

CHOICE LITERATURE.

A KNIGHT OF THE XIX. CENTURY.

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CHAPTER LII.—EXIT OF LAURA'S FIRST KNIGHT.

Haldane was given but little time for quiet study, for, before the year closed, tidings came from his mother, who was then in Italy, that she was ill and wished to see him. Poor Mrs. Haldane had at last begun to understand her son's character better, and to realize that he would retrieve the past. She also reproached herself that she had not been more sympathetic and helpful to him, and was not a little jealous that he should have found better and more appreciative friends than herself. And, at last, when she was taken ill, she longed to see him, and he lost not a moment in reaching her side.

Her illness, however, did not prove very serious, and she improved rapidly after a young gentleman appeared, who was so refined in his manners, so considerate and deferential in his bearing towards her, that she could scarcely believe that he was the same with the wild, wretched youth who had been in gaol, and what was almost as bad, who had worked in a mill.

Haldane made the most of his opportunities in seeing what was beautiful in nature and art while in the old world, but his thoughts turned with increasing frequency to his own land—not only because it contained the friends he loved so well, but also because events were now rapidly culminating for that great struggle between the two jarring sections that will eventually form a better and closer union on the basis of a mutual respect, and a better and truer knowledge of each other.

When Mrs. Haldane saw that her son was determined to take part in the conflict, he began to seem to her more like his old unreasonable self. She feebly remonstrated, as a matter of course, and proved to her own satisfaction that it was utter folly for a young man who had the enjoyment of such large wealth as her son to risk the loss of everything in the hardships and dangers of war. He was as kind and considerate as possible, but she saw from the old and well remembered expression of his eyes that he would carry out his own will nevertheless, and therefore she and his sisters reluctantly returned with him.

Having safely installed them in their old home, and proved, by the aid of Dr. Marks and some other leading citizens of his native city, that they had no further occasion to seclude themselves from the world, he returned to Hillaton to aid in organizing a regiment that was being recruited there, and in which Mr. Ivison had assured him of a commission. By means of the acquaintance he had made through his old mission class, he was able to secure enlistments rapidly, and although much of the material that he brought in was unpromising in its first appearance, he seemed to have the faculty of transforming the slouching, dilapidated fellows into soldiers, and it passed into general remark that "Haldane's company was the roughest to start with, and the best disciplined and most soldierly of them all when ordered to the seat of war."

The colonelcy of the regiment was given to Mr. Beaumont, not only on account of his position, but also because of his large liberality in fitting it out. He took a vast interest in the æsthetic features of its equipment, style of uniform, and like matters, and he did most excellent service in insisting on neatness, good care of weapons, and a soldier-like bearing from the first.

While active in this work he rose again in Laura's esteem, for he seemed more manly and energetic than he had shewn himself to be before; and what was still more in his favour, he had less time for the indulgence of his taste as a connoisseur with her fair, but often weary, face as the object of contemplation.

She, with many others, visited the drill-ground almost daily, and when she saw the tall and graceful form of Mr. Beaumont issuing from the Colonel's tent, when she saw him mount his superb white horse, which he managed with perfect skill, when she saw the sun glinting on his elegant sword and gold epaulettes, and heard his sonorous orders to the men, she almost felt that all Hillaton was right, and that she had reason to be proud of him, and to be as happy as the envious belles of the city deemed her to be. But in spite of herself, her eyes would wander from the central figure to plain Captain Haldane, who, ignoring the admiring throng, was giving his whole attention to his duty.

Before she was aware, the thought began to creep into her mind, however, that to one man these scenes were military pageants, and to the other they meant stern and uncompromising war.

The impression had speedy confirmation, for one evening when both Mr. Beaumont and Haldane happened to be present, Mrs. Arnot remarked in effect that her heart misgave her when she looked into the future, and that the prospect of a bloody war between people of one race and faith was simply horrible.

"It will not be very bloody," remarked Mr. Beaumont, lightly; "after things have gone about so far, the politicians on both sides will step in and patch up a compromise. Our policy at the North is to make an imposing demonstration; this will have the effect of bringing the fire-eaters to their senses, and if this won't answer, we must get enough men together to walk right over the South, and end the nonsense at once. I have travelled through the South, and know that it can be done."

"Pardon me, Colonel," said Haldane, "but since we are not on the drill-ground, I have a right to differ with you. I anticipate a very bloody, and perhaps, a long war. I have not seen so much of the South, but I have seen something of its people. The greatest heroism I ever saw manifested in my life was by a young Southern girl, and if such are their women, we shall find the men foemen abundantly worthy of our steel. We shall indeed have to literally walk over them, that is, such of us as are left, and able to walk. I agree with Mrs. Arnot, and I tremble for the future of my country."

Mr. Beaumont forgot himself for once so far as to say, "Oh, if you find such cause for trembling—" but Laura's indignant face checked further utterance.

"I propose to do my duty," said Haldane, with a quiet smile, though a quick flush shewed that he felt the slur, "and it will be your duty, Colonel, to see that I do."

"You have taught us that the word duty means a great deal to you, Egbert," said Mrs. Arnot, and then the matter dropped. But the animus of each man, had been quite clearly revealed, and the question would rise in Laura's mind, "Does not the one belittle the occasion because little himself?" Although she dreaded the coming war inexpressibly, she took Haldane's view of it. His tribute to her cousin Amy also touched a very tender chord.

On the ground of having secured so many recruits, Mr. Ivison urged that Haldane should have the rank of Major, but at that time those things were controlled largely by political influence and favouritism, and there was still not a few in Hillaton who both thought and spoke of the young man's past record as a good reason why he should not have any rank at all. He quietly took what was given him, and asked for nothing more.

All now know that Mr. Beaumont's view was not correct, and as the conflict thickened and deepened, that elegant gentleman became more and more disgusted. Not that he lacked personal courage, but, as he often remarked it was the "horrid style of living" that he could not endure. He could not find an æsthetic element in the blinding dust or unfathomable mud of Virginia.

As was usually the case, there was in the regiment a soldier gifted with the power and taste for letter-writing, and he kept the local papers quite well posted concerning affairs in the regiment. One item concerning Beaumont will indicate the condition of his mind. After describing the "awful" nature of the roads and weather, the writer added, "The Colonel looks as if in a chronic state of disgust."

Suddenly the regiment was ordered to the far south-west. This was more than Beaumont could endure, for in his view, life in that region would be a burden under any circumstances. He coolly thought the matter over, and concluded that he would rather go home, marry Laura, and take a tour in Europe, and promptly executed the first part of his plan by resigning on account of ill-health. He had a bad cold, it is true, which had chiefly gone to his head and made him very uncomfortable, and so inflamed his nose that the examining physician misjudged the exemplary gentlemen, recommending that his resignation be accepted, more from the fear that his habits were bad than from any other cause. But by the time he reached Hillaton his nose was itself again, and he as elegant as ever. The political Major had long since disappeared, and so Haldane started for his distant field of duty as Lieutenant-Colonel.

The regimental letter-writer chronicled this promotion in the Hillaton "Courier" with evident satisfaction.

"Lieut.-Col. Haldane," he wrote, "is respected by all and liked by the majority. He keeps us rigidly to our duty, but is kind and considerate nevertheless. He is the most useful officer I ever heard of. Now he is chaplain, and again he is surgeon. He coaxes the money away from the men and sends it home to their families, otherwise much of it would be lost in gambling. Many a mother and wife in Hillaton hears from the absent oftener, because the Colonel urges the boys to write, and writes for those who are unable. To give you a sample of the man, I will tell you what I saw not long ago. The roads were horrible as usual, and some of the men were getting played out on the march. The first thing I knew was a sick man on the Major's horse (he was Major then), and he was trudging along in the mud with the rest of us, and carrying the muskets of three other men who were badly used up. We want the people of Hillaton to understand, that if any of us get back we won't hear anything more against Haldane. Nice, pretty fellows, who don't like to get their boots muddy, as our ex-Colonel for instance, may be more to their taste, but they ain't to ours."

Laura read the letter with cheeks that reddened with shame, and then grew very pale.

"Auntie," she said, shewing it to Mrs. Arnot, "I cannot marry that man. I would rather die first."

"I do not wonder that you feel so," replied Mrs. Arnot, emphatically. "With all his wealth and culture I neither would nor could marry him, and would tell him so. I have felt sure that you would come to this conclusion, but I wished your own heart and conscience to decide the matter."

But before Laura could say to Mr. Beaumont that which she felt she must and yet which she dreaded, for his sake to speak, a social earthquake took place in Hillaton.

Mr. Arnot was arrested! But for the promptness of his friends to give bail for his appearance, he would have been taken from his private office to prison, as poor Haldane had been years before.

It would be wearisome to tell the long story of his financial distress, which he characteristically kept concealed from his wife. Experiences like his are only too common. With his passion for business he had extended it to the utmost limit of his capital. Then came a time of great depression and contraction. Prompted by a will that had never been thwarted, and a passion for routine which could endure no change, he made Herculean effort to keep everything moving on with mechanical regularity. His strong business foresight detected the coming change for the better in the business world, and with him it was only a question of bridging over the intervening gulf. He sank his own property in his effort to do this; then the property of his wife and Laura which he held in trust. Then came the great temptation of his life. He was joint trustee of

"I cannot refrain here from paying a tribute to my old schoolmate and friend, Major James Cromwell, of the 124th New York Volunteers, whom I have seen plodding along in the mud in a November storm, a sick soldier riding his horse, while he carried the accoutrements of other men who were giving up from exhaustion. Major Cromwell was killed while leading a charge at the Battle of Gettysburg.

another very large property, and the co-executor was in Europe, and would be absent for years. In order to use some of the funds of this property, it was necessary to have the signature of this gentleman. With the infatuation of those who dally with this kind of temptation, Mr. Arnot felt sure that he could soon make good all that he should use in his present emergency, and, therefore, forged the name of the co-trustee. The gentleman returned from Europe unexpectedly, and the crime was discovered and speedily proved.

It was now that Mrs. Arnot proved what a noble and womanly nature she possessed. Without palliating his fault, she ignored the whole scoffing, chattering world, and stood by her husband with as wisely devotion as if his crime had been misfortune, and he himself had been the affectionate, considerate friend that she had believed he would be, when, as a blushing maiden, she had accepted the hand that had grown so hard, and cold, and heavy.

Mr. Beaumont was stunned and bewildered. At first he scarcely knew what to do, although his sagacious father and mother told him very plainly to break off the engagement at once. But the trouble with Mr. Beaumont upon this occasion was that he was a man of honour, and for once he almost regretted the fact. But since he was he believed that there was but one course open for him. Although Laura was now penniless, and the same almost as the daughter of a man who would soon be in a State prison, he had promised to marry her. She must become the mistress of the ancient and aristocratic Beaumont mansion.

He braced himself, as had been his custom when a battle was in prospect, and went down to the beautiful villa which would be Laura's home but a few days longer.

As he entered, she saw that he was about to perform the one heroic act of his life, but she was cruel enough to prevent even that one, and so reduce his whole career to one consistently elegant and polished surface.

He had taken her hand and was about to address her in the most appropriate language, and with all the dignity of self-sacrifice, when she interrupted him by saying briefly:

"Mr. Beaumont, please listen to me first. Before the most unexpected event occurred which has made so great a change in my fortunes, and I may add, in so many of my friends, I had decided to say to you in all sincerity and kindness that I could not marry you; I could not give you that love which a wife ought to give to a husband. I now repeat my decision still more emphatically."

Mr. Beaumont was again stunned and bewildered. A woman declining to marry him!

"Can nothing change your decision?" he faltered, fearing that something might.

"Nothing," she coldly replied, and with an involuntary expression of contempt hovering around her flexible mouth.

"But what will you do?" he asked, prompted by not a little curiosity.

"Support myself by honest work," was her quiet but very decisive answer.

Mr. Beaumont now felt that there was nothing more to be done but to make a little elegant farewell address, and depart, and he would make it in spite of all that she could do.

The next thing she heard of him was, that he had started on a tour of Europe, and, no doubt, in his old character of a connoisseur, whose judgment few dared to dispute.

CHAPTER LIV.—ANOTHER KNIGHT APPEARS.

The processes of law were at length complete, and Mr. Arnot found himself in a prison cell, with the prospect that years must elapse before he would receive a freedom, that now was dreaded almost more than his forced seclusion. After his conviction, he had been taken from Hillaton to a large prison of the State, in a distant city.

"I shall follow you, Thomas, as soon as I can complete such arrangements as are essential," Mrs. Arnot had said, "and will remain as near to you as I can. Indeed, it will be easier for Laura and me to commence our new life there than here."

The man had at last begun to realize the whole truth. True to his nature, he thought of himself first, and saw that his crime, like a great black hand, had dragged him down from his proud eminence of power and universal respect, away from his beloved business; and had shut him up in his narrow, stony sepulchre; for what better was his prison cell than a tomb to a man with his tireless mind? The same mind which like a giant had carried its huge burden every day, was still his; but now there was nothing for it to do. And yet it would act, for constant mental action had become a necessity from a life-time of habit. Heretofore his vast business taxed every faculty to the utmost. He had to keep his eye on all the great markets of the world; he had to follow politicians, diplomats, and monarchs into their secret councils, and guess at their policy in order to shape his own business policy. His interests were so large and far reaching, that it had been necessary for him to take a glance over the world before he could properly direct his affairs from his private office. For years he had been commanding a small army of men, and with consummate skill and constant thought he had arrayed the industry of his army against the labours of like armies under the leadership of other men in competition with himself. His mind had learned to flash with increasing speed and accuracy to one and another of all these varied interests. But now the great fabric of business and wealth which he had built by a life-time of labour, had vanished like a dream, and nothing remained but the mind that had constructed it.

"Ah!" he groaned again and again, "why could not mind and memory perish also?"

But they remained, and were the only possessions left out of his great wealth.

Then he began to think of his wife and Laura. He had begged them, and what was far worse, he had darkened their lives with the shadow of his own disgrace. Wholly innocent as they were, they must suffer untold wretchedness through his act. In his view he was the cause of the