

CHOICE LITERATURE.

FROM TEST TO EARNEST.

BY REV. E. P. ROR.

CHAPTER XIX.—THE PREACHER TAUGHT BY THE PAGAN.

We have said that Lottie Marsden was a pagan. That is not necessarily a reproach. Socrates was a pagan. But Lottie, in the main, was a very ordinary pagan, not better than the average. Her only superiority over other idolaters, and many nominal Christians, it might be added, was her practical common sense. The more she thought, the more unsatisfactory Hemstead's sermon grew, and the more she became that there was a wrong somewhere: in him, or her, or in religion itself.

Her whole nature revolted at the idea of God given that morning.

In her vivid fancy, she saw an unrelenting, unimpassioned, and yet all-powerful Being, from whom there was no escape, calmly subjecting one human life after another to the severest crucial tests. If one could endure it, all might be well. If, in the composition of one's character, there existed good metal, it would come out of the furnace fine gold perhaps; but if, as she feared might be true of herself, there was only dross, then the fiery trials awaiting would be as useless as cruel.

"Why couldn't an all-powerful God find a pleasanter and surer way of making us good?" she asked in bitterness. "I know there is something wrong in what Mr. Hemstead preached this morning. He is different from his own doctrines, and to my mind a great deal better. He was severe upon me, but not calmly and stonily severe. He looked as if he felt for me deeply, and would even, at cost to himself, give me aid if I tried to do right. If he had shown me my faults in the calm cold distance of immeasurable superiority which he ascribed to God, I would not have listened to a word. But his voice was gentleness itself, and it evidently pained him to give me pain; but when he came to show our relations to God, I seemed to come in the presence of stony-hearted, stony-faced fate. If this is the real God that ministers preach about, little wonder that they have such a hard time of it in persuading us to love Him. Little wonder that people forget Him as long as they can. But Mr. Hemstead seems to want us to think of these awful things nearly all the time; and what's worse, to begin torturing and mortifying ourselves, even before God is ready to commence. No, I thank you. No such religion for me. If I must go into the fiery furnace, I won't go till I must."

She sprang up, and restlessly paced the room. "He's a very cheerful apostle of such a gloomy Gospel," she thought. "Gospel! I thought Gospel meant good news. I never heard worse than he told me this morning. If what he preached is true religion, he's a very inconsistent professor of it, and I would like to tell him so."

"What's more I will, if I can find him;" and acting upon the impulse she left the room.

The "miserables-inners," as the prayer-book has it, and whom Hemstead had in fact made quite miserable for a time, grew more comfortable after dinner; and by three P.M., so far from employing hair-cloth and scourings, or even the mildest form of a crusade against the weakness of the flesh, were all dozing and digesting in the most luxurious manner. Lottie was the only "sinner" who remained "miserable"; but she was not more "out of sorts" than the one who, *ex officio*, as the world is prone to believe, ought to have been calm and serene upon his theological height above the clouds.

As she entered the parlour with her velvet-like tread, she paused a moment to observe the Boanerges—the "hunderer of the morning." As he sat alone before the fire, with his elbows upon his knees and his face buried in his hands, he looked more like a weak mortal than a "son of thunder." He did not look a bit like one, who with face as firm and inflexible as God's purpose, was anxious to step into the fiery furnace before it was ready.

She drew a few steps nearer, and stood before him with a curious expression on her face, which could so well mask or reveal her thoughts as she chose. She had come down stairs in a state of irritable and defiant protest against his doctrines, and with no little vexation at him for being their mouth-piece. If she had found him calmly pacing the floor, pondering on human frailty and folly, or if he had been reading judiciously a semi-sceptical work, that he might demolish the irreverent author, she would have made an onslaught whose vigour, if not logic, would have greatly disturbed his equanimity and theological poise. But when she saw his attitude of deep dejection, and when twice he sighed long and heavily, her woman's nature was disarmed, and she began to think that his doctrines were as hard upon him as the rest. Instinctively she took his part against God, whose formative hand appeared too heavy for them both.

Therefore, instead of the hard, bitter words that she intended to speak, she said, with a little quaver in her voice, "Mr. Hemstead, I almost believe that you feel as badly as I do."

When he looked up she was sure he felt worse. But he seemed to try to forget his own trouble as he said kindly, "I'm sorry you feel badly."

"Well," said Lottie, sitting down on the opposite side of the hearth, while the fire, on which Hemstead had thrown some damp green wood, smoked dismally between them, "I do think you are a little sorry."

"Can I help you in any way? I wish you knew how gladly I would do so."

"Yes, I believe that, too. You don't look a bit as if you would like to throw me into a fiery furnace, and see if I would come out a lump of gold or a good-for-nothing cinder."

His only reply was a look of perplexed inquiry, but his gray eyes were so kind and yet withal so full of dejection that she again thought, "He is dreadfully inconsistent with his doctrines"; and she said, with a trace of archness in her tone:

"I think you look as if you needed a little help and comfort yourself."

He turned away his face, but after a moment said, "You never spoke truer words, Miss Marsden."

Then Lottie, who before had felt in such need of cheer herself, forgot this need in her wish to help the great disponding man before her, whose mingled weakness and strength was a growing surprise. In a tone that would have softened flint she said:

"I wish I were good enough to help you."

Then he perplexed her by saying, with sudden energy, "And I wish you were bad enough."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Pardon me," he said hastily. "My words were figurative, and exaggerated by deep feeling. I meant that I wished you or some one, could be human and charitable enough to understand me, and help me to triumph over my weakness without condemning me too severely."

"Well," said Lottie with a little sigh of satisfaction, "I think I'm bad enough. I'm very human, any way, and I think I'm in a mood to be charitable to-day; for, if my conscience tells me the truth, I'm awfully in need of charity myself."

He looked up quickly and hopefully as he said: "Then my sermon did you some good after all."

"Not a bit of it. I can have plenty of charity for you, but not a particle for your sermon—no more than I would for a thumb-screw of the Inquisition."

This unmeasured condemnation of the pet child of his brain—a part of himself as it were—of which he had been so proud, cut to the quick, and he flushed deeply and almost resentfully at first. But he made no reply, and sat lowering at the smoky hearth while he sank into a lower depth of despondency. Preaching was his chosen life work, and yet this was the verdict against his first great sermon.

Lottie looked hopelessly at him, not knowing what to say or do next, and regretting that she had spoken so hastily and harshly.

At last he sighed. "I don't understand it. I have spent months over that sermon. I fear I have mistaken my calling."

"Well," said Lottie rather brusquely, "I wouldn't feel so forlorn and miserable over that. I don't think it's much of a calling any way."

"Oh, Miss Marsden!" he ejaculated, in a shocked tone.

"I'm sincere in what I say," she continued earnestly.

"Please don't misunderstand me. As far as I am a judge I think your sermon was well written, and it certainly was delivered effectively; for though none of us liked it, we couldn't help listening. But its strongest effect was to make me wish I was an infidel and, like Mr. Harcourt, did not believe in anything. I honestly think that it will be a very poor calling to go out among the poor people on the frontier and preach such a gospel as you gave us this morning. In the name of pity, haven't they enough to contend with now? In addition to the scalping Indians, the border-ruffians, the grasshoppers, and grinding poverty, are you going to give them a religion in which the furnace of affliction and the crucible of trial flame are the centre? Poor creatures! I suppose they are in hard and hot places most of the time, but don't make them think that God puts them there, and that there is no chance to get out till He is through with them. I can tell you beforehand, that people are not going to get into the fiery furnace and commence having a miserable time of it before they must. Let us be as comfortable as we can, while we can. If you feel that you have mistaken your calling—and I hope you have—I'm sure that father, at my request, will find you a better one in New York."

Poor Hemstead was as satisfied as Luther had been that this was a temptation of the devil; but before him was no such apparition as that against which the great reformer could hurl his ink-horn without leaving a spot.

With the lurid flash of Lucifer as he fell from heaven, the thought passed through his disquieted mind, "And in New York I might win the hand and heart of this beautiful girl." But every quality of his soul frowned so darkly on this thought, which held out Lottie Marsden as a bribe, that it soon skulked away. His mind reverted to the main difficulty, and he said:

"Surely, Miss Marsden, I did not preach such a religion as you suggest."

"You surely did, Mr. Hemstead, as I could soon prove to you. I am glad you are so inconsistent a professor of your religion."

"Am I an inconsistent professor?" he asked sadly.

"Indeed you are," she replied, and both mischief and kindness lurked in her eyes. "You don't live up to your doctrines at all."

"Little wonder, then," he exclaimed, in bitter self-condemnation, "that all turn from my teaching."

She looked at him with a curious smile, as she thought, "What a child he is! He is but wax in my hands. If he should marry a cold hearted, selfish woman, with a spice of petty, teasing malice in her nature, she could sit down quietly at his hearth and torture to death this overgrown man, with whole libraries in his brain. I could wing his soul now, by making him think that he had lived so unworthily that we could not listen to his most unworthy sermon."

She led him out of his strong self-condemnation into equal perplexity, by saying, "Unlike most of the world, you are so much better than your creed as to be utterly inconsistent."

He came and sat down near her, with such an appealing, helpless look, that she laughed outright.

"Please don't laugh at me," he said with the glimmer of a smile, "because this to me is a more serious matter than you or any one can understand."

"I don't laugh unfeelingly, I assure you," she said earnestly. "I never was more sincere in my life than I was this afternoon, but I am one of those ridiculous mortals who cannot take things coolly, and as I said at dinner, there are times when I must either laugh or cry. I never passed a more miserable day in my life than yesterday. You, terrible magician, whom I have scarcely known for a week, have awakened in my heart a giant; and yesterday and to-day he

has been shaking my soul with his mutterings and threatenings. I could always manage my conscience before, and snub it into quietness when it became unruly. But as I said, from a whimpering child it has suddenly grown into a threatening giant, more harsh even than you the other evening. I went to church this morning, hoping to find some comfort, some remedy, but had as it is the disease, the remedy seems far worse. I came down stairs this afternoon in no amiable mood with you or your theology, but was disarmed by seeing you in as bad a plight as myself. I fear your medicine will kill both doctor and patient. During the past week you have been a strong, genial man, with a human, genuine enjoyment of our every-day life. If you were a little blue and puritanical, it was in a common-sense way that I could understand, and your criticism of myself I think in the main was just. Any way, you made me wish I was a better girl, and I was thinking how to commence; then came this awful Sunday, and your awful sermon, which made me both fear and hate God, and want to keep away from Him as far and as long as I can."

"Your words perplex and sadden me beyond measure," said Hemstead. "You belong to the very class that I hoped to benefit,—those who admit they are without faith, but who are not so averse to the truth but that they may be won by it. And yet you say that the whole force of my sermon is to make you wish that you could be an infidel. I cannot understand it. If I have mistaken my calling I could not make you nor any one comprehend the depth of my sorrow, or the bitterness of my disappointment. In the calling of the ministry it has ever seemed to me that I could work a century with enthusiasm. But in any other work I should be but a drudge, for my heart would not be in it. You know how young men often feel about these things. One has a natural bent for the law, another for medicine, and another for business or science. I had fondly hoped that I was a predestined minister, and this hope has strengthened with years and become inwrought with every fibre of my soul. I was willing to commence in a very humble way, and anywhere that God would set me to work; but if the effect of my preaching is to drive people away from Him, the sooner I give it all up the better."

"How different our tastes and plans for life are!" said Lottie musingly. "It appears strange that you should have set your heart so strongly on what is so dismal to me. And yet such is the evident depth of your regret that I do feel for you very much."

Hemstead rose and took a few abrupt turns up and down the room. Lottie watched him with increasing interest. He had shown her his weakness, and she perceived that he would also show his strength. After a moment he leaned on the mantel before her, and said in quiet, decisive tones: "Miss Marsden, I have given you the right to speak to me very plainly. I honestly wish light on this subject, and intend to settle this question at the earliest moment possible. God knows I do not wish to thrust myself unbidden into the sacred office. If I am not worthy of the calling, then the sooner I find it out the better, and so try to content myself with some humbler work. Not only from what you have said, but from the remarks and aspect of others, I am satisfied that my effort this morning was worse than a failure. You have a mind of unusual vigour, and a good faculty in expressing your thought. Won't you give me a keen, truthful analysis of the whole service? It is to the world I am to preach; and I wish to know just how what I say strikes the world. I know that Christian doctrines have ever been unpalatable, but if there is something in my presentation of them that is going to make them tenfold more so, then I will be dumb. I would rather hide in a desert than drive one soul from God, as you intimated. You were brave enough to let me speak to you, almost harshly I fear; now see if I have not equal courage. Say the very worst things that you believe true, and you may help me very much toward coming to the most important decision of my life."

"Oh dear," said Lottie. "I am not fit to counsel a downy chicken. I wish you didn't take this matter so to heart. You look as if I might be your executioner."

"You can be my faithful surgeon and do some wholesome cutting."

"Well," said Lottie dismally. "I'd rather give you ether or laughing-gas first."

"That is more kind than wise," he replied, smiling; "moral and mental surgery the patient should have all its faculties."

"There!" she exclaimed with animation, "we are illustrating by contrast my chief complaint against your preaching. When you told me my faults you did so gently; and appeared pained in giving me pain; and now I am honestly sorry to say words that I know will hurt you. And I know my words will hurt and discourage you, for if the trouble were in you it might be remedied, but it is in what you teach, and of course you teach what you believe, and won't say smooth things as I fear other ministers do sometimes. You represented God calm and unchangeable as fate, as unrelenting and unimpassioned. In this spirit you portrayed Him taking up one life after another and putting it into the furnace of affliction, to see what He can make of it. You illustrated His manner of doing this by the sculptor with his cold unfeeling marble, by the refiner with crude ore, and by the surgeon, and you forgot to say that the last stupifies his patients before cutting. You gave me the impression that as soon as God set about making us better we would find ourselves in trouble, and that like certain school masters of the old régime, He had faith in nothing save the rod. You know the natural feeling of children toward such pedagogues. How can we help feeling in the same way toward God? Then you presented God as full of inflexible purposes, but the oftener you told us that we could not help ourselves, and that there was no use of resisting, the more I felt like resisting. The idea of cutting and carving character out of quivering human hearts as if they were marble! The idea of putting one, like a lump of ore, into a crucible, and then coolly sitting by to see what becomes of it. I'm not a lump of ore, and if I need harsh treatment I want it done sympathetically, feelingly, or I will become a Tartar instead of a saint. The tears in your eyes the other night, Mr. Hemstead, did me more good than all your wise words."