

CHOICE LITERATURE.

A KNIGHT OF THE XIX. CENTURY.

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CHAPTER X.—RETURNING TO CONSCIOUSNESS.

Mr. Arnot did not leave his library that night. His wife came to the door, and found it locked. To her appeal he replied coldly, but decisively, that he was engaged.

She sighed deeply, feeling that the sojourn of young Haldane under her roof was destined to end in a manner most painful to herself and to her friend, his mother. She feared that the latter would blame her somewhat for his miserable fiasco, and she fully believed that if her husband permitted the young man to suffer open disgrace she would never be forgiven by the proud and aristocratic lady.

And yet she felt that it was almost useless to speak to her husband in his present mood, or to hope that he could be induced to show much consideration for so grave an offence.

Of the worst feature in Haldane's conduct, however, she had no knowledge. Mr. Arnot rarely spoke to his wife concerning his business, and she had merely learned, the previous evening, that Haldane had been sent to New York upon some errand. Acting upon the supposition that her husband had remembered and complied with her request, she graciously thanked him for giving the young man a little change and diverting novelty of scene.

Mr. Arnot, who happened to verge somewhat towards a complacent mood upon this occasion, smiled grimly at his wife's commendation, and even unbent so far as to indulge in some ponderous attempts at wit with Laura concerning her "magnificent offer," and asserted that if she had been "like his wife, she would have jumped at the chance of getting hold of such a crude, unreformed specimen of humanity. Indeed," concluded he, "I did not know but that Mrs. Arnot was bringing about the match, so that she might have a little of the raw material for reformatory purposes continually on hand."

Mrs. Arnot smiled, as she ever did, at her husband's attempted witticisms; but what he regarded as light, delicate shafts, winged sportively and carelessly, had rather the appearance of any heavy object that came to hand thrown at her with heedless, inconsiderate force. It is due to Mr. Arnot to say that he gave so little thought and attention to the wounds and bruises he caused, as to be unaware that any had been made. He had no hair-springs and jewel-tipped machinery in his massive, angular organization, and he acted practically as if the rest of humanity had been cast in the same mould with himself.

But Haldane's act touched him at his most vulnerable point. Not only had a large sum of his money been made away with, but, what was far worse, there had been a most serious irregularity in the business routine. While, therefore, he resolved that Haldane should receive full punishment, the ulterior thought of giving the rest of his employes a warning and intimidating lesson chiefly occupied his mind.

Aware of his wife's "unbusinesslike weakness and sentimental notions," as he characterized her traits, he determined not to see her until he had carried out his plan of securing repayment of the money, and of striking a salutary sentiment of fear into the hearts of all who were engaged in carrying out his methodical will.

Therefore, with the key of Haldane's room in his pocket, he kept watch and guard during the remainder of the night, taking only such rest as could be obtained on the lounge in his library.

At about sunrise two men appeared, and rapped lightly on the library window. Mr. Arnot immediately went out to them, and placed one within a summer-house in the spacious garden at the rear of the house, and the other in front, where he would be partially concealed by evergreens. By this arrangement the windows of Haldane's apartment and every entrance of the house was under the surveillance of police officers in citizen's dress. Mr. Arnot's own personal pride, as well as some regard for his wife's feelings, led him to arrange that the arrest should not be made at their residence, for he wished that all the events occurring at the house should be excluded as far as possible from the inevitable talk which the affair would occasion. At the same time he proposed to guard against the possibility of Haldane's escape, should fear or shame prompt his flight.

Having now two assistant watchers, he threw himself on the sofa, and took an hour or more of unbroken sleep. On awaking, he went with silent tread to the door of Haldane's room, and, after listening a moment, was satisfied from the heavy breathing within that its occupant was still under the influence of stupor. He now returned the key to the door, and unlocked it so that Haldane could pass out as soon as he was able. Then, after taking a little refreshment in the dining-room, he went directly to the residence of a police justice of his acquaintance, who, on hearing the facts as far as then known concerning Haldane, made out a warrant for his arrest, and promised that the officer to whom it would be given should be sent forthwith to Mr. Arnot's office—for thither the young man would first come, or be brought, on recovering from his heavy sleep.

Believing that he had now made all the arrangements necessary to secure himself from loss, and to impress the small army in his service that honesty was the "best policy" in their relations with him, Mr. Arnot next walked leisurely to one of his factories in the suburbs, partly to see that all was right, and partly to remind his agents there that they were in the employ of one whose untiring vigilance would not permit any neglect of duty to escape undetected.

Having noted that the routine of work was going forward as regularly as the monotonous clank of the machinery, he finally wended his way to his city office, and was the first arrival thither save Pat M'Cabe, who had just finished putting the place in order for the business of the day.

His factotum was in mortal trepidation, for in coming across town he had eagerly bought the morning "Courier," and his complacent sense of security at having withheld his name from the "oncivil iditor" vanished utterly as he read the words, "an intelligent Irishman in Mr. Arnot's employ."

"Och! bloody blazes! that manes me," he had exclaimed; "and ould Boss Arnot will know it just as well as if they had printed me name all over the paper. Bad luck to the spalpeen, and worse luck to meself!" "Intelligent Irishman, am I? Then what kind o' a crather would one be as had no sinse at all? Here I've ben throwin' away forty dollars the month for the sake o' one! Whin I gets me discharge I'd better go round to the tother side o' the airth than go home to me woife."

Nor were his apprehensions allayed as he saw Mr. Arnot reading the paper with a darkening scowl; but for the present Pat was left in suspense as to his fate.

Clerks and book-keepers soon appeared, and among them a policeman, who was summoned to the inner office, and given a seat somewhat out of sight behind the door.

Upon every face there was an expression of suppressed excitement and expectation, for the attention of those who had not seen the morning paper was speedily called to the ominous paragraph. But the routine and discipline of the office prevailed, and in a few minutes all heads were bending over bulky journals and ledgers, but with many a furtive glance at the door.

As for Pat, he had the impression that the policeman within would collar him before the morning was over, and march him off, with Haldane, to jail; and he was in such a state of nervous apprehension that almost any event short of an earthquake would be a relief if it could only happen at once.

The April sun shone brightly and genially into the apartment in which Haldane had been left to sleep off his drunken stupor. In all its appointments it appeared as fresh, inviting, and cleanly as the wholesome light without. The spirit of the housekeeper pervaded every part of the mansion, and in both furniture and decoration it would seem that she had studiously excluded everything which would suggest morbid or gloomy thoughts. It was Mrs. Arnot's philosophy that outward surroundings impart their colouring to the mind, and are a help or a hindrance. She was a disciple of the light, and was well aware that she must resolutely dwell in its full effulgence in order to escape from the blighting shadow of a life-long disappointment. Thus she sought to make her home, not gay or gaudy, not a brilliant mockery of her sorrow, which she had learned to calmly recognize as one might a village cemetery in a sunny landscape, but cheerful and lightsome like this April morning which looked in through the curtained windows of Haldane's apartment, and found everything in harmony with itself save the occupant.

And yet he was young and in his spring-time. Why should he make discord with the bright fresh morning? Because the shadow of evil—which is darker than the shadow of night, age, or sorrow—rested upon him. His hair hung in disorder over a brow which was contracted into a frown. His naturally fine features had a heavy, bloated, sensual aspect; and yet, even while he slept, you caught a glimpse in this face—as through a veil—of the anguish of a spirit that was suffering brutal wrong and violence.

His insensibility was passing away. His mind appeared to be struggling to cast off the weight of a stupefied body, but for a time its throes, which were manifested by starts, strong shuddering, and muttered words—were ineffectual. At last, in desperation, as it were, the tortured soul, poisoned even in its imaginings by the impurity of the lower nature, conjured up such a horrid vision that in its anguish it broke its chains, threw off the crushing weight, and the young man started up.

This returning consciousness had not been, like the dawn stealing in at his window, followed by a burst of sunlight. As the morning enters the stained, foul, dingy places of dissipation, which early in the evening had been the gas-lighted, garish scenes of riot and senseless laughter, and later the fighting ground of all the vile vermin of the night with their uncanny noises—as when, the doors and windows having been at last opened, the light struggles in through stale tobacco smoke, revealing dimly a discoloured, reeking place, whose sights and odours are more in harmony with the sewer than the sweet April sunshine and the violets opening on southern slopes—so when reason and memory, the janitors of the mind, first admitted the light of consciousness, only the obscure outline of miserable feelings and repulsive events were manifest to Haldane's introspection.

There was a momentary relief at finding that the horrible dream which had awakened him was only a dream, but while his waking banished the uncouth shapes of the imagination, his sane, well-guided vision saw revealed that from which he shrank, with far greater dread.

For a few moments, as he stared vacantly around the room, he could realize nothing save a dull leaden weight of pain. In this dreary obscurity of suffering, distinct causes of trouble and fear began to shape themselves. There was a mingled sense of misfortune and guilt. He had a confused memory of a great disappointment, and he knew from his condition that he had been drinking.

He looked at himself—he was dressed. There stood his muddy boots—two foul blots on the beauty and cleanliness of the room. So then he had come, or had been brought, at some hour during the night to the house of his stern and exacting employer. Haldane dismissed the thought of him with a reckless oath; but his face darkened with anguish as he remembered that this was also the home of Mrs. Arnot, who had been so kind, and, at the present time, the home of Laura Romeyn also.

They may have seen, and, at least, must know, of his degradation.

He staggered to the ewer, and, with a trembling hand, poured out a little water. Having bathed his hot, feverish face, he again sat down, and tried to recall what had happened.

In bitterness of heart he remembered his last interview

with Laura, and her repugnance toward both himself and what she regarded as "his disgusting vices;" and so disgusting did his evil courses now seem that for the first time in his life he thought of himself with loathing.

Then, as memory rapidly duplicated subsequent events, he gave a contemptuous smile to his "gloomy grandeur" schemes in passing, and saw himself on the way to New York, with one thousand dollars of his employer's funds entrusted to his care. He remembered that he was introduced to two fascinating strangers, that they drank and lunched together, that they missed the train, that they were gambling, that, having lost all his own money, he was tempted to open a package belonging to Mr. Arnot; did he not open the other also? At this point all became confused and blurred.

What had become of that money?

With nervous, trembling haste he searched his pockets. Both the money and the envelopes were gone.

His face blanched; his heart sank with a certain foreboding of evil. He found himself on the brink of an abyss, and felt the ground crumbling beneath him. First came a mad impulse to fly, to escape and hide himself, and he had almost carried it out. His hand was on the door, but he hesitated, turned back, and walked the floor in agony.

Then came the better impulse of one as yet unhardened in the ways of evil, to go at once to his employer, to tell the whole truth, and make such reparation as was within his power. He knew that his mother was abundantly able to pay back the money, and he believed she would do so.

This he conceded was his best, and, indeed, only safe course, and he hoped that the wretched affair might be so arranged as to be kept hidden from the world. As for Mrs. Arnot and Laura, he felt that he could never look them in the face again.

Suppose he should meet them going out. The very thought was dreadful, and it seemed to him that he would sink to the floor from shame under their reproachful eyes. Would they be up yet? He looked at his watch; it had run down, and its motionless hands pointed at the vile, helpless condition in which he must have been at the time when he usually wound it up.

He glanced from the window, with the hope of escaping the two human beings whom he dreaded more than the whole mocking world; but it was too lofty to admit of a leap to the ground.

"Who is yonder strange man that seems to be watching the house?" he queried.

Was it his shaken nerves and sense of guilt which led him to suspect danger and trouble on every side?

"There is no help for it," he exclaimed, grinding his teeth; and, opening the door, he hastened from the house, looking neither to the right hand nor to the left.

CHAPTER XI.—HALDANE IS ARRESTED.

As Haldane strolled rapidly along the winding, gravelled path that led from Mrs. Arnot's beautiful suburban villa to the street, he started violently as he encountered a stranger, who appeared to be coming toward the mansion; and he was greatly relieved when he was permitted to pass unmolested. And yet the cool glance of scrutiny which he received left a very unpleasant impression. Nor was this uneasiness diminished when, on reaching the street, he found that the stranger had apparently accomplished his errand to the house so speedily that he was already returning, and accompanied by another man.

Were not their eyes fixed on him, or was he misled by his fears? After a little time he looked around again. One of the men had disappeared, and he breathed more freely. No; there he was on the opposite side of the street, and walking steadily abreast with him, while his companion continued following at about the same distance away.

Was he "shadowed"? He was, indeed, literally and figurately. Although the sun was shining bright and warm, never before had he been conscious of such a horror of great darkness. The light which can banish the oppressive disheartening shadow of guilt must come from beyond the sun.

As he entered the busier streets in the vicinity of the office, he saw a few persons whom he knew. Was he again misled by his overwrought and nervous condition? or did these persons try to shun him by turning corners, entering shops, or by crossing the street, and looking resolutely the other way?

Could that awful entity, the world, already know the events of the past night?

A newsboy was vociferating down a side street. Only the word "Crime" caught Haldane's ear, but the effect was as cold and as chilling as the drip of an icicle.

As he hastened up the office steps, Pat M'Cabe scowled upon him, and muttered audibly,

"Bad luck till yees! I wish I'd lift ye ablinkin' like an owl where I found ye."

"And bad luck till yees, too," added Pat, in his surly growl, as a reporter, note-book in hand, stepped nimbly in after Haldane. "It's meself that wishes ivry iditor o' the land was burned up wid his own lyin' papers."

Even the most machine-like of the sere and withered book-keepers held their pews in suspense as Haldane passed hastily toward Mr. Arnot's private office, followed by the reporter, whose alert manner and observant, questioning eye, suggested an animated symbol of interrogation.

The manner of his fellow-clerks did not escape Haldane's notice, even in that confused and hurried moment, and it increased his sense of an impending blow; but when, on entering the private office, Mr. Arnot turned toward him his grim, rigid face, and when a man in the uniform of an officer of the law rose and stepped forward, as if the one expected had now arrived, his heart misgave him utterly, and for a moment he found no words, but stood before his employer, pallid and trembling, his very attitude and appearance making as full a confession of guilt as could the statement he proposed to give.

If Pat's opinion concerning Mr. Arnot's "in'ards" had not been substantially correct, that inexorable man would have seen that this was not an old offender who stood