

CHOICE LITERATURE.

TOM'S HEATHEN.

CHAPTER XVII. RECONSIDERED AND ACCEPTED.

Late the next morning Robert Lyon awoke and found a refreshing breakfast awaiting him, which he ate in silence, while I sat over by the window busily writing.

"Doctor," said he at length, "you brought me back in spite of myself, only to add to my obligation to you. The recollection of your kindness and my seeming ingratitude was all that stood between me and a wretched death last night. I wanted you to think as well as you could of me, and so come to tell you that I am going to get something to do, and for your sake will try to live a better life."

"Let the past go," said I, reaching him my hand. "We will wipe it all out and begin on a clean page. I have been waiting for you to go up street with me and get your money, or what amounts to the same thing, bills of exchange payable in New York. Then I want you to go home and start anew." I talked with him long and earnestly, spoke of his mother and of Tom, and when I told him of his mother's last words, and how poor Tom loved him, and had sought him everywhere, he covered his face with his hands and fairly broke down. His past sickness and present weakness rendered him more accessible. I pressed my advantage to the utmost, requiring no pledges, knowing how useless that would be, and so far won the day as to put him before night in possession of his property, part in ready money, but mostly in bills of exchange. These, mistrusting himself, he wished me to hold for the present.

On the street I found an acquaintance who was going to Liverpool, and from there by the next steamer to New York. Robert Lyon finally consented to go with him. I found that he was, somehow, unwilling to face Tom just yet. Promising to follow in a short time, I gave him letters of introduction to Mary and Hal, and telegraphed Hal to meet him in New York and take him home till I came.

It is curious how far the consciousness of being well dressed and of possessing a certain amount of filthy lucre goes to rehabilitate a man in his own esteem, as also in the esteem of those about him. When I parted with Robert Lyon at the depot, he was a self-respecting, dignified-looking man. A superficial observer could see nothing wrong about him, and if he could have the courage and perseverance to live down his evil appetites he would be once more a man of whom Tom could be proud.

As I placed the receipt signed by Robert Lyon in Joel Dyer's hands, he stared incredulously. As he failed to understand the man's refusal at the first, so he failed to understand his acceptance in the end. But I gave him his glasses and called Agnes to look at an engraving I had found in an old shop, that he might read his receipt and indulge his thoughts secure from observation.

At last I ventured to look at him. He was still holding the receipt, and his face was like a written page. He realized clearly that so much money was gone forever from his control, and it was a large sum to pay away needlessly. With him anything that could not be legally collected was needlessly paid. He had purchased peace of mind at a high price. It was a costly luxury. But then, he reflected, that through a long life he had allowed himself few luxuries, and perhaps could afford to indulge himself in this, since the thing would not occur again, and beside, he was so near through with it all. Thinking of that, he folded the paper carefully and put it in his pocket-book. Never was bond or mortgage so precious as this. It was, he believed, an assurance of peace in this life, and a sort of mortgage on the Lord—a note on demand to be presented at the entrance of that mysterious life toward which he was journeying fast. Yes, he could pass the remainder of his days in peace. He had escaped; he had circumvented that worthless Robert Lyon; he could afford to exult, even; and with these thoughts he swung himself off the couch, a deep, scarlet spot like a blood stain burning either hollow cheek; and in the old, imperative tone he called:

"Come, Agnes get my cane. I want to walk. I shall get well now, and we will go home at once."

He began to improve steadily. He possessed an astonishing amount of what is called "recuperative" force. The prospect of going home helped to put new vigor in him, and Agnes began to hope for a permanent improvement, if not a final cure.

In a few days I could see that notwithstanding his apparent courage and cheerfulness, he was not yet at rest. The tormenting thought of this Robert Lyon had so grown into him during the past two years that he could not rid himself of it at once. It still haunted his sleep. And if the relief by day was not as complete as he expected, it was still enough to give strength and invigoration to a frame peculiarly susceptible to mental influences. He must have had a tough physical constitution to have resisted so long the inroads of his aggressive mental force, which now that it had at last obtained the upper-hand, was like a lion rampant. In his restlessness he turned to the thought of his home with the longing of a homesick child. Once there, he felt assured that the absolute repose which he so craved would be his.

I had hoped for a few weeks of sight-seeing both for Agnes and for myself. But he was so importunate, thinking as usual only of his own claims and conveniences, that Agnes, glad to gratify him in anything, wished to comply with his desire. And so before the autumn storms came on we started for home.

CHAPTER XVIII.—JACK OPENS MY EYES.

I had expected Hal to meet us in New York, but instead Jack came pushing his way through the crowd as soon as the steamer reached her dock. Dear old Jack! I scarcely knew him. He had grown a head taller, and a downy darkness on his upper lip betokened a coming mustache. His voice, too, was in that transition period when a youth commences a sentence in one octave and ends it in another. But his heart was unchanged. He hugged me like a bear, pulled off

his cap with an awkward bow to Miss Dyer, and shook hands with her father as if they were just of an age. There was a breezy cheeriness and whole-heartedness about the boy that would half cure one less hopelessly diseased. Even his face brightened for a moment, but the brightness ended in a sigh, for as he stood with his cold, weak palm in Jack's warm, strong clasp, he could not help thinking, "He is at the beginning and I am at the end of life." There could be no sharper contrast. It was Alpha and Omega, with an immeasurable stretch between.

"How are they all at home, Jack?" asked I, as soon as our party were comfortably seated in the train that would take us to our own city.

"First-rate! only mother has intermittent fidgets about that Mr. Lyon you sent over to us. He is out every night till nearly morning. Mother says there is something wrong about him, and I tell her of course there is; you have no interest in people who are all right. If I had a club-foot or a liver-disease you would think as much again of me; now wouldn't you Uncle Doctor?" and he gave me another spasmodic hug, adding: "Hal says that you are a philanthropist as well as a physician, and that probably this man has a moral obliquity that you are endeavoring to straighten. I have tried ever since to find out what a moral obliquity is,—mother fears it is infectious;" and Jack's mischievous eye looked up inquiringly, as in the old, boyish days when he coaxed for a tin-trumpet or a hobby-horse.

"Never you mind Jack!" said I, settling his cap, which was forever perched on one side of his tousled head. "But tell me, where is Hal; and why did he not come to meet us?"

"Is that a reflection upon your humble servant?" He waited for me to shake my head and pinch his cheek, before he continued: "Hal said I could do just as well and better than he, and so got off the train at New Haven, leaving me to come on alone. I was to give his love to you, and to say that he was going to stick to his studies now, and should spend no more time running back and forth, unless absolutely necessary. He also sent kindly regards to Miss Dyer and her father." As Agnes smiled and bowed her thanks a flush crept over her face, and as Jack went on to say: "When mother is not fidgeting about Mr. Lyon she fidgets about Hal. She says he is not well, and is worrying himself to death about something or other; and in truth the old fellow has grown awful poor and sober. But I tell her we shall all get well now you have come home,"—her face grew troubled and pitiful, and she looked steadily out of the car-window with wistful eyes, that saw neither town nor landscape as we hurried on.

"But," continued Jack, "Maud makes up for all Hal's soberness. She is as gay as a lark, and sings from morning till night. She and Tall Enough go about whispering to each other, and laughing over the silliest things."

"What is that, Jack?" said I quickly, a gleam of light just breaking in upon my benighted brain.

"Why, Uncle Doctor! you would not believe it," said Jack earnestly, "but that Tall Enough is up to the house every evening, not to see Hal either. He has just taken possession of our parlors and of Maud too. I don't believe she knows there is any one else in the world. A fellow might as well have no sister, if she is to be appropriated in that way."

I looked over to Agnes. Notwithstanding her pre-occupation she heard Jack's speech, and met my questioning eyes with an amused smile.

"Have I been blind?" queried I doubtfully, still looking in her face.

"Perhaps so."

"But you were not?"

"No."

"I have had so little experience in matters of that sort, and am getting so far along in life that perhaps my blindness is a permanent thing. Your sight is clearer, Miss Dyer."

Again her face flushed, and this time with an exquisitely pained and embarrassed look that made me bite my tongue with vexation for having said anything to trouble her. She leaned back in her seat, and her face was for a long time hidden by the newspaper she was attentively perusing. After a little I observed that the paper was wrong side up. Well, perhaps it was just as interesting that way.

Jack was bouncing about as usual.

"Sit still, old fellow. Did Maud tell you she was homesick in Italy?"

"No; was she homesick?"

"Very."

"Guess she would not have been, if you had taken Tall Enough along."

"It is too absurd," said I after a thoughtful pause.

"What is too absurd?" asked Jack, leaning his head heavily on his shoulder.

"Nothing, it seems," said I, feeling more annoyed than I was willing to admit. Here was Maud caring for Northrup Duff—a chicken beside a hawk; and here, too, was Agnes flashing when Hal's name was spoken; and somehow the joy of coming home was marred already. Then there was Lyon. Trouble ahead in that direction.

The first look showed me that he had improved in health and strength and general appearance since I saw him last, and also confirmed my suspicions that with returning health and strength came a resurrection of the old, evil appetites and instincts. There was a restlessness about him that nothing could quiet; an unexpended nerve-force crowding him to action or dissipation. Dissipation was the old channel, and it would vent there, unless drawn off by steady and exhaustive action. As soon as we were alone he asked for his money, saying that he was "dead broke." I knew that he could not have spent the considerable sum in his possession when he left Liverpool, legitimately; and giving him what money I had with me told him he had best wait a few days before getting his bills of exchange cashed, in order to make a safe investment.

The next day he came for more money—not shame-faced as one would expect, but as coolly as he would ask for a glass of water, being thirsty.

"What have you done with that you had yesterday?" asked I, trying to arrest his uneasy eyes.

"Lost every cent of it at faro last night," adding hurriedly, "but I will get it back again to-night, and more too."

"Look here, Robert," said I gently: "I thought you had got through with all that, and would begin life anew."

"I never shall get through with it," said he fiercely. "It is like a consuming thirst. I have become so accustomed to the excitement that I have got to have it or drink till I drown the devilish craving. So far, I have kept from drink; but no one knows how I have fought, and no one knows how much longer I can abstain. I staid in the house day and night, because I could not trust myself out of doors, till I could bear it no longer. Then I went out, and propelled by an impulse I could not master, pushed straight for a gambling saloon. If there was one in the city, I knew I should go straight to it, blindfold. I tell you," said he with an awed look and whispered tones, "I am mastered by something stronger than my own will; and it holds and drags me whether I will or not."

"But if you had work to do, work to keep you wholly occupied through the day and thoroughly tired at night, that 'something' which is only an abnormal habit that has returned with returning strength, could be kept down till your weakened will had grown strong enough to hold it there. You are not a sound man. Your disease is moral debility; and the cure lies almost wholly in your own hands. Recognize the fact that you are unsound, and treat yourself with the same patience and perseverance that you would treat a sick child. Come! I will help you all in my power. Are you willing to try?"

"It is useless!" said he with tears in his eyes. "I am past help. I have tried it over and over again. There will come days when I think I am strongest that I cannot hold myself at all. You have no idea what an utterly worthless thing a rotten will is. Do you know a man can yield and yield, till he can do nothing else? I have come to that." He stood staring at me with eyes full of horror that saw himself sliding surely, surely into a bottomless abyss. Suddenly he covered his face with his hands exclaiming passionately: "Would to God I had never been born!"

"Have you seen your brother?"

"No, and I cannot," said he with strange inconsistency, "till I am more of a man. Give me my money and I will go off and see if I cannot do better somewhere else."

"Have you slept well of late?" asked I, apprehensive that this uncontrollable restlessness would precipitate another debacle with its consequences.

"No; I cannot sleep till I am half-tired to death. Sometimes I think I never shall sleep again."

"Come with me then, and I will see that you have a good sound sleep. It will do you more good than anything else."

He followed me obediently as a child. Yielding was easier than resisting. There is a constitutional laziness in the mental make-up of some people which is often the tap-root of their misfortunes. I gave him a large dose of hydrate of chloral and made him lie on the lounge in my den. Having staid by him till he was in a sound safe sleep that would last for some hours, I took my hat and went over to see Tom.

Tom was as glad to see me as I was to see him, and we stood for a long time hand in hand, asking more questions than either could answer. At last there was a pause, and I said:

"Tom, you remember we had a conversation some two years ago upon a subject we agreed not to mention again?"

"Yes."

"Will you give me leave to speak of it now?"

"Yes; for you would not speak of it needlessly," answered Tom under his breath; for his intuition, keen as a woman's, divined that I had news of consequence for him. He brought me a chair and sat down himself. I scarcely knew how to begin, and his anxiety helped me, for he asked unsteadily:

"Is he alive?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"In this city—at my house."

Tom's head went down. I could not see his covered face, nor would I if I could.

After a little, glad to say what I must without looking at him, I added, "He was sick in a Paris hospital, and as soon as he was well enough I persuaded him to come home. You remember that he lost his inheritance in an unfortunate transaction with a broker. Well, that man's conscience, or something behind it, or something within it, has forced him to make full restitution so far as money goes. Your brother has his own once more, and it was about the disposal of this money that I wanted to see you this afternoon."

"Why does he not come to me?" asked Tom, lifting his head.

It was best to be thoroughly honest with him, and I answered, "I do not quite understand. It seems to be a mixture of fear and shame that keeps him away."

Tom's dark face flushed to the roots of his hair. He was grieved, pained and chagrined. "I thought Bob knew me better," he said to himself; and turning away he put a question infinitely harder than all the rest:

"What is he, Doctor?"

"A man to be saved."

"Then he is not wholly lost?"

"I trust no man is wholly lost while the breath of life remains within him. Tom,"—reaching him my hand which he instantly grasped,—"my interest in your poor brother has grown to be second only to yours; and however painful it may be to you or to me, it is better to talk this matter up thoroughly, and see what we can do for him."

A long consultation followed, in which I told Tom all that I knew of Robert's past or present; withholding only the name of the broker in whose interest the successful search had been prosecuted. Some day he would know. Till then let it rest. I dwelt upon Robert's present condition, necessary treatment and future prospects. Our earnest and prayerful conference ended by his going home with me to see Robert and if possible to persuade him to become a member of his own family. If an interest in some one or something besides himself could be stimulated into action, if his affections could be drawn out and fostered, and a self-res-