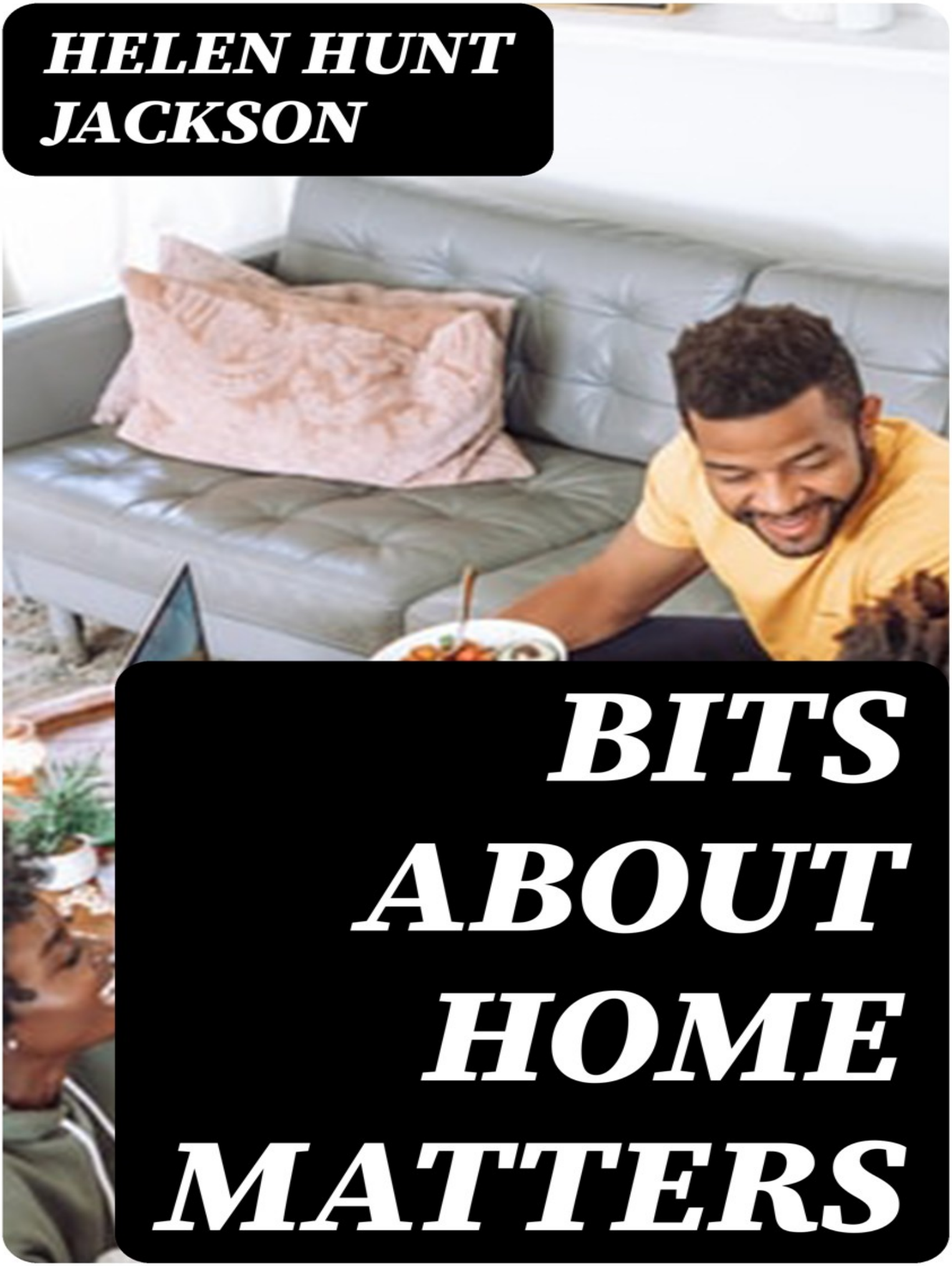
HELEN HUNT JACKSON



BITS ABOUT HOME MATTERS

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The Inhumanities of Parents--Corporal Punishment.

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Not long ago a Presbyterian minister in Western New York whipped his three-year-old boy to death, for refusing to say his prayers. The little fingers were broken; the tender flesh was bruised and actually mangled; strong men wept when they looked on the body; and the reverend murderer, after having been set free on bail, was glad to return and take refuge within the walls of his prison, to escape summary punishment at the hands of an outraged community. At the bare mention of such cruelty, every heart grew sick and faint; men and women were dumb with horror: only tears and a hot demand for instant retaliation availed.

The question whether, after all, that baby martyr were not fortunate among his fellows, would, no doubt, be met by resentful astonishment. But it is a question which may well be asked, may well be pondered. Heart-rending as it is to think for an instant of the agonies which the poor child must have borne for some hours after his infant brain was too bewildered by terror and pain to understand what was required of him, it still cannot fail to occur to deeper reflection that the torture was short and small in comparison with what the next ten years might have held for him if he had lived. To earn entrance on the spiritual life by the briefest possible experience of the physical, is always "greater gain;" but how emphatically is it so when the conditions of life upon earth are sure to be unfavorable!

If it were possible in any way to get a statistical summing-up and a tangible presentation of the amount of physical pain inflicted by parents on children under twelve years of age, the most callous-hearted would be surprised and shocked. If it were possible to add to this estimate an accurate and scientific demonstration of the extent to which such pain, by weakening the nervous system and exhausting its capacity to resist disease, diminishes children's chances for life, the world would stand aghast.

Too little has been said upon this point. The opponents of corporal punishment usually approach the subject either from the sentimental or the moral standpoint. The argument on either of these grounds can be made strong enough, one would suppose, to paralyze every hand lifted to strike a child. But the question of the direct and lasting physical effect of blows--even of one blow on the delicate tissues of a child's body, on the frail and trembling nerves, on the sensitive organization which is trying, under a thousand unfavoring conditions, to adjust itself to the hard work of both living and growing--has yet to be properly considered.

Every one knows the sudden sense of insupportable pain, sometimes producing even dizziness and nausea, which follows the accidental hitting of the ankle or elbow against a hard substance. It does not need that the blow be very hard to bring involuntary tears to adult eyes. But what is such a pain as this, in comparison with the pain of a dozen or more quick tingling blows from a heavy hand on flesh which is, which must be as much more sensitive than ours, as are the souls which dwell in it purer than ours. Add to this physical pain the overwhelming terror which only utter helplessness can feel, and which is the most recognizable quality in the cry of a very young child under whipping; add the instinctive sense of disgrace, of outrage, which often keeps the older child stubborn and still through-out,--and you have an

amount and an intensity of suffering from which even tried nerves might shrink. Again, who does not know--at least, what woman does not know--that violent weeping, for even a very short time, is quite enough to cause a feeling of languor and depression, of nervous exhaustion for a whole day? Yet it does not seem to occur to mothers that little children must feel this, in proportion to the length of time and violence of their crying, far more than grown people. Who has not often seen a poor child receive, within an hour or two of the first whipping, a second one, for some small ebullition of nervous irritability, which was simply inevitable from its spent and worn condition?

It is safe to say that in families where whipping is regularly recognized as a punishment, few children under ten years of age, and of average behavior, have less than one whipping a week. Sometimes they have more, sometimes the whipping is very severe. Thus you have in one short year sixty or seventy occasions on which for a greater or less time, say from one to three hours, the child's nervous system is subjected to a tremendous strain from the effect of terror and physical pain combined with long crying. Will any physician tell us that this fact is not an element in that child's physical condition at the end of that year? Will any physician dare to say that there may not be, in that child's life, crises when the issues of life and death will be so equally balanced that the tenth part of the nervous force lost in such fits of crying, and in the endurance of such pain, could turn the scale?

Nature's retributions, like her rewards, are cumulative. Because her sentences against evil works are not executed speedily, therefore the hearts of the sons of men are fully set in them to do evil. But the sentence always is executed, sooner or later, and that inexorably. Your son, O unthinking mother! may fall by the way in the full prime of his

manhood, for lack of that strength which his infancy spent in enduring your hasty and severe punishments.

It is easy to say,--and universally is said,--by people who cling to the old and fight against the new, "All this outcry about corporal punishment is sentimental nonsense. The world is full of men and women, who have grown up strong and good, in spite of whippings; and as for me, I know I never had any more whipping than I deserved, or than was good for me."

Are you then so strong and clear and pure in your physical and spiritual nature and life, that you are sure no different training could have made either your body or your soul better? Are these men and women, of whom the world is full, so able-bodied, whole-souled, strong-minded, that you think it needless to look about for any method of making the next generation better? Above all, do you believe that it is a part of the legitimate outworking of God's plan and intent in creating human beings to have more than one-half of them die in childhood? If we are not to believe that this fearful mortality is a part of God's plan, is it wise to refuse to consider all possibilities, even those seemingly most remote, of diminishing it?

No argument is so hard to meet (simply because it is not an argument) as the assumption of the good and propriety of "the thing that hath been." It is one of the devil's best sophistries, by which he keeps good people undisturbed in doing the things he likes. It has been in all ages the bulwark behind which evils have made stand, and have slain their thousands. It is the last enemy which shall be destroyed. It is the only real support of the cruel evil of corporal punishment.

Suppose that such punishment of children had been unheard of till now. Suppose that the idea had yesterday been suggested for the first time that by inflicting physical pain on a child's body you might make him recollect certain truths; and suppose that instead of whipping, a very moderate and harmless degree of pricking with pins or cutting with knives or burning with fire had been suggested. Would not fathers and mothers have cried out all over the land at the inhumanity of the idea?

Would they not still cry out at the inhumanity of one who, as things are to-day, should propose the substitution of pricking or cutting or burning for whipping? But I think it would not be easy to show in what wise small pricks or cuts are more inhuman than blows; or why lying may not be as legitimately cured by blisters made with a hot coal as by black and blue spots made with a ruler. The principle is the same; and if the principle be right, why not multiply methods?

It seems as if this one suggestion, candidly considered, might be enough to open all parents' eyes to the enormity of whipping. How many a loving mother will, without any thought of cruelty, inflict half-a-dozen quick blows on the little hand of her child, when she could no more take a pin and make the same number of thrusts into the tender flesh, than she could bind the baby on a rack. Yet the pin-thrusts would hurt far less, and would probably make a deeper impression on the child's mind.

Among the more ignorant classes, the frequency and severity of corporal punishment of children, are appalling. The facts only need to be held up closely and persistently before the community to be recognized as horrors of cruelty far greater than some which have been made subjects of legislation.

It was my misfortune once to be forced to spend several of the hottest weeks of a hot summer in New York. In near neighborhood to my rooms were blocks of buildings which had shops on the first floor and tenements above. In these lived the families of small tradesmen, and mechanics of the better sort. During those scorching nights every window was thrown open, and all sounds were borne with distinctness through the hot still air. Chief among them were the shrieks and cries of little children, and blows and angry words from tired, overworked mothers. At times it became almost unbearable: it was hard to refrain from an attempt at rescue. Ten, twelve, twenty quick, hard blows, whose sound rang out plainly, I counted again and again; mingling with them came the convulsive screams of the poor children, and that most piteous thing of all, the reiteration of "Oh, mamma! oh, mamma!" as if, through all, the helpless little creatures had an instinct that this word ought to be in itself the strongest appeal. These families were all of the better class of work people, comfortable and respectable. What sounds were to be heard in the more wretched haunts of the city, during those nights, the heart struggled away from fancying. But the shrieks of those children will never wholly die out of the air. I hear them to-day; and mingling with them, the question rings perpetually in my ears, "Why does not the law protect children, before the point at which life is endangered?"

A cartman may be arrested in the streets for the brutal beating of a horse which is his own, and which he has the right to kill if he so choose. Should not a man be equally withheld from the brutal beating of a child who is not his own, but God's, and whom to kill is murder?

The Inhumanities of Parents--Needless Denials.

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Webster's Dictionary, which cannot be accused of any leaning toward sentimentalism, defines "inhumanity" as "cruelty in action;" and "cruelty" as "an act of a human being which inflicts unnecessary pain." The word inhumanity has an ugly sound, and many inhuman people are utterly and honestly unconscious of their own inhumanities; it is necessary therefore to entrench one's self behind some such bulwark as the above definitions afford, before venturing the accusation that fathers and mothers are habitually guilty of inhuman conduct in inflicting "unnecessary pain" on their children, by needless denials of their innocent wishes and impulses.

Most men and a great many women would be astonished at being told that simple humanity requires them to gratify every wish, even the smallest, of their children, when the pain of having that wish denied is not made necessary, either for the child's own welfare, physical or mental, or by circumstances beyond the parent's control. The word "necessary" is a very authoritative one; conscience, if left free, soon narrows down its boundaries; inconvenience, hindrance, deprivation, self-denial, one or all, or even a great deal of all, to ourselves, cannot give us a shadow of right to say that the pain of the child's disappointment is "necessary." Selfishness grasps at help from the hackneyed sayings, that it is "best for children to bear the yoke in their

youth;" "the sooner they learn that they cannot have their own way the better;" "it is a good discipline for them to practise self-denial," &c. But the yoke that they *must* bear, in spite of our lightening it all we can, is heavy enough; the instances in which it is, for good and sufficient reasons, impossible for them to have their own way are quite numerous enough to insure their learning the lesson very early; and as for the discipline of self-denial,--God bless their dear, patient souls!--if men and women brought to bear on the thwartings and vexations of their daily lives, and their relations with each other, one hundredth part of the sweet acquiescence and brave endurance which average children show, under the average management of average parents, this world would be a much pleasanter place to live in than it is.

Let any conscientious and tender mother, who perhaps reads these words with tears half of resentment, half of grief in her eyes, keep for three days an exact record of the little requests which she refuses, from the baby of five, who begged to stand on a chair and look out of the window, and was hastily told, "No, it would, hurt the chair," when one minute would have been enough time to lay a folded newspaper over the upholstery, and another minute enough to explain to him, with a kiss and a hug, "that that was to save his spoiling mamma's nice chair with his boots;" and the two minutes together would probably have made sure that another time the dear little fellow would look out for a paper himself, when he wished to climb up to the window,--from this baby up to the pretty girl of twelve, who, with as distinct a perception of the becoming as her mother had before her, went to school unhappy because she was compelled to wear the blue necktie instead of the scarlet one, and surely for no especial reason! At the end of the three days, an honest examination of the record would show that full half of these small denials, all of which had involved

pain, and some of which had brought contest and punishment, had been needless, had been hastily made, and made usually on account of the slight interruption or inconvenience which would result from yielding to the request. I am very much mistaken if the honest keeping and honest study of such a three days' record would not wholly change the atmosphere in many a house to what it ought to be, and bring almost constant sunshine and bliss where now, too often, are storm and misery.

With some parents, although they are neither harsh nor hard in manner, nor yet unloving in nature, the habitual first impulse seems to be to refuse: they appear to have a singular obtuseness to the fact that it is, or can be, of any consequence to a child whether it does or does not do the thing it desires. Often the refusal is withdrawn on the first symptom of grief or disappointment on the child's part; a thing which is fatal to all real control of a child, and almost as unkind as the first unnecessary denial,--perhaps even more so, as it involves double and treble pains, in future instances, where there cannot and must not be any giving way to entreaties. It is doubtless this lack of perception,--akin, one would think, to color-blindness,--which is at the bottom of this great and common inhumanity among kind and intelligent fathers and mothers: an inhumanity so common that it may almost be said to be universal; so common that, while we are obliged to look on and see our dearest friends guilty of it, we find it next to impossible to make them understand what we mean when we make outcry over some of its glaring instances.

You, my dearest of friends,--or, rather, you who would be, but for this one point of hopeless contention between us,--do you remember a certain warm morning, last August, of which I told you then you had not heard the last? Here it is again: perhaps in print I can make it look blacker to you

than I could then; part of it I saw, part of it you unwillingly confessed to me, and part of it little Blue Eyes told me herself.

It was one of those ineffable mornings, when a thrill of delight and expectancy fills the air; one felt that every appointment of the day must be unlike those of other days,--must be festive, must help on the "white day" for which all things looked ready. I remember how like the morning itself you looked as you stood in the doorway, in a fresh white muslin dress, with lavender ribbons. I said, "Oh, extravagance! For breakfast!"

"I know," you said; "but the day was so enchanting, I could not make up my mind to wear any thing that had been worn before." Here an uproar from the nursery broke out, and we both ran to the spot. There stood little Blue Eyes, in a storm of temper, with one small foot on a crumpled mass of pink cambric on the floor; and nurse, who was also very red and angry, explained that Miss would not have on her pink frock because it was not quite clean. "It is all dirty, mamma, and I don't want to put it on! You've got on a nice white dress: why can't I?"

You are in the main a kind mother, and you do not like to give little Blue Eyes pain; so you knelt down beside her, and told her that she must be a good girl, and have on the gown Mary had said, but that she should have on a pretty white apron, which would hide the spots. And Blue Eyes, being only six years old, and of a loving, generous nature, dried her tears, accepted the very questionable expedient, tried to forget the spots, and in a few moments came out on the piazza, chirping like a little bird. By this time the rare quality of the morning had stolen like wine into our brains, and you exclaimed, "We will have breakfast out here, under the vines! How George will like it!" And in another instant you

were flitting back and forth, helping the rather ungracious Bridget move out the breakfast-table, with its tempting array.

"Oh, mamma, mamma," cried Blue Eyes, "can't I have my little tea-set on a little table beside your big table? Oh, let me, let me!" and she fairly quivered with excitement. You hesitated. How I watched you! But it was a little late. Bridget was already rather cross; the tea-set was packed in a box, and up on a high shelf.

"No, dear. There is not time, and we must not make Bridget any more trouble; but"--seeing the tears coming again--"you shall have some real tea in papa's big gilt cup, and another time you shall have your tea-set when we have breakfast out here again." As I said before, you are a kind mother, and you made the denial as easy to be borne as you could, and Blue Eyes was again pacified, not satisfied, only bravely making the best of it. And so we had our breakfast; a breakfast to be remembered, too. But as for the "other time" which you had promised to Blue Eyes; how well I knew that not many times a year did such mornings and breakfasts come, and that it was well she would forget all about it! After breakfast,--you remember how we lingered,--George suddenly started up, saying, "How hard it is to go to town! I say, girls, walk down to the station with me, both of you."

"And me too, me too, papa!" said Blue Eyes. You did not hear her; but I did, and she had flown for her hat. At the door we found her, saying again, "Me too, mamma!" Then you remembered her boots: "Oh, my darling," you said, kissing her, for you are a kind mother, "you cannot go in those nice boots: the dew will spoil them; and it is not worth while to change them, we shall be back in a few minutes."

A storm of tears would have burst out in an instant at this the third disappointment, if I had not sat down on the door-step, and, taking her in my lap, whispered that auntie was going to stay too.

"Oh, put the child down, and come along," called the great, strong, uncomprehending man--Blue Eyes' dear papa. "Pussy won't mind. Be a good girl, pussy; I'll bring you a red balloon to-night."

You are both very kind, you and George, and you both love little Blue Eyes dearly.

"No, I won't come. I believe my boots are too thin," said I; and for the equivocation there was in my reply I am sure of being forgiven. You both turned back twice to look at the child, and kissed your hands to her; and I wondered if you did not see in her face, what I did, real grief and patient endurance. Even "The King of the Golden River" did not rouse her: she did not want a story; she did not want me; she did not want a red balloon at night; she wanted to walk between you, to the station, with her little hands in yours! God grant the day may not come when you will be heart-broken because you can never lead her any more!

She asked me some questions, while you were gone, which you remember I repeated to you. She asked me if I did not hate nice new shoes; and why little girls could not put on the dresses they liked best; and if mamma did not look beautiful in that pretty white dress; and said that, if she could only have had her own tea-set, at breakfast, she would have let me have my coffee in one of her cups. Gradually she grew happier, and began to tell me about her great wax-doll, which had eyes that could shut; which was kept in a trunk because she was too little, mamma said, to play very much with it now; but she guessed mamma would

let her have it to-day; did I not think so? Alas! I did, and I said so; in fact, I felt sure that it was the very thing you would be certain to do, to sweeten the day, which had begun so sadly for poor little Blue Eyes.

It seemed very long to her before you came back, and she was on the point of asking for her dolly as soon as you appeared; but I whispered to her to wait till you were rested. After a few minutes I took her up to your room,--that lovely room with the bay window to the east; there you sat, in your white dress, surrounded with gay worsteds, all looking like a carnival of humming-birds. "Oh, how beautiful!" I exclaimed, in involuntary admiration; "what are you doing?" You said that you were going to make an affghan, and that the morning was so enchanting you could not bear the thought of touching your mending, but were going to luxuriate in the worsteds. Some time passed in sorting the colors, and deciding on the contrasts, and I forgot all about the doll. Not so little Blue Eyes. I remembered afterward how patiently she stood still, waiting and waiting for a gap between our words, that she need not break the law against interrupting, with her eager--

"Please, mamma, let me have my wax dolly to play with this morning! I'll sit right here on the floor, by you and auntie, and not hurt her one bit. Oh, please do, mamma!"

You mean always to be a very kind mother, and you spoke as gently and lovingly as it is possible to speak when you replied:--

"Oh, Pussy, mamma is too busy to get it; she can't get up now. You can play with your blocks, and with your other dollies, just as well; that's a good little girl."

Probably, if Blue Eyes had gone on imploring, you would have laid your worsteds down, and given her the dolly; for you love her dearly, and never mean to make her unhappy. But neither you nor I were prepared for what followed.

"You're a naughty, ugly, hateful mamma! You never let me do *any* thing, and I wish you were dead!" with such a burst of screaming and tears that we were both frightened. You looked, as well you might, heart-broken at such words from your only child. You took her away; and when you came back, you cried, and said you had whipped her severely, and you did not know what you should do with a child of such a frightful temper.

"Such an outburst as that, just because I told her, in the gentlest way possible, that she could not have a plaything! It is terrible!"

Then I said some words to you, which you thought were unjust. I asked you in what condition your own nerves would have been by ten o'clock that morning if your husband (who had, in one view, a much better right to thwart your harmless desires than you had to thwart your child's, since you, in the full understanding of maturity, gave yourself into his hands) had, instead of admiring your pretty white dress, told you to be more prudent, and not put it on; had told you it would be nonsense to have breakfast out on the piazza; and that he could not wait for you to walk to the station with him. You said that the cases were not at all parallel; and I replied hotly that that was very true, for those matters would have been to you only the comparative trifles of one short day, and would have made you only a little cross and uncomfortable; whereas to little Blue Eyes they were the all-absorbing desires of the hour, which, to a child in trouble, always looks as if it could never come to an end, and would never be followed by any thing better.