

CHOICE LITERATURE.

A DAY OF FATE.

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BOOK FIRST—CHAPTER I.—AIMLESS STEPS.

"Another month's work will knock Morton into 'pi,'" was a remark that caught my ear as I fumed from the composing-room back to my private office. I had just irately blamed a printer for a blunder of my own and the words I overheard reminded me of the unpleasant truth that I had recently made a great many senseless blunders, over which I chafed in merciless condemnation. For weeks and months my mind had been tense under the strain of increasing work and responsibility. It was my nature to become absorbed in my tasks, and, as night editor of a prominent city journal, I found a limitless field for labour. It was true I could have joggled along under the heavy burden with comparatively little wear and loss, but, impelled by both temperament and ambition, I was trying to maintain a racer's speed. From casual employment as a reporter I had worked my way up to my present position, and the tireless activity and alertness required to win and hold such a place was seemingly degenerating into a nervous restlessness which permitted no repose of mind or rest of body. I worked when other men slept, but, instead of availing myself of the right to sleep when the world was awake, I yielded to an increasing tendency to wakefulness, and read that I might be informed on the endless variety of subjects occupying public attention. The globe was becoming a vast hunting ground, around which my thoughts ranged almost unceasingly that I might capture something new, striking, or original for the benefit of our paper. Each day the quest had grown more eager, and as the hour for going to press approached I would even become feverish in my intense desire to send the paper out with a breezy, newsy aspect, and would be elated if, at the last moment, material was flashed in that would warrant startling head-lines, and correspondingly depressed if the weary old world had a few hours of quiet and peace. To make the paper "go," every faculty I possessed was in the harness.

The aside I had just overheard suggested, at least, one very probable result. In printer's jargon, I would soon be in "pi."

The remark, combined with my stupid blunder, for which I had blamed an innocent man, caused me to pull up and ask myself whither I was hurrying so breathlessly. Saying to my assistant that I did not wish to be disturbed for a half hour, unless it was essential, I went to my little inner room. I wished to take a mental inventory of myself, and see how much was left. Hitherto I had been on the keen run—a condition not favourable to introspection.

Neither my temperament nor the school in which I had been trained inclined me to slow, deliberate processes of reasoning. I looked my own case over as I might that of some brother-editors whose journals were draining them of life, and whose obituaries I shall probably write if I survive them. Reason and Conscience, now that gave them a chance, began to take me to task severely.

"You are a blundering fool," said Reason, "and the man in the composing room is right. You are chafing over petty blunders while ignoring the fact that your whole present life is a blunder, and the adequate reason why your faculties are becoming untrustworthy. Each day you grow more nervously anxious to have everything correct, giving your mind to endless details, and your powers are beginning to snap like the overstrained strings of a violin. At this rate you will soon spend yourself and all there is of you."

Then Conscience, like an irate judge on the bench, arraigned me. "You are a heathen, and your paper is your carol of Juggernaut. You are ceasing to be a man and becoming merely an editor—no, not even an editor—a newsmonger, one of the world's gossips. You are an Athenian only as you wish to hear and tell some new thing. Long ears are becoming the appropriate symbols of your being. You are too hurried, too eager for temporary success, too taken up with details, to form calm philosophical opinions of the great events of your time, and thus be able to shape men's opinions. You commenced as a reporter, and are a reporter still. You pride yourself that you are not narrow, unconscious of the truth that you are spreading yourself thinly over the mere surface of affairs. You have little comprehension of the deeper forces and motives of humanity."

It is true that I might have pleaded in extenuation of these rather severe judgments that I was somewhat alone in the world, living in bachelor apartments, without the redeeming influences of home and family life. There were none whose love gave them the right or the motive to lay a restraining hand upon me, and my associates in labour were more inclined to applaud my zeal than to curb it. Thus it had been left to the casual remark of a nameless printer and an instance of my own failing powers, to break the spell that ambition and habit were weaving.

Before the half hour elapsed I felt weak and ill. The moment I relaxed the tension and will-power which I had maintained so long, strong reaction set in. Apparently I had about reached the limits of endurance. I felt as if I were growing old and feeble by minutes as one might by years. Taking my hat and coat I passed out, remarking to my assistant that he must do the best he could—that I was ill and would not return. If the Journal had never appeared again I could not then have written a line to save it, or read another proof.

Saturday morning found me feverish, unrefreshed and more painfully conscious than ever that I was becoming little better than the presses on which the paper was printed. Depression inevitably follows weariness and exhaustion, and one could scarcely take a more gloomy view of himself than I did.

"I will escape from this city as if it were Sodom," I muttered, "and a June day in the country will reveal whether I have a soul for anything beyond the wrangle of politics and the world's gossip."

In my despondency I was inclined to be reckless, and after merely writing a brief note to my editorial chief, saying that I had broken down and was going to the country, I started almost at random. After a few hours' riding I wearied of the cars, and left them at a small village whose name I did not care to inquire. The mountains and scenery pleased me, although the day was overcast like my mind and fortunes. Having found a quiet inn and gone through the form of a dinner, I sat down on the porch in dreary apathy.

The afternoon aspect of the village street seemed as dull and devoid of interest as my own life at that hour, and in fancy I saw myself, a broken-down man, lounging away days that would be like eternities, going through my little round like a bit of driftwood, slowly circling in an eddy of the world's great current. With lack-lustre eyes I "looked up to the hills," but no "help" came from them. The air was close, the sky leaden; even the birds would not sing. Why had I come to the country? It had no voices for me, and I resolved to return to the city. But while I waited my eyes grew heavy with the blessed power to sleep—a boon for which I then felt that I would travel to the Ultima Thule. Leaving orders that I should not be disturbed, I went to my room, and Nature took the tired man, as if he were a weary child, into her arms.

At last I imagined that I was at the Academy of Music, and that the orchestra were tuning their instruments for the overture. A louder strain than usual caused me to start up, and I saw through the open window a robin on a maple bough, with its tuneful throat swelled to the utmost. This was the leader of my orchestra, and the whole country was alive with musicians, each one giving out his own notes without any regard for the others, but apparently this score had been written for them all, since the innumerable strains made one divine harmony. From the full-orbed song from the maple by my window, down to the faintest chirp and twitter, there was no discord; while from the fields beyond the village the whistle of the meadow-larks was so mellowed and softened by distance as to incline one to wonder whether their notes were real or mere ideals of sound.

For a long time I was serenely content to listen to the myriad voiced chords without thinking of the past or future. At last I found myself idly querying whether Nature did not so blend all out-of-door sounds as to make them agreeable, when suddenly a cat-bird broke the spell of harmony by its flat, discordant note. Instead of my wonted irritation at anything that jarred upon my nerves, I laughed as I sprang up, saying,

"That cry reminds me that I am in the body and in the same old world. That bird is near akin to the croaking printer."

But my cynicism was now more assumed than real, and I began to wonder at myself. The change of air and scene had seemingly broken a malign influence, and sleep—that for weeks had almost forsaken me—had yielded its deep refreshment for fifteen hours. Besides, I had not sinned against my life so many years as to have destroyed the elasticity of early manhood. When I had lain down to rest I had felt myself to be a weary, broken, aged man. Had I, in my dreams, discovered the Fountain of Youth, and unconsciously bathed in it? In my rebound toward health of mind and body I seemed to have realized what the old Spaniard vainly hoped for.

I dressed in haste, eager to be out in the early June sunshine. There had been a shower in the night, and the air had a fine exhilarating quality, in contrast with the close sultriness of the previous afternoon.

Instead of nibbling at a breakfast while I devoured the morning dailies, I ate a substantial meal, and only thought of papers to bless their absence, and then walked down the village street with the quick glad tread of one whose hope and zest in life have been renewed. Fragrant June roses were opening on every side, and it appeared to me that all the sin of man could not make the world offensive to heaven that morning.

I wished that some of the villagers that I met were more in accord with Nature's mood; but in view of my own shortcomings, and still more because of my fine physical condition, I was disposed toward a large charity. And yet I could not help wondering how some that I saw could walk among their roses and still look so glum and matter-of-fact. I felt as if I could kiss every velvet petal.

"You were unjust," I charged back on Conscience; "this morning proves that I am not an ingrained newsmonger. There is still man enough left within me to revive at Nature's touch," and I exultantly quickened my steps until I had left the village miles away.

Before the morning was half gone I learned how much of my old vigour had ebbed, for I was growing weary early in the day. Therefore I paused before a small gray building, old and weather-stained, that seemed neither a barn, nor a dwelling, nor a school-house. A man was in the act of unlocking the door, and his garb suggested that it might be a Friends' meeting-house. Yielding to an idle curiosity I mounted a stone wall at a point where I was shaded and partially screened by a tree, and watched and waited, beguiling the time with a branch of sweet-brier that hung over my resting place.

Soon strong open wagons and rockaways began to appear, drawn by sleek, plump horses that often, seemingly, were gayer than their drivers. Still there was nothing sour in the aspect, or austere in the garb, of the people. Their quiet appearance took my fancy amazingly, and the peach-like bloom on the cheeks of even well-advanced matrons suggested a serene and quiet life.

"These are the people of all others with whom I would like to worship to-day," I thought; "and I hope that that rotund old lady, whose face beams under the shadow of her deep bonnet like a harvest moon through a fleecy cloud, will feel moved to speak." I plucked a few buds from the sweet-brier bush, fastened them in my button-hole, and promptly followed the old lady into the meeting-house. Having found a vacant pew I sat down, and looked around with serene content. But I soon observed that something was amiss, for the men folk looked at each other and then at me. At last an elderly and substantial Friend, with a face so flushed and round as to suggest a Baldwin apple, arose and

creaked with painful distinctness to where I was innocently infringing on one of their customs.

"If thee will follow me, friend," he said, "I'll give thee a seat with the men folks. Thee's welcome, and thee'll feel more at home to follow our ways."

His cordial grasp of my hand would have disarmed suspicion itself, and I followed him meekly. In my embarrassment and desire to shew that I had no wish to appear forward, I persisted in taking a side seat next to the wall, and quite near the door; for my guide, in order to shew his good-will and to atone for what might seem rudeness, was bent on marshalling me almost up to the high seats that faced the congregation, where sat my rubicund old Friend lady, whose aspect betokened that she had just the Gospel message I needed.

I at once noted that these staid and decorous people looked straight before them in an attitude of quiet expectancy. A few little children turned on me their round, curious eyes, but no one else stared at the blundering stranger, whose modish coat, with a sprig of wild roses in its button-hole, made him rather a conspicuous contrast to the other men folk, and I thought—

"Here certainly is an example of good-breeding which could scarcely be found among other Christians. If one of these Friends should appear in the most fashionable church on the Avenue he would be well stared at, but here even the children are receiving admonitory nudges not to look at me."

I soon felt that it was not the thing to be the only one who was irreverently looking around, and my good-fortune soon supplied ample motive for looking steadily in one direction. The reader may justly think that I should have composed my mind to meditation on my many sins, but I might as well have tried to gather in my hands the reins of all the wild horses of Arabia as to curb and manage my errant thoughts. My only chance was for some one or something to catch and hold them for me. If that old Friend lady would preach I was sure she would do me good. As it was, her face was an antidote to the influences of the world in which I dwelt, but I soon began to dream that I had found a still better remedy, for, at a fortunate angle from my position, there sat a young Quakeress whose side face arrested my attention and held it. By leaning a little against the wall as well as the back of my bench, I also, well content, could look straight before me like the others.

The fair profile was but slightly hidden by a hat that had a perceptible leaning toward the world in its character, but the brow was only made to seem a little lower, and her eyes deepened in their blue by its shadow. My sweet-brier blossoms were not more delicate in their pink shadings than was the bloom on her rounded cheek, and the white, firm chin denoted an absence of weakness and frivolity. The upper lip, from where I sat, seemed one-half of Cupid's bow. I could but barely catch a glimpse of a ripple of hair that, perhaps, had not been smoothed with sufficient pains, and thus seemed in league with the slightly worldly bonnet. In brief, to my kindled fancy, her youth and loveliness appeared the exquisite human embodiment of the June morning, with its alternations of sunshine and shadow, its roses and their fragrance, of its abounding yet untarnished and beautiful life.

No one in the meeting seemed moved save myself, but I felt as if I could become a poet, a painter, and even a lover, under the inspiration of that perfect profile.

CHAPTER II.—A JUNE DAY DREAM.

Moment after moment passed, but we all sat silent and motionless. Through the open windows came a low, sweet monotone of the wind from the shadowing maples, sometimes swelling into a great depth of sound, and again dying to a whisper, and the effect seemed finer than that of the most skillfully-touched organ. Occasionally an irascible humble-bee would dart in, and, after a moment of motionless poise, would dart out again, as if in angry disdain of the quiet people. In its irate hum and sudden dartings I saw my own irritable fuming and nervous activity, and I blessed the Friends and their silent meeting. I blessed the fair June face, that was as far removed from the seething turmoil of my world as the rosebuds under her home-windows.

Surely I had drifted out of the storm into the very haven of rest and peace, and yet one might justly dread lest the beauty which bound my eyes every moment in a stronger fascination should evoke an unrest from which there might be no haven. Young men, however, rarely shrink from such perils, and I was no more prudent than my fellows. Indeed, I was inclining towards the fancy that this June day was the day of destiny with me; and if such a creature were the remedy for my mishapen life it would be bliss to take it.

In our sweet silence, broken only by the voice of the wind, the twitter of birds beguiling, perhaps, with pretty nonsense the hours that would otherwise seem long to their brooding mates on the nests, and the hum of insects, my fancy began to create a future for the fair stranger—a future, rest assured, that did not leave the dreamer a calm and disinterested observer.

"This day," I said mentally, "proves that there is a kindly and superintending Providence, and men are often led, like children in the dark, to just the thing they want. The wisdom of Solomon could not have led me to a place more suited to my taste and need than have my blind, aimless steps; and before me are possibilities which suggest the vista through which Adam might have approached Eve."

My constant contact with men who were keen, self-seeking, and often unscrupulous, inclined me toward cynicism and suspicion. My editorial life made me an Arab in a sense, for if there were occasion, my hand might be against any man, if not every man. I certainly received many merciless blows, and I was learning to return them with increasing zest. My column in the paper was often a tilting-ground, and whether or no I inflicted wounds that amounted to much, I received some that long rankled. A home such as yonder woman might make would be a better solace than newspaper files. Such lips as those might easily draw the poison from