

CHOICE LITERATURE.

TOM'S HEATHEN.

CHAPTER XIX.—JOEL DYER RECOGNIZES HIS ANTAGONIST.

It was some time before I got back into the old routine broken by a year's absence; and when at last I settled to work, I found that my round of practice had considerably changed. Several families who had employed me for years continued to call upon Dr. Hope whenever medical attendance was desired; others, life-long friends, had wandered to various practitioners, and only a few of my old patients returned to me like sheep to a shepherd. Of course I could find no fault; it was all right; but sometimes I moralized upon the mutability of human affections and interests. I went so far as to subscribe to this:

"That could the dead, whose dying eyes
Were closed with wail, resume this life,
They would but find in child and wife
An iron welcome when they rise."

Now that Robert Lyon was off my mind, I found time to look after my own household, somewhat. Hal came up to see me and report progress in his studies. After mature deliberation, he decided to stick to his first choice, my own profession; believing he could serve as effectually there as in the pulpit; and he was now pushing his studies vigorously. He was improving every way. His disappointment in regard to Miss Dyer was hard to bear, but he was too healthy in body and mind to be seriously crippled by a trouble of this nature. In fact, painful as it was, its influence had been salutary. A man is either better or worse for suffering. An added dignity, sympathy and compassion, told that Hal was already better.

And Maud—I could not bring myself to believe that after all my pet cared for Northrop Duff except as her own and her brother's friend, till she told me so with her own lips. She was a courageous little piece. She liked Northrop and she would not be coaxed or laughed out of it, absurd as it was. At first I felt that I must protest against so unequal a match. Why, the child could walk under his elbow; and when I spoke of the disparity, she laughed and asked if tall men did not always select short wives, and small men stout women? Besides he would be such a convenience; he could reach where she could not; he could see where her sight failed; and if danger came, he could pick her up and carry her off with no trouble at all. And then, more seriously, "I love him, Uncle Doctor, and he loves me, and who or what shall stand between us?" And so I held my peace and made ready for the inevitable.

I still saw Mr. Dyer occasionally, but my presence was by no means as essential as formerly. As soon as Robert Lyon was found and the proposed payment became a fact, his hold upon me visibly relaxed. With the occasion went the demand. He knew that I could do no more for him. It was his way to use people while he needed them—an old habit that he would carry to his grave. Gratitude was by no means a part of this man's structure; and it was apparently too late to put in anything new. All this I discounted before it came. Then Agnes was an excellent nurse, and with occasional consultations could take my place professionally. What was a great relief to me was an added burden to her. Then, too, not long after my return, I perceived that, although he was as courteous as ever, he avoided speaking of himself, and no longer cared to be left alone with me; and the reason for that was also evident. He was by no means at peace with himself. The relief he supposed he had purchased, and had so confidently expected, came not. It was in vain that he read over his receipt, and assured himself that he had done even more than the most scrupulous could demand—that he had behaved magnificently. And he was unwilling to have me see that after all he had been defeated. He invented all manner of excuses for the delay of returning peace; and as they proved futile, one after another, he was deeply chagrined as well as troubled. Of course, under such conditions his health could not improve, and I expected to see him run down now that he had no longer a special motive for living; but he lived on and on, seemingly no better and no worse, till I began to think he might outlive us all.

More than a year after our return from Paris, I found a note from Agnes on my office table. She was troubled about her father. Would I call?

Toward night I went over. I had not seen him for several weeks, and a marked change was apparent. A new difficulty of breathing, with dropsical symptoms, convinced me that the beginning of the end had arrived. His face was indescribably anxious, though he bore his sufferings with unbroken courage. Agnes, too, was more anxious than I had ever seen her before. She did not ask me to tell her his condition. There was a certainty in her own heart that shrank from expression as confirmation, and for a while she was touched with something like despair. She had so longed and prayed that even at the eleventh hour her father might see how thoroughly wrong and selfish and barren of all good to others and himself had been his life, and that he would repent while repentance was possible. And now the eleventh hour was at hand, and he would die as he had lived, blind and hopeless of any life but this. Perhaps she understood that a man can live so intensely here as to deprive himself of any realizing sense of a hereafter,—however orthodox may be his theoretic belief. "Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots?"

After a few days his suffering abated somewhat, and one morning I said: "You are looking better to-day, Mr. Dyer."

"But I am no better, and I am so tired of living, I wish I could die to-night," said he in so weary a tone that I could but second his wish. I saw Agnes sink down out of her father's sight, and cover her face with her hands, and taking a seat at his bedside I asked:

"Because your sufferings are so great?"

"Yes; though I can bear pain; but if I was dead I should stop thinking. At least I should get away from myself."

"Do you think so?"

"Yes. Why not? You see I have a poor, worn-out body, so thoroughly diseased that it affects my mind, and keeps me thinking of things I should never think of if I were well. And when I get rid of this body, as I shall when I die, these things will trouble me no more."

"What things, Mr. Dyer?"

"Well!" said he, after a moment's hesitation, "I will tell you, that you may see how this disease operates. You remember that affair of Robert Lyon?" (this was the first allusion he had made to Robert Lyon since the receipt was placed in his hands; he neither knew, nor cared to know what had become of him,) "and how this disease brought it up and kept it continually before me, till I was bribed to buy him off. Well!"—and he paused, lost in thought—"I might have saved my money. I ought to have known that it was this distemper, this disease, and that it was not to be bought or sold. For when the money was paid and I was released from the supposed claim, the torment would not go. There he stood, asking, not now for money, but with that absurd demand for his 'lost life,' his 'ruined soul.' Those were the words; I have heard them ever since. Now admitting for the moment that there was anything wrong in that transaction, did I not repay him fully and fairly all that he could claim?"

"So far as money goes I think you did."

"So far as money goes?" money covers the entire claim. Could I—could any one—give him back his 'lost life,' his 'ruined soul?' If he had fooled away one and destroyed the other it was his own fault, not mine; and it is only this disease affecting my mind, that keeps this preposterous demand in my ears and before my eyes."

"You consider yourself a sane man?"

"Yes, certainly."

"And you have a full and intelligent use of all your mental faculties?"

"Of course I have."

"Then if Robert Lyon demands of you an impossibility why are you troubled?"

"Because I am sick; because I am no longer master of myself."

"That is partly true. If you were well and sound, and about your usual business, you would not think of these things at all."

"Not for a moment," interrupted he, eagerly.

"But you are, as you say, sick; you have known for the past three years that you could never be well again. You felt your hold on life loosen daily, and you could not help thinking. Now was it your disease that made you think? or was it the consciousness that you were almost through with life, and felt within yourself the need of some preparation, some protection before entering the Unknown; as a man puts on his overcoat and his hat before going out into the night?"

"Have I not made preparation?" asked he, hurriedly, reaching for his pocket-book. "See, here is the receipt!" and he nervously unfolded the paper, worn and craked with frequent handling, and held it out as if that was to stand between him and eternal bankruptcy.

"But is it sufficient? Are you untroubled?"

"It is my disease, I tell you it is my disease that makes me so troubled," said he, with increasing earnestness.

"I grant that your disease has rendered you less capable of resisting thought, less able to turn away from the demands of something within yourself, something that most people call conscience."

"Is it that? Is it that which sides with Robert Lyon in his demand for what I cannot give?" questioned he, with a startled look.

"I fear it is."

"But it is not a legitimate demand. I did not make Robert Lyon a gambler or a drunkard."

"If Robert Lyon had never lost his money would he have gone to gambling to get it back? Would he have gone to drinking to make himself forget that he was a gambler? He did these things of his own free will; but, consciously or unconsciously, you were the first cause, and as such are answerable. Cold drops stood upon his wrinkled forehead, and his gaunt hands were locked in a death-like gripe. My heart ached with compassion, but to spare him now would be a cruelty. It was his last chance, and with my whole soul in the words I added, "And it is *not* Robert Lyon, who brings this charge against you!"

"Who then?" cried he.

Before I could answer, Agnes came forward and threw herself on her knees before her father crying:

"Father, if some one were to rob me and ruin my reputation, would he hurt me alone? Would he not hurt you even more than me?"

"My child," said he, tenderly, dropping his tremulous hands upon her head.

"Well, father," cried she, her voice broken by uncontrollable weeping, "Robert Lyon was God's child."

Suddenly his face became not as the face of a man, but as the face of a spirit before whose startled vision some awful truth stood out. It was as if for that one moment he went in behind the veil and saw what he must soon see forever and forever.

"Is it *He* I have wronged? Is it *He* I have fought?" whispered he to himself.

What knowledge, what revelation came to him there, no mortal can tell. In that one instant all self-assertion, all antagonism fell out of him. His changed face never recovered its wonted look.

"Take away the pillows, lay me down," said he, gently. For an hour I sat beside him while he lay with closed eyes and folded hands, and that spirit-face peering through his wan features till I was benumbed with awe.

At length Agnes followed me into the ante-room. "What can I do?" she whispered with bated breath, as if afraid to break the pregnant silence.

"Tell him of Christ, and pray."

With an absent mind I hurried through the remainder of my calls for the day and returned to him.

He lay as I left him, motionless, and with folded hands. Agnes sat beside him with an open book. She had been reading from John: "I am the door; by me if any man enter

in he shall be saved," and other passages setting forth the Atonement, and now she took up John's account of the crucifixion, reading slowly and tenderly that mysterious death of the God-man for men. He made no sign, but a certain attentiveness in his face told that he heard.

For several days he lay thus, never speaking except to answer briefly some necessary question; taking whatever was offered him as obediently as a child, and enduring his pain, for he suffered greatly, without a murmur. The only person he noticed was Agnes; for though his eyes were closed he knew the moment she left his side, and was restless and uneasy till she returned. The way she bore this terrible strain was wonderful. Tireless, tearless, calm and ineffably tender as He who said: "Come unto me and I will give you rest." The peace she would have imparted to him sustained her.

At the close of the fifth day it became apparent that he was rapidly drifting away.

"Stay with us to-night," she entreated, as I entered the room.

All through the long hours we sat beside him, watching, hoping, praying. Towards morning he moved restlessly, grasping about with his hand.

"Agnes!" called he, speaking clearer than he had spoken for many days.

"Yes, father," bending over him.

"Agnes, I leave Robert Lyon to you."

"What shall I do for him, father?"

"Save him."

Another long silence broken only by his slow, irregular breathing. He was going fast now.

"Agnes."

"Yes, father."

"Kiss me."

White and tremulous were the lips that kissed him, and she laid her face on the pillow beside his.

A little later I led her from the room and closed the door.

CHAPTER XX.—HER FATHER'S LEGACY.

As we stood in the outer room, neither speaking, for at such a time words hurt more than they help, the church clocks tolled out the hour with four slow, heavy strokes; and when all was still again, I was startled by the sound of heavy breathing near us. Pushing open the door into the hall I saw on the upper landing, and almost at our feet, a man, crouched as fallen in a heap. I turned up the gas and despite the tattered garments and uncleanness, recognized Robert Lyon.

How came he here—he of all men—and at this time. I had not seen him for months, and knew only that, unable or unwilling to resist his evil propensities, he had broken away from all restraint and his brother's entreaties, and obtaining possession of his money had gone to New York and was living in his own way. When he returned or how he got into the house no one ever knew. He had evidently been through a long debauch, and had fallen in a drunken stupor. He must be moved.

I endeavored to keep Agnes from seeing him, but some strange premonition made her stoop over and turn his bloated face to the light. There was a pitiful tenderness in her low voice as she said:

"My father's legacy."

"He is intoxicated. I will have one of the servants take him away," said I, starting to go down the stairs.

"No," she answered. "My father left him to me; the Lord sent him hither, and here he must stay if he will."

During the day I ascertained that Robert Lyon had come up on the midnight train from New York; that he had been more or less intoxicated for weeks; had lost all his money at the gaming-table, or otherwise; that a comrade bought him a ticket and left him in charge of the conductor to be put off the train here, where he had friends to care for him. He might have mistaken Joel Dyer's place for his brother's house, or he might have intended to reproach Mr. Dyer to his face, for it was his habit when in his cups to dwell upon his wrong without sense or reason. However that might be, he was there, and before night a summons from Agnes called me to attend him professionally.

It appeared that while Mr. Dyer was being made ready for his last resting-place, Robert Lyon was cleansed and put into bed, and that what I supposed a drunken stupor was likely to prove something much more serious. In fact a close examination proved that he fell on the landing in a fit of some sort, and that apparently there was little chance of recovery. Perhaps it was just as well.

As I was going out I met Tom, who called to offer Agnes his sympathy and such consolation as was possible. He supposed that Robert was still in New York, and must be told of his presence and condition, which could not be done without betraying the secret kept inviolate while Joel Dyer lived. Tom followed me up to the room where Mr. Dyer lay in his last sleep, and gently as possible I told him that this was the man who had wronged his brother, who had also sought and found him, and made restitution, and with his last breath left Robert to his daughter's care.

"He? He?" demanded Tom, retreating from the dead man's side. His dark face burned and his fists clenched. Even the presence of death could not still his indignation. "Did I not tell you he was a heathen? ay; a thousand times worse than a heathen. How dared he look me in the face? Despoiler!"

"Hush, Tom. He died without knowing that Robert was anything to you. And yet, strangely enough, you were your brother's avenger."

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"Yes. Something in your voice and manner recalled your brother long after the transaction had been forgotten. When he sat and looked so intently at you it was not you he saw, but your brother Robert. And, Tom, if you knew how this man has suffered, you would pity and forgive him, even if he were still alive."

"He deserved to suffer; he has gone into eternity burdened with my brother's ruin."

"He knew it all at last, Tom; and I believe accepted his share of the responsibility. Your brother's ruin must be