

## CHOICE LITERATURE.

## A KNIGHT OF THE XIX. CENTURY.

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## CHAPTER XIX. — THE WORLD'S BEST OFFER. — A PRISON.

After a walk in the sweet April sunshine the following morning, a hearty breakfast, and a general rallying of the elastic forces of youth, Haldane felt that he had not yet reached the "brink of dark despair."

Indeed, he had an odd sense of pride that he had survived the ordeal of the last two days, and still felt as well as he did. Although it was but an Arab's life, in which every man's hand seemed against him, yet he still lived, and concluded that he could continue to live indefinitely.

He did not go out again, as on the previous day, to seek employment, but sat down and tried to think his way into the future somewhat.

The first question that presented itself was, Should he in any contingency return home to his mother?

He was not long in deciding adversely, for it seemed to him to involve such a bitter mortification, that he felt he would rather starve.

Should he send to her for money?

That would be scarcely less humiliating, for it was equivalent to a confession that he could not even take care of himself, much less achieve all the brave things he had intimated. He was still more averse to going to Mrs. Arnot, for what would seem charity to her husband and to everyone else who might hear of it. The probability, also, that Laura would learn of such an appeal for aid made him scout the very thought.

Should he go away among strangers, change his name, and commence life anew, unburdened by the weight which now dragged him down?

The thought of cutting himself off utterly from all whom he knew, or who cared for him, caused a cold, shivering sense of dread. It would also be a confession of defeat, an acknowledgment that he could not accomplish what he had promised to himself and to others. He had, moreover, sufficient forethought to perceive that any success which he might achieve elsewhere, and under another name, would be such a slight and baseless fabric, that a breath from one who now knew him could overturn it. He might lead an honourable life for years, and yet no one would believe him honourable after discovering that he was living under an alias and concealing a crime. If he could build himself up in Hillaton he would be founded on the rock of the truth, and need fear no disastrous reverses from causes against which he could not guard.

Few can be more miserable than those who hold their fortunes and good name on sufferance—safe or y in the power and disposition of others to keep some wretched secret; and he is but little better off who fears that every stranger arriving in town may recognize in his face the features of one that years before, by reason of some disgraceful act, fled from himself and all who knew him. The more Haldane thought upon the scheme of losing his identity, and of becoming that vague and as yet unnamed stranger, who after years of exile would still be himself, though to the world not himself, the less attractive it became.

He finally concluded that, as he had resolved to remain in Hillaton, he would keep his resolution, and that, as he had plainly stated his purpose to lift himself up by his own unaided efforts, he would do so if it were possible; and if it were not, he would live the life of a labourer—a tramp, even—rather than "skulk back," as he expressed it, to those who were once kindred and companions.

"If I cannot walk erect to their front doors, I will never crawl around to the back entrances. If I ever must take alms to keep from starving, it will be from strangers. I shall never inflict myself as a dead weight and a painfully tolerated infamy on any one. I was able to get myself into this disgusting slough, and if I haven't brains and pluck enough to get myself out, I will remain at this, my level, to which I have fallen."

Thus pride still counselled and controlled, and yet it was a kind of pride that inspires something like respect. It proved that there was much good metal in the crude, misshapen ore of his nature.

But the necessity of doing something was urgent, for the sum he had been willing to receive from his mother was small, and rapidly diminishing.

Among the possible activities in which he might engage, that of writing for papers and magazines occurred to him, and the thought at once caught and fired his imagination. The mysteries of the literary world were the least known to him, and therefore it offered the greatest amount of vague promise and indefinite hope. Here a path might open to both fame and fortune. The more he dwelt on the possibility, the more it seemed to take the aspect of probability. Under the signature of E. H. he would write thrilling tales, until the public insisted upon knowing the great unknown. Then he could reverse present experience by scorning those who had scorned him. He recalled all that he had ever read about genius toiling in its attic until the world was compelled to recognize and do homage to the regal mind. He would remain in seclusion also; he would burn midnight oil until he should be known as Haldane the brilliant writer instead of Haldane the gambler, drunkard, and thief.

All on fire with his new project, he sallied forth to the nearest news stand, and selected two or three papers and magazines, whose previous interest to him and known popularity suggested that they were the best mediums in which he could rise upon the public as a literary star, all the more attractive because unnamed and unknown.

His next proceeding indicated a commendable amount of shrewdness, and proved that his roscate visions resulted more from ignorance and inexperience than from innate foolishness. He carefully read the periodicals he had bought, in the hope of obtaining hints and suggestions from their contents which would aid him in producing acceptable manuscripts. Some of the sketches and stories appeared

very simple, the style flowing along as smoothly and limpidly as a summer brook through the meadows. He did not see why he could not write in a similar vein, perhaps more excitingly and interestingly. In his partial and neglected course of study he had not given much attention to belles lettres, and was not aware that the simplicity and lucid purity of thought which made certain pages so easily read were produced by the best trained and most cultured talent existing among the regular contributors.

He spent the evening and the greater part of a sleepless night in constructing a crude plot of a story, and, having procured writing materials, hastened through an early breakfast the following morning in his eagerness to enter on what now seemed a shining path to fame.

He sat down and dipped his pen in ink. The blank, white page was before him, awaiting his brilliant and burning thoughts; but for some reason they did not and would not come. This puzzled him. He could dash off a letter, and write with ease a plain business statement. Why could he not commence and go on with his story?

"How do those other fellows commence?" he mentally queried, and he again carefully read and examined the opening paragraphs of two or three tales that had pleased him. They seemed to commence and go forward very easily and naturally. Why could he not do the same?

To his dismay he found that he could not. He might as well have sat down and hoped to have deftly and skilfully constructed a watch, as to have imitated the style of the stories that most pleased him, for he had never formed even the power, much less the habit, of composition.

After a few laboured and inconsequential sentences, which seemed like crude ore instead of the molten, burning metal of thought left to cool in graceful moulds, he threw aside his pen in despair.

After staring despondently for a time at the blank page which now promised to remain as blank as the future then seemed, the fact suddenly occurred to him that even genius often spurred its flagging or dormant powers by stimulants. Surely, then, he, in his pressing emergency, had a right to avail himself of this aid. A little brandy might awaken his imagination, which would then kindle with his theme.

At any rate, he had no objection to the brandy, and with this inspiration he again resumed his pen. He was soon astonished and delighted with the result, for he found himself writing with ease and fluency. His thoughts seemed to become vivid and powerful, and his story grew rapidly. As body and mind flagged, the potent geni in the black bottle again lifted and soared on with him until the marvellous tale was completed.

He decided to correct the manuscript on the following day, and was so complacent and hopeful over his performance, that he scarcely noted that he was beginning to feel wretchedly from the inevitable reaction. The next day, with dull and aching head, he tried to read what he had written, but found it dreary and disappointing work. His sentences and paragraphs appeared like clouds from which the light had faded; but he explained this fact to himself on the ground of his depressed physical state, and he went through his task with dogged persistence.

He felt better on the following day, and with the aid of the bottle he resolved to give his inventive genius another flight. On this occasion he would attempt a longer story—one that would occupy him several days—and he again stimulated himself up to a condition in which he found at least no lack of words. When he attained what he supposed was his best mood, he read over again the work of the preceding day, and was delighted to find that it now glowed with prismatic hues. In his complacency he at once despatched it to the paper for which it was designed.

Three or four days of alternate work and brooding passed, and if various and peculiar moods prove the possession of genius, Haldane certainly might claim it. Between his sense of misfortune and disgrace, and the fact that his funds were becoming low, on one hand, and his towering hopes and shivering fears concerning his literary ventures on the other, he was emphatically in what is termed "a state of mind," continuously. These causes alone were sufficient to make mental serenity impossible; but the after effects of the decoction from which he obtained his inspiration were even worse, and after a week's work the thought occurred to him more than once that if he pursued a literary life, either his genius or that which he imbibed as its spur, would consume him utterly.

By the time the first two stories were finished, he found that it would be necessary to supplement the labours of his pen. He would have to wait at least a few days before he could hope for any returns, even though he had urged in his accompanying notes prompt acceptance and remittance for their value.

He went to the office of the "Evening Spy," the paper which had shown some leniency toward him, and offered his services as a writer, or even reporter; and, although taught by harsh experience not to hope for very much, he was a little surprised at the peremptory manner in which his services were declined. His face seemed to ask an explanation, and the editor said briefly,

"We did not bear down very hard on you—it's not our custom; but both inclination and necessity lead us to require that everyone and everything connected with this paper should be eminently respectable and deserving of respect. Good morning, sir."

Haldane's pre-eminence consisted only in his lack of respectability; and after the brave visions of the past week, based on his literary toil, this cool, sharp-cut statement of society's opinion quenched about all hope of ever rising by first gaining recognition and employment among those whose position was similar to what his own had been. As he plodded his way back to the miserable little foreign restaurant, his mind began to dwell on this question,

"Is there any place in the world for one who has committed a crime, save a prison?"

## CHAPTER XX. — MAIDEN AND WOOD-SAWYER.

Before utterly abandoning all hope of finding employment that should in some small degree preserve an air of respecta-

bility, Haldane resolved to give up one more day to the search, and on the following morning he started out and walked until nightfall. He even offered to take the humblest positions that would insure him a support and some recognition; but the record of his action while in Mr. Arnot's employ followed him everywhere, creating sufficient prejudice in every case to lead to a refusal of his application. Some said "No" reluctantly and hesitatingly, as if kindly feelings within took the young man's part; but they said it, nevertheless.

For the patient resolution with which he continued to apply to all kinds of people and places, hour after hour in spite of such disheartening treatment, he deserved much praise; but he did not receive any, and at last, weary and despondent, he returned to his miserable lodgings. He was so desperately depressed in body and mind, that the contents of the black bottle seemed his only resource.

Such a small sum now remained that he felt that something must be done instantly. He concluded that his only course now was to go out and pick up any odd bits of work that he could find. He hoped that by working half the time he might make enough to pay for his board at his present cheap lodging-place. This would leave him time to continue his writing, and in the course of a week more he would certainly hear from the manuscripts already forwarded. On these he now built nearly all his hope. If they were well received, and paid for he considered his fortune substantially restored, and fame almost a certainty in the future. If he could only produce a few more manuscripts, and bridge over the intervening time until he could hear from them, he felt that his chief difficulties would be past.

Having decided to do a labourer's work, he at once resolved to exchange his elegant broadcloth for a labourer's suit, and he managed this transfer so shrewdly, that he obtained quite a little sum of money in addition.

It was well that he did replenish his finances somewhat, for his apparently phlegmatic landlord was as wary as a veteran mouse in looking after his small interests. He had just obtained an inkling as to Haldane's identity, and, while he was not at all chary concerning the social and moral standing of his few uncertain lodgers, he proposed henceforth that all transactions with the suspicious stranger should be on a strictly cash basis.

It was the busy spring-time, and labour was in great demand. Haldane wandered off to the suburbs, and, as an ordinary labourer, offered his services in cleaning up yards, cutting wood, or forking over a space of garden ground. His stalwart form and prepossessing appearance generally secured him a favourable answer, but before he was through with his task he often received a sound scolding for his unskilful and bungling style of work. But he in part made up by main strength what he lacked in skill, and after two or three days he acquired considerable deftness in his unwanted labours, and felt the better for them. They counteracted the effects of his literary efforts, or, more correctly, his means of inspiration in them.

Thus another week passed, of which he gave three days to the production of two or three more brief manuscripts, and during the following week he felt sure that he would hear from those first sent.

He wrote throughout the hours of daylight on Sunday, scarcely leaving his chair, and drank more deeply than usual. In consequence, he felt wretchedly on Monday, and, therefore, strolled off to look for some employment that would not tax his aching head. Hitherto he had avoided all localities where he would be apt to meet those who knew him, and by reason of his brief residence in town there were comparatively few who were familiar with his features. He now recalled the fact that he had often seen from his window, while an inmate of Mrs. Arnot's home, quite a collection of cottages across a small ravine that ran a little back of that lady's residence. He might find some work among them, and he yielded to the impulse to look again upon the place where such rich and abundant happiness had once seemed within his grasp.

For several days he had been conscious of a growing desire to hear from his mother and Mrs. Arnot, and often found himself wondering how they regarded his mysterious disappearance, or whether reports of his vain inquiry for work had reached them. With a pride and resolution that grew obstinate with time and failure, he resolved that he would not communicate with them until he had something favourable to tell; and he hoped, and almost believed, that before many days passed, he could address to them a literary weekly paper in which they would find in prominent position, the underscored initials of E. H. Until he could be preceded by the first flashes of fame he would remain in obscurity. He would not even let Mrs. Arnot know where he was hiding, so that she might send to him his personal effects left at her house. Indeed, he had no place for them now, and, besides, more morbidly bent than ever on making good the proud words he had spoken. If, in the face of such tremendous odds he could, alone and unaided, with nothing but his hands and brain, win again all and more than he had lost, he could compel the respect and admiration of those who had witnessed his downfall and consequent victorious struggle.

Was the girl who had inspired his sudden, and, as he had supposed, "undying" passion, forgotten during these trying days? Yes, to a great extent. His self-love was greater than his love for Laura Romeyn. He craved intensely to prove that he was no longer a proper object of her scorn. She had rejected him as a slave to "disgusting vices," and such he had apparently shewn himself to be; but now he would have been willing to have dipped his pen in his own blood and have written away his life, if thereby he could have filled her with admiration and regret. Although he scarcely acknowledged it to himself, perhaps the subtlest and strongest impulse to his present course was the hope of teaching her that he was not what she had regarded him. But he was not at that time capable of a strong, true affection for anyone, and thoughts of the pretty maiden wounded his pride more than his heart.

After arriving at the farther bank of the ravine back of Mrs. Arnot's residence, he sat down for a while, and gave himself up to a very bitter reverie. There, in the bright