

CHOICE LITERATURE.

A DAY OF FATE.

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CHAPTER X.—IN THE DELTUS.—(Continued.)

Thoughts like these passed through my mind as I thanked her for all that she had done for me, and told her of such phases of New York life as I thought would interest her. She listened with so intent and childlike an expression on her face that I could scarcely realize that I was talking to one in whose bosom beat the heart of a woman. I felt rather as if I were telling Zillah a fairy story.

Still I had faith in her intuition, and believed that after I was gone she would recognize and accept the frank, brotherly regard that I now cherished toward her.

Reuben was not very long in joining us, and boylike did not note that his sister evidently wished him far away. My greeting was so cordial that she noted with a sigh that I did not regard him as the unwelcome third party. Then Mr. Yocomb and the little girls came to the door and asked if there was room for a crowd. Soon after Mrs. Yocomb appeared, with her comely face ruddy from exercise.

"I've hurried all I could," she said, "but thee knows how it is with housekeepers; and yet how should thee know, living all thy life alone in dens, as thee said? Why, thee's having a reception."

"I fear your guests down-stairs will feel neglected, Mrs. Yocomb."

"Don't thee worry about that, Richard," Mr. Yocomb said, laughing. "I'm not so old, mother, but I can remember when we could get through an evening together without help from anybody. I reckon we could do so again—eh? mother? Ha, ha, ha! so thee isn't too old to blush yet? How's that, Richard, for a young girl of sixty. Don't thee worry about Family Warren. I fear 'thar any one of us would make a large crowd in the old parlour."

This was sorry comfort, and I fear that my laugh was anything but honest, while Mrs. Yocomb stared out of the window, at which she sat fanning herself, with a fixedness that I well understood.

But they were all so kind and hearty that I could no more give way to dejection than to chill and cheerlessness before a general wood fire. They seemed in truth to have taken me into the family. Rarely was I now addressed formally as Richard Morton. It was simply "Richard," spoken with the unpremeditated friendliness characteristic of family intercourse. Heavens though I was, I thanked God that He had brought me among these true-hearted people; and I inwardly prayed "may I never relapse into the old sneering cynicism that I once affected. Let me at least leave that vice to half-fledged young men, and to bad old men."

One thing puzzled me. Miss Warren remained at her piano, and it struck me as a little odd that she did not find the music of her lover's voice preferable, but I concluded that music was one of the strongest bonds of sympathy between them, and one of the means by which he had won her affection. Sometimes, as her voice rose clear and sweet to my open windows, I answered remarks addressed to me with an inaptness that only Mrs. Yocomb understood.

Before very long, that amiable lady looked into my face a moment, and then said decisively,

"Richard, thee is getting tired. We must all bid thee good night at once."

Adah looked almost resentfully at her mother, and lingered a little behind the others. As they passed out she stepped hastily back, and undressing a rose-bud from her breastpin laid it on the table beside me.

"It was the last one I could find in the garden," she said breathlessly, and with its colour in her cheeks. Before I could speak she was gone.

"It shall be treated with reverence, like the feeling which led to the gift," I murmured sadly. "Heaven grant that it may be only the impulse of a girlish fancy;" and I filled a little vase with water and placed the bud near the window, where the cool night air could blow upon it.

Still Miss Warren remained at the piano. "How singularly fond of music he is!" I thought.

I darkened my room, and sat at the window that I might hear every note. The old garden, half hidden by trees, looked cool and Eden-like in the light of the July moon, athwart whose silver hemisphere fleecy clouds were drifting like the traces of thought across a bright face. Motionless shadows stretched toward the east, from which the new day would come, but with a dreary sinking of heart I felt as if each coming day would bring a heavier burden.

But a little time passed before I recognized Chopin's Nocturne, to which I had listened with kindling hope on the night of the storm. Was it my own mood, or did she play it with far more pathos and feeling than on that never-to-be-forgotten evening? Be that as it may, it evoked a fiercer storm of unavailing passion and regret in my mind. In bitterness of heart I groaned aloud and insulted God.

"It was a cruel and terrible thing," I charged, "to mock a creature with such a hope. Why was such power over me given to her when it was of no use?" But I will say no more of that hour of weak human idolatry. It was a revelation to me of the depths of despair and wretchedness into which one can sink when ensnared by manly fondness on Christian principle. It is in such desperate, irrational moods that undisciplined, ill-balanced souls thrust themselves out from the light of God's sunshine and the abundant possibilities of future good. I now look back on that hour with shame, and cannot excuse it even by the fact that I was enfeebled in mind as well as body by disease. We often never know ourselves or our need until after we have failed miserably under the stress of some strong temptation.

I was the worse the next day for my outburst of passion, and the wretched night that followed, and did not leave my room; but I was grim and rigid in my purpose to retrieve myself. I appeared, so be occupied with my mail and paper much of the day, and I wrote a very complimentary para-

graph concerning the banker's gift for the meeting-house. Mr. Hearn and Miss Warren were out riding much of the time. I saw them drive away with a lowering brow, and was not disarmed of my bitterness because I saw, through the half-closed blinds, that the young girl stole a swift glance at my window.

Adah was pleased as she saw how I was caring for her gift; but I puzzled and disheartened her by my preoccupation and taciturnity. She took the children off on a long ramble in the afternoon, and heaped coals of fire on my head by bringing me an exquisite collection of ferns.

The next morning I went down to breakfast resolving to take my place in the family, and make no more trouble during the brief remainder of my stay, for I proposed to go back to the city as soon as I had shown enough manhood to satisfy my pride, and had made Miss Warren believe that she could dismiss her solicitude on my account, and thus enjoy the happiness which apparently had clouded. As I saw her pale face again I condemned my weakness unsparingly, and with the whole force of my will endeavoured to act and appear as both she and Mr. Hearn would naturally wish.

"Richard," said Reuben, after breakfast, "I've borrowed a low phaton, and I'm going to take thee out with Dapple. He'll put life in thee, never fear. He'd cure me if I were half dead."

He was right; the swift motion through the pure air braced me greatly.

When he returned, the banker sat on the piazza. Adah was near, with some light sewing, and the connoisseur was leisurely admiring her. Well he might, for in her neat morning gown she again seemed the embodiment of a June day. She rose to meet me, with a faint accession to her delicate colour, and said,

"The ride has done thee good; thee looks better than thee has done any day yet."

"Reuben's right," I said, laughing. "Dapple would bring a fossil to life," and the young fellow drove chuckling down toward the barn, making dapple rear and prance in order to show off a little before Mr. Hearn.

I sat down a few moments to rest. Miss Warren must have heard our voices; but she went on with an intricate piece of music in which she was displaying no mean skill. I did not think Mr. Hearn was as much interested in it as I was. His little girl came out of the house and climbed into Adah's lap. She evidently liked being petted, and was not a little spoiled by it. The banker continued to admire the picture they made with undisguised enjoyment, and I admitted that the most critical could have found no fault with the group.

After exerting myself to seem exceedingly cheerful, and laughing heartily at a well-known jest of Mr. Hearn's, I went to my room and rested till dinner, and I slept away the afternoon as on the previous day.

My plan was now to get sufficiently strong to take my departure by the following Monday, and I was glad indeed that the tone of out-of-door air promised an escape from a position in which I must continually seem to be what I was not—a cheerful man in the flood tide of convalescence. Were it not that my kind friends at the farm-house would have been grievously hurt, I would have left at once.

As I returned from my ride the next day, Mr. Hearn greeted me with a newspaper in his hand.

"I'm indebted to you," he said, in his most gracious manner, "for a very kindly mention here. So small a donation was not worth the importance you give it, but you have put the matter so happily and gracefully that it may lead other men of means to do likewise at the various places of their summer enjoyment. You editors are able to wield a great deal of influence."

I bowed, and said I was glad the paragraph had been worded in a way not disagreeable to him.

"Oh, it was good taste itself, I assure you, sir. It seemed the natural expression of your interest in that which interests your good friends here."

When I came down to dinner I saw that there was an unusual fire in Miss Warren's eyes and unusual colour in her cheeks. Moreover, I imagined that her replies to the few remarks that I addressed to her were brief and constrained. "She is no dissembler," I thought, "something has gone wrong."

After dinner I went to my room for a book, and as I came out I met her in the hall.

"Mr. Morton," she said, with a characteristic directness, "if you had given a sum toward a good object in a quiet country place, would you have been pleased to see the fact paraded before those having no natural interest in the matter?"

"I have never had the power to be munificent, Miss Warren," I replied, with some embarrassment.

"Please answer me," she insisted, with a little impatient tap on the floor with her foot.

"No," I said bluntly.

"Did you think it would be pleasing to me?"

"Pardon me," I began, "that I did not sufficiently identify you with Mr. Hearn—"

"What!" she interrupted, blushing hotly, "have I given any reason for not being identified with him?"

"Not at all—not in one sense," I said bitterly. "Of course you are loyal to itself."

She turned away so abruptly as to surprise me a little.

"You had no more right to think it would be pleasing to him than to me," she resumed coldly.

"Miss Warren," I said, after a moment, "don't turn your back on me. I won't quarrel with you, and I promise to do nothing of the kind again," and I spoke gravely and a little sadly.

"When you speak in that way you disarm me completely," she said, with one of the sudden illuminations of her face that I so loved to see; but I also noted that she had become very pale, and as my eyes met hers I thought I detected the old frightened look that I had seen when I had revealed my feelings too clearly after my illness.

"She fears that I may again speak as I ought not," I thought, and therefore I bowed quietly and passed on. Mr. Hearn was reading the paper on the piazza. I took a chair and went out under the elm, not far away. In a few mo-

ments Miss Warren joined her affianced, and sat down with some light work.

"Emily, I heard the banker say, as if the topic were upmost in his mind, 'I'd like to call your attention to this paragraph. I think our friend has written it with unusual good taste and grace, and I've taken pains to tell him so.'"

I could not help hearing his words; but I would not look up to see her humiliation, and turned a leaf, as if intent on my author.

After a moment she said, with slight but clear emphasis, "I can't agree with you."

A little later she went to the piano; but I never heard her play so badly. A glance at Mr. Hearn revealed that his dignity and complacency had received a wound that he was inclined to resent. I strolled away muttering,

"She has idealized him as she did Old Plod, but after all it's not a very serious foible in a man of millions."

Before the day passed she found an opportunity to ask,

"Why did you not tell me that Mr. Hearn had spoken to you approvingly of that paragraph?"

"I would not willingly say anything to annoy you," I replied quietly.

"Did you hear him call my attention to it?"

"I could not help it."

"You did not look up and triumph over me."

"That would have given me no pleasure."

"I believe you," she said, in a low tone; but she devoted herself so assiduously to the stately banker that he became benignness itself. I also observed that Mr. Yocomb looked in vain for the paper after tea. "I happened to destroy my copy," I said very innocently.

CHAPTER XI.—POOR ACTING.

The last week that I proposed remaining at the farm-house was passing quietly and uneventfully away. I was gaining steadily though not rapidly in physical strength, but not in my power to endure my disappointment with equanimity, much less with resignation. In the delirium of my fever I kept constantly repeating words—so Mrs. Yocomb told me—"It's all wrong." Each successive day found these words on my lips again with increasing frequency. It seemed contrary to both right and reason that she should so completely enslave me, and then go away leaving me a bound and helpless captive. The conviction grew stronger that no such power over me should have been given to her, if her influence was to end only in darkening my life and crippling my power to be a forceful man among men. I felt with instinctive certainty that my burden would be too heavy to leave me the elastic spring and energy required by my exacting profession. A hopeful, eager interest in life and the world at large was the first necessity to success in my calling; but already I found a leaden apathy creeping over me which even the powerful motives of pride, and my resolute purpose to seem cheerful that she might go on to her bright future unregretfully, were not sufficiently strong to banish. If I could not cope with this despondency in its inception, how could I face the future?

At first I had bitterly condemned my weakness; but now I began to recognize the strength of my love, which, so far from being a mere sudden passion, was the deep, abiding conviction that I had met the only woman I could marry—the woman whom my soul claimed as its mate, because she possessed the power to help me and inspire me to tireless effort toward better living and nobler achievement. Her absolute truth would keep me true and anchored amid the swift, dark currents of the world to which I was exposed. I feared, with almost instinctive certainty, that I would become either a brooding, solitary man, or else a very ambitious and reckless one, for I was conscious of no reserve strength which would enable me to go steadfastly on my way under the calm and inexorable guidance of duty.

Such was my faith in her that I had no hope whatever. If she loved and had given her truth to another man, it would not be in her nature to change, therefore my purpose had sampled itself to the effort to get through this one week at the farm-house in a manner that would enable me to carry away the respect of all its inmates, but especially the esteem of one to whom I feared I seemed a rash, ill-balanced man. So carefully had I avoided Miss Warren's society, and yet so freely and frankly, apparently, had I spoken to her in the presence of her affianced, that his suspicions were evidently banished, and he treated me with a gracious and patronizing benignance. He saw no reason why he should not turn on me the light of his fall and smiling countenance, which might be taken as an emblem of prosperity; and, in truth, I gave him no reason. So rigid was the constraint under which I kept myself that jealousy itself could not have found fault.

With the exception of the two momentary interviews recorded in the previous chapter, we had not spoken a syllable together, except in his presence, nor had I permitted my eyes to follow her with a wistful glance that she or he could intercept. Even Mrs. Yocomb appeared to think that I was recovering in more senses than one, and by frequent romps with the children, jests and chaffing with Mr. Yocomb and Reuben, by a little frank and ostentatious gallantry to Adah, which no longer deceived even her simple mind, since I never sought her exclusive society as a lover would have done, I confirmed the impression.

And yet, in spite of all efforts and disguises, the truth will often flash out unexpectedly and irresistibly, making known all that we hoped to hide with the distinctness of the lightning, which revealed even the colour of the roses on the night of the storm.

The weather had become exceedingly warm, and Miss Warren's somewhat portly suitor clung persistently to the wide, cool veranda. Adah sat there frequently also; sometimes she read to the children fairy stories, of which Adah, Mr. Hearn's little girl, had brought a great store, and she seemed to enjoy them quite as much as her eager-eyed listeners; but more often she superintended their doll dress-making, over which there were the most animated discussions. The banker would look on with the utmost content, while he slowly waved his palm-leaf fan. Indeed the group