

Choice Literature.

A MODERN JACOB.

BY HESTER STUART.

CHAPTER IX.—(Continued.)

One day, with some misgivings, he opened the subject to his wife. She listened silently while he spoke, in hesitating words, of the perils of that awful night, and the vow he had then made.

When he had finished she said, "I have thought that all out long ago. We took the farm on condition of caring for your father and mother. I shall never go back again, and I presume you will be satisfied to remain here. We could not be sure of finding anybody to take care of them and manage the farm properly. You had better deed it back to your father during his lifetime, and let him do as he pleases with it, and when he dies it will come to us again."

Very shrewdly planned; but the perils of that night of horror, when he was dragged from the very gate of death, were too vivid for her husband to assent to this half-way restitution.

"That wouldn't help Joel," he replied, "and I promised to be just to him."

Mrs. Balcome was one of those rare women who never waste words in a useless argument, and now, seeing that her husband was fully decided, she closed her eyes and turned her face to the wall, thus dismissing the subject once and forever.

Before his purpose had time to change, a deed was executed, giving back to Farmer Balcome his ancestral acres, and to Jacob a feeling about his heart which was entirely novel. This deed with a letter saying that on his wife's account they would remain with her people was started for the East, and Jacob turned his whole attention toward the possibilities of the West.

It was a sunny day in mid-April. Farmer Balcome and Joel had been on a little tour about the farm; down in the south meadow, where the brook began to show a narrow green border on either side; and up over the big hill pasture where the cattle roamed contentedly after the winter's confinement. The air was full of the subtle feeling of spring, and when they reached the dooryard again, they stopped and looked long over the wide brown fields, so soon to be green, and the smiling, pleasant land about them.

"This is a grand old farm, father," said Joel. "I believe it never struck me so strongly before; what a good home we have."

Farmer Balcome sat down on a wheelbarrow, and, taking off his hat, wiped his face nervously. "Joel," he broke out suddenly, a tremble in his strong voice, "I've got something to tell you; a hard thing, but it's true. This farm ain't mine; it's Jacob's. I never meant to wrong you, but after I got hurt I was kinder ailin', and got into the way of thinkin' I shouldn't ever be good for anything again; and there was you, gone off in anger—I don't say that you didn't have reason—and Jacob always here, and somehow a-urging' of me, and one day, when I was feelin' clear down, I gave the farm to him. You can't feel any harder towards me than I do towards myself, but it's done."

"I knew all about it long ago, father," replied Joel, "and I won't pretend not to be sorry, for I love every foot of the place; but I couldn't have been your son all these years and not know you did what you thought was right. And you needn't worry about me; I'm doing well in the store."

"But you ain't made for a trader. Jacob's a better trader than you'll ever be; you're a born farmer; and to think that I have cheated you out of it," and in bitterness of spirit, Farmer Balcome withdrew to the house.

When, a few days later, Joel came back from the village with Jacob's letter and the reconveyance of the farm, Mr. Balcome's feelings may, perhaps, be imagined; they certainly cannot be described. When the fact became plain to him that he was once more a landholder, the free owner of his dearly loved farm, he shut himself up in his room and poured forth a prayer of thanksgiving that the seclusion could not silence. By and by the door was softly opened, and another gray head was bowed beside his. Not less than her husband had Mrs. Balcome felt the pain and mortification of their position, and as they had suffered together, they now gave thanks together.

Knowing that they were fully at liberty to resume their rightful places made them more willing to give up to the younger people, and they talked long and cheerfully of what they and "the children" would do on the farm the coming season, for it was settled in their own minds that Joel and Rhoda must remain with them. Joel was more than willing, for, as his father had said, he was a born farmer, and he had not known how distasteful store life was to him until he breathed again the free air of the hills. But it cost Rhoda a sharp pang to give up her pretty nest of a home, and leave her kindred and come to a place where, if some things were long since forgiven, they were not forgotten. "Besides," said Rhoda, "how can I leave dear Mr. Cushing? Your Mr. Berkeley is perfectly splendid, but he's not my own dear old minister."

Farmer Balcome and his wife stole a meaning glance at each other at this mention.

"I should miss Mr. Cushing, that's a fact," replied Joel, "but I'll tell you what we might do, Rhoda. He might be asked to come up here and preach once in a while. I think he would come, and I know father and mother would like him right well. Don't you wish they could have heard his sermon on 'The wages of sin is death'? That was just right up and down enough to suit father."

So, between them, Rhoda was persuaded, as those who love always have been and always will be. The little house at Coverley was dismantled and the old farmhouse at Wilton Corners became the richer by many dainty furnishings. And then set in a long season of peace and good-will in the

Balcome family. Joel and his father worked together more like two brothers than like parent and child; for since Mr. Balcome's confidence in himself had been so grievously shaken, he had fallen into the way of leaning on his son; and instead of the old dictatorial "I am going to do so and so," was often heard "Hadden't we better do this or that?" and what he lost in authority he gained in affection.

Indoors, Mrs. Balcome and Rhoda worked pleasantly together, mutually forbearing and ignoring, as far as possible, the inevitable friction of every-day life. And if we ever stopped to think of it, here is one of the hundred ways in which women have need of more patience than men. They are thrown together so much more closely; their orbits are in closer conjunction, and they cut across one another's circles so often. Two men may hate each other very cordially, and yet work in an acre lot all day without coming to open warfare; or they may swing their hammers on opposite sides of a house, and not be tempted to strike anything but the legitimate nails and timbers; but shut them up in a space, say ten by twelve feet, and see how soon the atmosphere becomes charged.

CHAPTER X.—FRIENDSHIP TESTED.

Society does not show a very repellent front to a young doctor of fine presence and widening fame, so not many weeks passed before Mr. Berkeley received a characteristic letter from his friend, telling of his meeting with Miss Lenox, and his increased admiration for her. The letter, like the doctor's conversation, was full of quips and cranks, but through it ran an undertone of deep feeling only too apparent to the hungry heart of the recipient. "She is mine," he said passionately, "mine! and how dare he talk of winning her?" So intense was this feeling, that he hurriedly drew pen and paper toward him to forbid his friend. But the pen dropped from his hand, and, laying his head upon his folded arms, he groaned in bitterness of spirit. Fool! What claim had he upon the woman he loved? A spider's thread was stronger than any hope he could cherish. What right had he even to dream that she cared for him? Beyond the memory of a fleeting look, he searched the whole range of their acquaintance in vain. And even if the great joy might be his, that she should turn her calm eyes upon him, radiant with the light of love, and across the black gulf between them stretch hers light, firm hand, he must still cast that hand aside and hide himself from those heavenly eyes. And because Paradise was shut to him, was he so base as to grudge his friend the chance to enter? He thought of the doctor, so strong, so tender, so joyous; a son of the morning, while he seemed a companion of shadows. What hope could he have; he to whom hope was forbidden? So hour after hour wore away and still the battle raged. Mrs. Sykes tapped at his door, and went away, and came and tapped again, but he made no answer.

Just then Miss Dow happened in, and to her Mrs. Sykes told her anxiety.

"I'm just worried to death about the minister. I know he's in his room, and I've rapped twice without getting any answer."

"You might just peek in, and see what the trouble is," suggested Miss Dow.

"I should kinder hate to do it," said the other doubtfully.

"I'd just as lief as not, if you want me to."

Mrs. Sykes nodded her assent, and Miss Dow adjusted her eye to the keyhole with a dexterity acquired only by long practice, and took what seemed to Mrs. Sykes a very protracted survey. She rose from her feet in a tremor of excitement. "He's lyin' right forward on the table, and as near as I could make out by the firelight, face down. Perhaps he's in a fit."

Moved by this dreadful possibility, Mrs. Sykes laboriously lowered herself to the level of the keyhole and took an observation. "Looks to me as though he was all tired out, and had gone to sleep," she said, rising from her knees, her broad face reddened by her exertions. "He's wearin' himself out with those choppers over to the Hollow—a parcel of heathen! I'm goin' to rap again."

Miss Dow withdrew from the range of the door, and Mrs. Sykes rapped smartly, this time with success, for after a moment Mr. Berkeley opened the door.

"Supper is ready, sir," she said.

"I do not care for any to-night," he answered. It was too dark to see his face clearly, but his voice was quiet and natural, and the good woman went away much relieved.

"Did you ever think," said Miss Dow, over her teacup, "that the minister might have done some dreadful deed sometime, and have fits of remorse over it?"

"Fits of fiddlesticks," replied her hostess concisely. "If you never have any call for remorse more than that blessed saint has, you may thank your stars."

For a few minutes the relation between hostess and guest seemed slightly strained; but under the softening influences of the table, good feeling was soon restored and the two went amicably together to the evening meeting. With the last stroke of the bell Mr. Berkeley came in and took his accustomed place. He looked very worn and sad, and when he opened the Bible and began to read Psalm lxxxix—that epitome of human despair—Miss Dow gave her companion a significant nudge with her sharp elbow. As he read in his low, distinct tones, the closing verse, "Lover and friend hast thou put far from me, and my acquaintance into darkness," even Mrs. Sykes was conscious that the familiar words had a new and desolate sound, and she was thankful when a good deacon followed it with a prayer in which, in plain and homely language, he brought the sins and sorrows of the world to God, and on his strength laid the weakness of his creatures. Mrs. Sykes went home from the meeting in a calm and trustful state of mind, but after she retired for the night she lay awake sometime thinking over what Almira Dow had said, and other things, and the outcome of her thinking was the resolve to make an extra good omelette for the minister's breakfast.

The letter Mr. Berkeley sent to his friend a few days later bore no evidence of the storm that had preceded it, but

was so kind, so delicate, so full of generous feeling, that the doctor's eyes dimmed as he read it, contrasting the sunshine in which he walked with the shadowed life of his friend; for those were the golden days of Dr. Grant. He woke every morning with a sense of joy. Life had never seemed such a supreme gift. All through the day his sunny face and cheery voice carried their own healing to his patients, and the spell of his happiness seemed to work upon them; for never had he been so successful.

"Ain't he boss?" said one street gamin to another as the doctor gave them a smile in passing. "You bet!" was the answer, spoken in the terseness of the tribe. "Looks as though he'd struck a fortune."

And so he had. A fortune which some, winning lightly, cast lightly aside; which some through long years never find, and some, finding, see their fancied gold turn to lead—the uncertain fortune of love.

But Dr. Grant had not yet won. Love was no light thing to him. Through the long years of struggle in his profession he had held it aloof, and now on his mature manhood it had burst with the suddenness and splendour of an Eastern sunrise. As often as he dared, he sought the society of Miss Lenox, and, gradually, established himself on familiar footing in her father's house. It gave him the keenest delight simply to sit and look at her; to watch the quiet grace of her movements, and hear her low voice. He loved to speak to her suddenly and watch the slow lifting of the white lids, and the clear shining of her eyes. After such evenings he would go home and write a joyous letter to Mr. Berkeley, the reading of which was like tearing open an old wound. Did he not know, better than words could tell him, every turn of the proud head, every intonation of her voice, every motion of the slight hands?

If Hector could have spoken in those days, he might have told of long drives, when he was suffered to go up hill and down at his own will, while the reins hung loose on his neck as though the hands holding them had lost their power. He might have told of standing for hours in dim wood roads, while his master sat with his face buried in his hands; but nobody was the wiser for Hector. Those to whom Mr. Berkeley was dear, noticed that he grew thinner and paler, and his smile more and more rare. But they said to each other that he was working himself to death; for since Dr. Grant's visit he had taken into his thought and care the forlorn settlement at Slab Hollow. It had been a solitary work, for the good people of Wilton Corners regarded with great indifference the life that went on in those dreary woods. Sometimes, when plump chickens disappeared between night and morning, or when fruit was gathered a little in advance of the owner's intentions, the indifference woke to active ill-will; but, in general, the people round about let Slab Hollow entirely alone. To this barren corner of the vineyard Mr. Berkeley applied himself with quiet persistence and the first fruit of his labour was the sound conversion of Jake Felch, the worst man in the settlement. Jake, being laid aside from active work by his broken arm, was more accessible than the other men, and so skilfully and tenderly had Mr. Berkeley improved his opportunity, that the man, broken-hearted and childlike in his repentance, had called mightily on the Christ for help, and so calling had not called in vain. After this the way was open; for the preacher who could subdue Jake Felch must be something out of the common. So, Sunday after Sunday, the men and their families gathered in the open space before the houses, and looked curiously at the man who said such strange things to them. At first the men lounged, pipe in mouth, against the house corners, ready to make sport of anything that might happen. But this gradually changed, and soon no more attentive audience could be found. It would have been a rare scene for an artist; the background of dark woods, pierced here and there by a shaft of the low sun; the little company scattered about, seated on stumps; the coarse, hard faces of the men, and the weary faces of the women, with children leaning on their laps, and some with babes in their arms, and in their midst the thin earnest face of the speaker; a face that daily grew thinner and paler.

When Mr. Berkeley faced this audience he gave the best that was in him. This was not an audience of respectable sinners, to be reproved in pleasant phrases, and gently beguiled into the kingdom; it was a company of naked souls, unclothed by the wrappings of inherited or acquired morality. They demanded the living truth, and that they received, and the result became manifest. Wilton Corners was too loyal to laugh at its minister's new missionary field, but they regarded it as a sad waste of time and strength. But, by and by, people whose business took them to the Hollow, began to notice a change. The untidy litter about the houses disappeared, and the women no longer appeared in ragged dresses and uncumbered hair. The men bought more groceries and less whiskey and tobacco; and there were fewer oaths, and these few uttered shamefacedly. Slab Hollow had begun to see itself as it was, which is the first step toward any sound change. People driving by the place sometimes reported the strange sight of a rough man with his arm in a sling, listening to a circle of children singing a hymn, and gradually the neighbouring farmers began to be less careful about fastening their barn doors.

So the weeks slipped by and the last of June came; still fresh and fair in the country, but stifling in the city, and Miss Lenox began to plan her summer flitting.

Though it might seem precipitate after so short an acquaintance, Dr. Grant resolved to know his fate before she went. Every time he saw her the question trembled on his lips, but something repressed its utterance. One evening, taking up a little book of Heine's poems, he noticed a pencilled translation in the margin. He sat looking at it idly, comparing the translation with the original.

"I have a friend who writes very much like that," he said, holding the book toward Miss Lenox; "my old college chum, Arthur Berkeley."

"That is Mr. Berkeley's writing," she answered quietly. "We attended his church while we lived in Philadelphia." Dr. Grant still kept his eyes on the pencilled words, but no longer idly. The past and present were suddenly illuminated, and he marvelled at his blindness. Ending his call early, he went out into the summer night. The air of the house suffocated him; his mind was in a whirl, and coming