

CHOICE LITERATURE.

FROM JEST TO EARNEST.

BY REV. E. P. ROE.

CHAPTER XVIII.—HEMSTEAD'S HEAVY GUN AND ITS RECOIL.

The "day after the ball" has its proverbial character, and Saturday was so long and dismal to several of the revellers, that it occurred to them that their pleasure had been purchased rather dearly. It seemed an odd coincidence, that those who had been bent on securing all the pleasure possible, with no other thought, suffered the most. Bel and Addie could scarcely endure their own company, they were so weary and stupid; and they yawned through the day, irritable and dishevelled, for it was too stormy for callers.

De Forrest did not appear until dinner, and then came down moody and taciturn. The young ladies had heard of his illness the evening before, with significant glances, and Mrs. Marchmont partly surmised the truth, but politely ignored the matter, treating it only as a sudden indisposition; and so the affair was passed over, as they usually are in fashionable life, until they reach a stage too pronounced for polite blindness.

De Forrest but dimly recollected the events of the preceding evening. He was quite certain, however, that he had been drunk, and made a fool of himself.

Though his conscience was not over tender upon this subject, and though such occurrences were not so exceedingly rare in fashionable life as to be very shocking, he still had the training and instinct of a gentleman, to a sufficient degree to feel deep mortification.

If he had become tipsy among those of his own sex, or while off on a fishing excursion, he would have regarded it as a light matter; but even in his eyes, intoxication at an evening company, and before the girl in whose estimation he most wished to stand well, was a very serious matter. He could not remember much after going a second time to the supper-room in compliance with Lottie's request, but had a vague impression that she and Hemstead had brought him home. He was left in torturing uncertainty how far he had disgraced himself, because it was a subject concerning which he could not bring himself to make inquiries. That those he met at the dinner-table treated him with their usual quiet politeness proved nothing. Human faces mask more thoughts than are expressed. Hemstead's grave silence was somewhat significant; but De Forrest cared so little for his opinion that he scarcely heeded the student's manner.

Lottie Marsden was the one he most wished, and yet most dreaded to see. But Lottie did not appear.

Whether it was true, as she believed, or not, that she was the most guilty, she certainly was the greatest sufferer, and that Saturday became the longest and dreariest period of pain, that she ever experienced. She awoke in the morning with a nervous headache, which grew so severe that she declined leaving her room during the day. Bel, Addie, and her aunt, all offered to do anything in their power; but she only asked to be left alone. She was so unstrung, that even words of kindness and solicitude jarred like discord.

It was torture to think, and yet her brain was unnaturally active. Everything presented itself in the most painfully bare and accurate manner. The glamour faded out of her gay young life, and she saw only the hard lines of fact. Hemstead's words kept repeating themselves over and over again, and in their light she questioned the past closely. It was not in keeping with her positive nature and strong mind to do things by halves. With fixed and steady scrutiny she reviewed the motives of her life, and estimated the results. They were so unsatisfactory as to startle her. Although the spent years had been filled with continuous and varied activity, what had she accomplished for herself or any one else? Were not all her past days like water spilled on barren sands, producing nothing?

As she had before intimated, she had been receiving homage, flattery, and even love, all her life, and yet now her heart had no treasures to which she could turn in solid satisfaction, nor could memory recall efforts like that she saw Miss Martell making in behalf of Harcourt. The adulation received was now empty breath and forgotten words, and nothing substantial or comforting remained.

But if memory could recall little good accomplished, it placed in long and dark array many scenes that she would gladly have forgotten.

What can be worse—what need we fear more—than to be left alone forever with a guilty and accusing conscience, and no respite, no solace? What perdition need a man shrink from more than to go away alone from his earthly life, to where memory—a pale and silent spectre—will turn the pages of his daily record, and point to what was, and what might have been?

A shallow-minded girl would have been incapable of this searching self-analysis. A weak, irresolute girl like Bel Parton would have taken a sedative, and escaped a miserable day in sleep. But with all her faults, Lottie abounded in practical common sense; and Hemstead's words and her own experience suggested that she might be doing herself a very great wrong. She felt that it was no light matter to make one's whole life a blunder, and to invest all one's years and energies in what paid no better interest than she had received that day. Her physical pain and mental distress acted and reacted upon each other, until at last, wearied out, she sobbed herself to sleep.

Both De Forrest and Hemstead were greatly in hopes that she would be at the supper-table, but they did not see her that day. The former, with his aching head and heavy heart, learned, if never before, that the "way of the transgressor is hard." But though the latter could not be regarded as a transgressor, his way was hard also that long day, and he whom Lottie, in the memory of his severe words, regarded somewhat as her stern accuser, was more than ready

to take all her pains and woes upon himself, could he have relieved her.

He now bitterly condemned himself for having been too harsh in the wholesome truth he had brought home to the flattered girl. It was rather severe treatment; still she was vigorous, and would be all the better for it. But now her faithful physician, as he heard how ill and suffering she was, almost wished that he had but faintly suggested the truth in homœopathic doses.

At the same time he supposed that her indisposition was caused more by her shame and grief at the conduct of De Forrest, than from anything he had said. The impression that she was attached or engaged to De Forrest was becoming almost a conviction.

Though Lottie had never, by a word, bound herself to her cousin, yet her aunt and all the household regarded her as virtually engaged to him, and expected that the marriage would eventually occur. With Hemstead, they regarded her illness and seclusion as the result of her mortification at his behaviour, and underneath their politic politeness were very indignant at his folly. But they expected that the trouble would soon blow over, as a matter of course. The mantle of charity for young men as rich and well-connected as De Forrest, is very large. And then this slip could be regarded somewhat in the light of an accident; for when it became evident that Bel understood the nature of De Forrest's "spell," as the coachman called it, Lottie had taken pains to insist that it was an accident for which she was chiefly to blame; and had also said as much to Mrs. Marchmont. Thus they all concluded that her relations with De Forrest would not be disturbed.

Harcourt was the happiest of the party; but it must be confessed that, clearer than any law points, he saw still among blooming exotics a being that seemed far more rare and beautiful, who stood before him the whole day with clasped hands and entreating eyes, whose only request was, "Be a true man. Under the inspiration of her words and manner he began to hope that he might eventually grant her request.

As far as Lottie's intruding image would permit, Hemstead concentrated all his energies on the great sermon, the elaborate effort of many months, that he expected to preach on the morrow. He hoped Lottie, and indeed that all, would be there, for it seemed that if they would only give him their thoughtful attention he would prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that they were in God's hands, and that it would be worse than folly not to submit to His shaping and moulding discipline.

At last Sunday morning came. It was a cold, chilly, leaden day, and even a glance from the windows gave one a shivering sense of discomfort.

The gloom of nature seemed to shadow the faces of some of the party as they gathered at a late breakfast; and of none was this more true than of Lottie Marsden, as, pale and languid, she took her wonted place. Her greeting of De Forrest was most kindly, and he seemed greatly reassured and brightened up instantly. But Lottie's face did not lose its deep dejection.

To the others she appeared to take very little notice of Hemstead; but he thought that he observed her eyes furtively seeking his face, with a questioning expression. Once he answered her glance with such a frank, sunny smile that her own face lighted up. As they were passing into the parlour he said, in a low tone:

"I wished a hundred times yesterday that I could bear your headache for you."

"That is more kind than just. It is right that I should get my deserts," she replied, shaking her head.

"Heaven save us from our deserts," he answered quickly.

Before she could speak again, De Forrest was by her side and said, "Let me wheel the lounge up to the fire, and I will read anything you wish this morning."

"Oh no, I'm going to church."

"Miss Lottie, I beg of you do not go. You are not able."

"Yes, I am; the air will do me good. It's the Sunday before Christmas, Julian, and we both ought to be at church."

"Oh, certainly, I'll go if you wish it."

"I hope your sermon will do me good, Mr. Hemstead. I'm wofully blue," she said, as she left the room to prepare for church.

"I think it will," he replied, "for I have prepared it with a great deal of care."

The building was a small but pretty gothic structure, and its sacred quiet did seem to Lottie something like a refuge. With an interest such as she had never felt in the elegant city temple, she waited for the service to commence, honestly hoping that there might be something that would comfort and reassure.

But Hemstead went through the preliminary services with but indifferent grace and effect. He was embarrassed and awkward, as is usually the case with those who have seldom faced an audience, and who are naturally very diffident. But as he entered upon his sermon, his self-consciousness began to pass away, and he spoke with increasing power and effect.

He took as his text the words from the 11th chapter of St. John, wherein Jesus declares to his disciples in regard to the death of Lazarus:

"I am glad, for your sakes, that I was not there to the intent that ye may believe."

The importance of faith—believing—as the source of Christian life, and the ground of man's acceptance with God, was his subject, from which he wandered somewhat—a course often noted in the ministerial tyro.

He presented his views strongly, however, but they were partial and unripe, giving but one side of the truth, and therefore calculated to do injury rather than good. He did not—he could not—over-estimate the importance of faith, but he unwittingly misrepresented God, in his efforts to inspire this faith, and the Christian life resulting; and he undervalued our earthly state and its interests.

He sketched in strong outlines the experience of the little family in Bethany, portraying with vivid realism the suffering of the man whom Jesus loved, the anxiety of the sisters when Lazarus became ill—this anxiety passing into fear,

dread, sickening certainty, and despair—the anguish of bereavement, the loneliness and heart-breaking sorrow of four days, and that most agonized wrench of the heart when the beloved form is left alone to corrupt in the dark and silent sepulchre.

Having presented this picture in such true and sombre colours that the gloom was reflected from the faces of all his hearers, they being reminded that this would be their lot ere long, he passed suddenly from the painful scenes of Bethany to Bethabara, beyond Jordan, where was sojourning the mysterious Prophet of Nazareth, who had so often proved his power to heal every disease. He enlarged upon the fact that Jesus, seeing and knowing all the fear and suffering at Bethany which he could change by a word into gladness, did not interfere, but decreed that the terrible ordeal should be endured to the bitter end.

From this he reasoned that the transient sorrows and passing pains of the household at Bethany were of little moment, and that God, in the advancement of his own glory and the accomplishment of his great plans, would never turn aside because his human children in their short-sighted weakness would stay his heavy hand if they could. He knew all that was occurring at Bethany, but quietly and calmly permitted it to take place, and in this case it was the same as if he had willed it.

He then proceeded to show that the Divine purpose had not only a wide and general sweep, embracing the race, and extending through all time, but that there was a minute providence encompassing each life. If there were any good in us, God would bring it out, nor would he spare us in the effort. The preacher, unfortunately and unconsciously to himself, gave the impression that God acted on the principle that he could accomplish far more with the rod of affliction than anything else, and that when he fully set about the task of winning a soul from sin, his first step was to stretch it upon the rack of some kind of suffering. He also intensified this painful impression, by giving the idea that God thought little of the processes which might be so painful to us, but fixed His eye only on the result. If people became sullen, rebellious, or reckless under His discipline, they were like misshapen clay, that the potter must cast aside. The crude ore must go into the furnace, and if there was good metal in it the fact would appear.

"Sooner or later," he said, "God will put every soul into the crucible of affliction. Sooner or later we shall be passing through scenes like that of the family at Bethany. We may not hope to escape. God means that we shall not. As Christ firmly, while seeing and knowing all, left events at Bethany to their designed course, so he will as surely and steadily carry out the discipline, which he, as the unerring physician of the soul, sees that each one of us requires. Does the refiner hesitate to put the crude ore into the crucible? Does the sculptor shrink from chiselling the shapeless block into beauty? Does not the surgeon, with nerves of steel and pulse unquicken, cut near the very vitals of his agonized patient? He sees that it is necessary, in order to save from greater evil, and therefore he is as remorseless as fate. If to cure some transient, physical infirmity, man is justified—nay more, is compelled—to inflict so much suffering upon his fellow-creatures, how much more is God justified in his severest moral discipline, which has as its object our eternal health? Though we shrink from the sorrow, though we writhe under the pain, though our hearts break a thousand times, he will not waver in his calm, steadfast purpose. He sees eternity, the present is as nothing to him. He will break our grasp from all earthly idols, even though he tear our bleeding hearts asunder. If we are trusting in aught save Him, that upon which we are leaning will be snatched away, even though we fall at first into the depths of despairing sorrow. What he makes us suffer now is not to be considered, in view of his purpose to wean us from the world and prepare us for the next. Christ, as we learn from our text, is as inflexible as fate, and does not hesitate to secure the needful faith by remaining away, even though the message of the sisters was an entreaty in itself. Nay more, he distinctly declares to his disciples, 'I was glad for your sakes I was not there, to the intent that ye may believe.'

"In conclusion; we assert that we ought to rise above our human weakness and co-work with God. Instead of clinging so to the present, we ought to think of the eternal future, and welcome the harshest discipline which prepares us for that future. We should mortify ourselves, trample our earthly natures under our feet. To that degree that we can bring ourselves to think less of earth—we shall think more of heaven. Our business, our earthly hopes and plans, our dearest ties, may be fatal snares to our souls. The husband may make an idol of his wife—the mother of her child. God jealously watches; we should watch more jealously. The sisters may have been loving their brother and trusting to his protection more than in Christ. We should hold all earthly possessions in fear and trembling, as something not our own, but only committed for a brief time to our trust. We should remember that the one great object of this life is to secure that faith which leads to the preparation for the life to come. The harsher our experiences are, the better, if they more surely wean us from earth and earthly things, and make eternity the habitation of our thoughts. We see how stern and resolute God is in his great purpose to stamp out unbelief from the world. Jesus would not save the family at Bethany that he loved—the family that freely gave hospitality and love in return when nearly all the world was hostile. Do not think, then, that he will spare us. Let us therefore, not spare ourselves, but with remorseless hands smite down every earthly object that hides from our view the wide ocean of eternity. As the wise men from the East travelled steadily across arid wastes with eyes fixed only on the strange bright luminary that was guiding them to Bethlehem, so we should regard this world as a desert across which we must hasten to the presence of our God."

As Hemstead forgot himself, and became absorbed with his theme, he spoke with impressiveness and power; and everywhere throughout the audience was seen that thoughtful contraction of the brow and fixed gaze which betoken deep attention. But upon the faces of nearly all was the expression of one listening to something painful. This was especially true of Miss Martell and her father, while Har-