

CHOICE LITERATURE.

FROM JEST TO EARNEST.

BY REV. H. F. ROK.

CHAPTER XXVI.—ON A CRUMBLING ICE-FLOE.

The plan suggested by their host, of sending their sleigh home by the ferry, while they crossed in a boat, just suited Miss Martell, and she proposed having a good vigorous pull at the oars herself. She had always been fond of out-of-door sports, a taste which her father had judiciously encouraged; and thus had saved her, no doubt, from the life of an invalid, for she had inherited the delicacy of a feeble mother, who years before, in spite of what wealth could do to prevent it, had passed away.

Just at this time Miss Martell was waging that pathetic war with her own heart which so many women must fight out in silence, and she welcomed eagerly any distraction of thought—anything that would so weary the body that the mind could rest. She dreaded the long, monotonous ride home, and so warmly seconded the new plan, that her father yielded, though somewhat against his judgment.

Through the little delays of hospitality more cordial than kind, they were kept until the early December twilight was deepening into dusk. But the oarsman lighted his lantern, and was content that he could put them across most speedily. The boat was stanch and well built, and they started with scarcely a misgiving, Miss Martell taking an oar with much zest. Their friends waved them off with numberless good wishes, and then from their windows watched till the boat seemed quite across, before drawing the curtains and concluding that all was well.

At first they did not meet much ice, and everything promised a safe and speedy passage, but when well past the middle of the river, two dark masses were seen just before them. There appeared to be a wide opening between them, through which they could see the water ripple.

"I think we can shoot through," said the oarsman, standing up a moment; "perhaps it will be the safest course, for we don't know what's above."

"Very well," said Mr. Martell, "I will steer you as well as I possibly can. Pull strongly till we are again in clear water."

Miss Martell bent her supple form to the oar, and her strokes counted as well as those of the strong, practised man, and the boat sped, all too quickly, into what afterward seemed the very jaws of destruction.

The opening narrowed instead of widening. The ice above, for some reason, appeared to gain on that below.

In growing alarm, Mr. Martell saw that they were becoming shut in, and pointed out the fact to the oarsman.

"Shall we turn round?" he asked, excitedly.

The man stood up again, and instantly decided.

"No we have not time, the tide is running very swiftly. The ice would close on us before we could get around. Our best chance is to push through. I can see water beyond." They bent to their oars again with the energy which danger inspires.

But there was not time. The opening closed too rapidly, suddenly the bow struck the upper cake, and being well out of the water ran up on the ice, causing the boat to take in water at the stern. For a second it seemed that they should be overturned and drowned at once.

But just at this moment the upper cake struck the lower ice, and the boat, being well up on the first cake, was not crushed between the two masses, as would have been the case had the ice closed against its sides while they were deep in the water. For a moment they were saved, while the upper and lower floes crunched and ground together under the keel, lifting the light craft still further above the tide and throwing it over on one side. Without a second's pause, the now consolidated field of ice swept downward, carrying with it the wedged and stranded skiff.

The lantern gleamed on the pale faces of those who realized that they had just passed through a moment of supreme peril, and perhaps had before them as great if not equally imminent dangers.

The oarsman hastily examined the boat, and found that it had been injured, though to what extent he could not tell. Water was oozing in slowly from some point near the keel, but they were too high out of the water to know whether more dangerous leaks had been made. They tried to break their way out, but found that the two cakes had become so joined together as to form a solid mass, upon which they could make no impression.

They called aloud for help, and Miss Martell's plaintive cry was blended again and again with the hoarse, strong shoutings of the men. But the river was wide; the tide swept them out towards its centre, and then nearer the less peopled eastern shore. The evening was cold and bleak, and few were out, and they so intent upon reaching warm firesides that they never thought of scanning the dark waste of the river; and so, to all their cries for aid there was no response, save the gurgling water, that sounded so coldly as to chill their hearts, and the crunching of the ice as the rushing tide carried them downward and away from the gleaming lights of their own loved home—downward and past the lights from Mrs. Marchmont's mansion, where, even in her peril, poor Alice Martell could picture Harcourt at Addie's side, and she forgotten. As the imagined scene rose vividly before her, the wild thought passed through her mind.

"Since perhaps it must be so, perhaps I can find more rest beneath these waters than in my home yonder. It may be for the best, after all, and God designs mercy in what at first seemed so terrible."

As people saw Miss Martell's quiet and rather distant bearing in society, as many admired her chiselled and faultlessly refined features, they little imagined that, as within snowy mountains are volcanic fires, so within her breast was kindling as passionate a love as ever illumined a woman's life with happiness, or consumed with a smouldering flame.

But death is stern and uncompromising, and snatches

away all disguises—even those which hide us from ourselves. In bitterness of heart the poor girl learned, while darker than the night the shadow of death hovered over her, how intense was her love for one that she believed loved another. If, but a hand's breath away, beneath the rushing tide, there was a remedy for the pain at her heart, why need she fear?

"My child," said a tremulous voice.

Then, with a natural and remorseful rush of love or one who had been as tender toward her as a mother since that mother commended her to his care, she put her arms around him and whispered:

"I am not afraid, father. Mother and heaven may be nearer than we think."

"Thank God, my child, thank God you are not afraid. I was trembling for you—not myself. You are young, and I trusted that there was a happy life before you. But the home where mother is promises me far more than the one yonder, whose lights are growing so faint."

"I am not afraid, dear father. I am content, if it is God's will, to go to that better home and be with you and mother."

"God bless thee, my child; and blessed be the God of mercy who has given you so true a faith. It would be terrible to me beyond words, if now you were full of hopeless dread."

But the poor oarsman had no such faith—only the memory of his dependent wife and children, and his material life, which never before had seemed so sweet and precious. He kept shouting for aid until exhausted, and then despairingly sat down to await the result.

Mr. Martell, in the true Christian spirit, sought to impart to his humble companion in peril some of his own confidence in God's mercy and goodness; but in vain. An intelligent, sustaining faith cannot be snatched like a life-preserver in the moment of danger; and the man appeared to scarcely heed what he said.

Downward and past the twinkling lights of many comfortable homes the remorseless tide still swept them, until the huge outlines of the two mountains at the portal of the Highlands loomed out of the darkness.

"If we get down among the mountains, we might as well give up," says the oarsman sullenly. "We might as well be cast away at sea as down in that wild gorge; though for that matter it seems, to-night, as if one's neighbours wouldn't step out of doors to keep a body from drowning. Why no one has heard us is more than I can understand, unless it is according to the old saying, 'None's so deaf as them as won't hear.'"

But there was nothing strange in the fact that they had been unnoted. The north wind blew their voices down the river. There was a noisy surf upon the shore, and those who chanced to see the light supposed it to come from some craft hastening to its winter quarters near the city. So fate seemed against them, and they drifted down and down until the black shadow of "Storm King" swallowed them up.

But no they became conscious that their motion was growing less steady and rapid. A little later and the floe apparently paused in its downward progress, and there was only some slight movement caused by the increasing gale.

Then came what seemed interminable hours of weary waiting under the sombre shadow of "Cro' Nest" mountain. The strange and almost irresistible drowsiness that severe cold induces began to creep over Miss Martell, but her father pleaded with her to fight against it; and, more for his sake than her own, she tried. They each took turns in endeavouring to break the ice around them with the boat-hook. The exercise kept their blood in circulation, but was of little avail in other respects. The ice was too heavy and solid for their feeble strokes.

At last the tide turned, and the dreary monotonous waiting in their hopeless position was exchanged for an upward movement that would soon bring them above the mountains again, where, from the thickly peopled shores, there would be a better chance of being seen and rescued.

There was no certainty that they would be missed, and therefore sought for, as the coachman, not finding them on his return, might conclude that they had been prevailed upon to remain all night with the friend they were visiting.

But any exchange from the black, rayless shadows that surrounded them would be a relief; and it was with a faint feeling of hopefulness that they recognized their movement northward, which slowly increased in speed as the tide gained mastery of the slight natural current of the river.

The strengthening northern gale had thrown up quite a "sea," and the experienced oarsman soon saw that the ice-field by which they were surrounded was breaking up under the influence of the waves. This might at last bring relief, or increase their danger. If the ice should all break up around them and leave their boat tight and sound, they could row ashore. If the boat had been, or should become so injured as to leak badly, it might fill with water before they could reach the land. Thus in any case, their peculiar position was aggravated by a terrible uncertainty and suspense.

As they emerged from the Highlands into the broad waters of Newburgh Bay, their worst fears seemed about to be realized. Here, for many miles, the north wind had an unrestrained sweep, and the waves grew larger and more violent. Under their increasing force the ice-floes crumbled around them rapidly, until at last little was left save the mass of double thickness caused by the union of the two larger cakes between which the boat had been caught. This, at last, began to give under the weight of the boat, and let it more deeply into the water. Then to their dismay, they saw that the seams of the boat had been so wracked apart that the water came in rapidly.

They tried to keep it down by ballast. The frosty gale tossed Mr. Martell's white hair, while with his hat he worked, with pathetic earnestness, for the sake of his daughter; but in spite of all that he and the oarsman could do, the water gained on them, wetting their feet and creeping up their legs with the icy chill of death.

Every moment or two the man would pause in his work, and send forth a cry of such terrible power and earnestness, that it would seem some one must hear.

Again Alice Martell saw the distant lights of her own home, but she turned from them to those that gleamed from the nearer residence of Mrs. Marchmont. Was *he* there, safe and happy, looking love to the eyes of Addie Marchmont, while every moment she sank lower into the cold river? The thought sent a deeper chill into her heart than the icy tide from which she could no longer keep her feet.

"God and man is agin us," said the oarsman savagely. "What is the use of trying any longer! The sooner it's over the better," and he was about to give up in despair. Alice, with equal hopelessness of any earthly aid, was about to turn her eyes from the faint rays from Mrs. Marchmont's windows, which, barbed with the thoughts suggested above, pierced her heart like arrows, when the throwing open of the hall door by Hemstead let out such a broad streaming radiance that her attention was attracted to it. By calling the attention of the others to it also, a faint hope was inspired.

But when, soon after, the door was closed, and the lights had their usual appearance, the flicker of hope sank down into a deeper darkness.

Alice turned to her father, and in a close embrace and with a oneness of spirit and hope that needed not outward expression, they silently lifted their thoughts from the dark earth to the bright heaven where they soon expected to be.

Just then a voice from earth recalled them to earthly hope, and the prospect of human help. It was Hemstead's shout of encouragement from the shore. Then they saw the glimmer of a lantern moving hither and thither; a moment later it became stationary, then shot out toward them.

With cries of joy they recognized that they had been seen, and that an attempt to rescue them was being made.

In the apathy of their despair the water had gained dangerously; but, with the energy of hope that is ever greater than that of fear or despair, they set to work anew. Again the wintry winds tossed Mr. Martell's white hair, as for want of something better he baled with his hat, and Alice's little numb hands were lifted every moment as if in pathetic appeal, as she dipped them in the ice-cold water at her feet, and threw out a tiny cupful, which the gale carried away in spray.

"Come quick. We can't keep afloat much longer," cried the oarsman.

"Ay, ay," shouted the ex-sailor, in a voice as hoarse as the winds in the cordage of his old ship.

"Courage!" cried Hemstead; and his tones, in contrast, rang out like a bugle, inspiring hope in the chilled hearts of those who, a little before, had despaired, and almost sending an equal thrill of delight to the heart of Lottie Marsden, as, with the half-phrenzied Harcourt, she stood in Mrs. Marchmont's open door.

How terribly in earnest now are some who thought that their acquaintance would commence and end with a heartless jest!

The sailor-coachman was a good oarsman, and Hemstead pulled fairly. Both were very strong, and they drove the boat through the short chopping waves rather than over them, reckoning not how much water was shipped.

A little later came the shout, "Quick, quick. The ice is giving under us, and the boat sinking."

"Oh, come—save my father," cried Alice Martell in a tone that might have moved the very ice around her to pity.

"My child, my child!" came the agonized voice of the father; "never think of me, if you can save her."

Thus in the darkness of the night, parent and child revealed, clear and luminous, the image of God upon their souls—the image of Him who thought not of Himself—who sought not to save Himself but others.

Unselfish love inspired their appeals, and unselfish love is God.

Hemstead's nature was anthracite, and now glowed at white heat in his grand excitement. He was no longer a man, but a giant, and would have ruined everything, snapped his oars, dragged the oarpins from their sockets, thus rendering his massive strength utterly useless, had not the cool, wary ex-sailor taken command of the little craft, and insisted on seamanship. Under his skillful direction the student was like a powerful engine, with a steady measured stroke, and the boat fairly flew, until their oars struck floating ice, and then they had to slacken up, for to strike a mass of ice at their speed would be to sink at once.

"Steady now," cried the ex-sailor. "You pull, I will stand and steer."

Their boat was roughly grazed several times; but glided through without serious injury.

"Now or never," cried the oarsman; "we're sinking."

Alice hid her face on her father's breast. Life had grown strangely sweet during the brief time since, at Hemstead's voice, hope had revived; and it seemed a bitter thing to perish almost within the grasp of rescuing hands.

"Oh come," groaned her father. "Oh, this is hard."

With a despairing cry she heard the water rush and gurgled around her, and closed her eyes, not expecting to open them again in this world. But strong hands grasped, and lifted her drenched, helpless form tenderly into the boat.

With mingled hope and fear she looked up, and by the lantern's light recognized Frank Hemstead.

"My father," she gasped.

"Safe, my darling, thank God," said Mr. Martell, taking her into his arms; "and they have pulled our stout oarsman in, too. So we are all safe."

"Well, I hope so," said the ex-sailor, with a little depressive dabiousness. "We shipped a sight o' water comin' out. There's a good deal of ice runnin', and so chopped up one can skerce see it. I must be skipper and all, mind, if we are to come safe out. Here, Mr. Hemstead, you hale; and you, too, meesmate, if yer hain't shipped too much water yerself. I'll sit well up toward the bow, where I can see and pull around the ice. Besides, with this cargo, we've got to croom the waves kind o' easy and keerful, or they'll swamp us."

Thus in this instance the ex-sailor appeared a special providence, and gradually took them out of the ice-strewn tide in the centre of the river to smoother, clearer water nearer