

CHOICE LITERATURE.

TOM'S HEATHEN.

CHAPTER VII.—TOM'S STORY.

The next morning I was still in a speculative mood, and we were sitting gravely about the breakfast table, an unusual occurrence, for I insist that a mirthful breakfast is essential to a healthy day—a vantage-ground from which to meet for the next twenty-four hours foes, spiritual and physical. Suddenly the door burst open and in rushed Hal like a north-west wind.

"Halloa, mother! Halloa, Uncle Doctor! Halloa, everybody!"

"Milder! Milder! you young hurricane! Did you leave your manners in New Haven?"

"Yes, and everything else but my precious self. Chum vows I have been up and dressed all night, else I should never have gotten off by the early train. You understand it is Saturday, and I thought it would be healthier for body and mind to run home for Sunday. I assure you it is purely a sanative measure," rattled he, kissing his mother on either cheek.

Kate came in to set a plate for Master Hal, her favorite in the household, and when he had established himself at his mother's side I looked at the group of happy faces and dismissed my speculations for the present.

Few men are so fortunate as to have all the comforts, conveniences and civilizing influences of a family home, who have neither wife nor child. Yet such had fallen to my lot. Sister Mary came to me at once after her husband's death, and from boarding I went to housekeeping. Her children had become, in a sense, my children, without the cares and anxieties incident to parentage. They were a comely lot. There was Hal, student and incipient physician, a good-looking fellow, and he knew it. And Maud, a just-graduated school-girl, fair as the dawn, and as sentimental as her sensible mother would permit. And Jack, scapegoat, responsible for all the mischief on the premises—and there was enough of it—a big-headed boy, with tousled hair and generous mouth, that was always whistling unless he was eating. Hal insisted that there was a muchness every way about that boy that ought to be pruned. But when he attempted the pruning business he found more than he could conveniently manage, and latterly Jack had his own way, and a long way it was too. There was no telling what he would prove to be. I was prepared for anything not absolutely vicious.

"I tell you, mother," said Hal, passing up his coffee-cup the second time, "I just ached to bring Chum home with me. The poor prodigal's home is three thousand miles away, and he has not seen it for more than three years."

"Three years," repeated Mary with tender concern, wondering how his mother could live without seeing him for three long years.

"What is his name, and where is his home?" asked Maud.

"You must have a good memory. I am always talking about him."

"You rave about Chum, without naming or placing him."

"Out with your note-book, then, and down with the items. Name, Northrop P. Duff; called North, for short. But, as he is long, fearfully long, he is dubbed North Pole by most of the fellows. There is a tradition among the Sophs that he sleeps in the halls, the bed-rooms being too short for his accommodation. As for his home, it is in San Francisco, which accounts for his absurd growth; and, as to himself, he is a capital fellow, every way."

After consultation it was decided that Hal could invite him home, only he was not to pounce upon us in this unexpected fashion.

Maud said we should have to put another story to the house, and Jack muttered that his legs would take up so much room under the table, that the family would have to stand, and for his part, he should dine in the kitchen.

After breakfast Hal picked up Maud as he would pick up a kitten, and carried her off protesting that she would be treated as a baby no longer. Was she not almost eighteen and just graduated? As I passed the hall door a few moments later, I saw Maud and Hal busily whispering together, and knew that some precious scheme was incubating.

And a precious scheme it proved, for at dinner Hal came cracking his fingers about my ears like an Ethiopian end-man, calling, "Wake up! Uncle Doctor; wake up! For once you are caught napping."

"Don't be silly, Hal. Draw off your artillery or you will deafen me."

At that he flew around the table, posturing like a dancing-master, and with a profound bow said, solemnly, "I have gone and done it, Uncle Doctor."

"To the discredit of us all?"

"Ask Miss Dyer."

For a moment I felt as if a hand were clutching my throat. A preposterous fancy. Hal was waiting for remarks, and I said, "I have something else to do."

"But you should have kept better watch."

"Of what?"

"Of Miss Dyer."

"I watch her father."

"All right," with tremendous emphasis. You watch the old gentleman, and I will watch the daughter."

"Hal, Hal, what nonsense are you up to now?" asked Mary, looking mystified and concerned.

"Why, mother, when I was home last Uncle Doctor inculcated me, and it has been taking effect ever since."

"For what?" asked Mary, looking at me in alarm.

"For lunacy, lest he should become an idiot."

"Useless; he was born one," muttered Jack.

"Maud, do explain, or I shall believe the house has turned into a lunatic asylum in sober earnest," said Mary, with increasing perplexity.

"It is nothing else when Hal is at home."

"Be still, Jack, Maud and I are sane at all events," and she looked appealingly at Maud.

"It is nothing, mother, only this: when Hal was here a

few weeks ago, Uncle sent him over to the Dyer place with medicines. He saw Miss Dyer, and it seems did not acquaint himself to his own satisfaction, and has been brooding over the matter ever since. He is a little sensitive, you know."

"Conceded!" ejaculated the youngest member of the council.

"Don't interrupt me! This morning Hal took me into his confidence, and upon comparing notes found that Miss Dyer and myself were classmates before she went to Vassar. Consequently I dressed, Hal got the carriage, and we went to call on Miss Dyer. She received us graciously, seemed pleased to renew our acquaintance, smiled upon Hal, though I must say that I never saw him so stupid before, and he came away gratified. That is the beginning and end of the wonderful mystery."

"I am afraid not," said Mary, gravely, before whose maternal eyes, visions of entanglements began to float. "You must look out for him, Doctor," as if some dire evil was impending.

"There is no cause for anxiety. It is only a sort of internal measles, and when the onslaught is so fierce, it runs to the rear by rapid and easy stages; no danger of striking in."

At this, Hal flamed; said he was a man, and not a boy; knew his own mind, and so forth, at which we all laughed uproariously.

The afternoon was a busy one, but I found time to scud through Tom's article in the "Review," written in one of his metaphysical moods, feeling in the dark for answers to questions that are unanswerable this side of the grave. It was prudent to read it, for I knew that he would run in before he slept for "my impressions," as he phrased it. In our long talks he opened himself more freely to me than to any one else, and he insisted that I had a straightforward way of putting things that often helped him out of his most obstinate difficulties. Be that as it may, his talk was a rare feast to me, and we passed many and many a pleasant and I believe profitable hour, discussing the interests that lie close to every human soul. Just now, however, my concern centred not in Tom, but in Tom's half-brother, upon whose fate much would seem to depend.

It was past nine o'clock when he came quietly in after his Thursday evening prayer-meeting, and with only a nod for greeting, stretched himself on the lounge a little wearied and a little depressed, by some church matter which he afterwards mentioned, but did not explain.

I plunged into his article, dwelling on the main question, but failed to arouse his wonted enthusiasm. He lay motionless and said yes, or no, or nothing—generally nothing. He was in one of his "oyster moods," as he called them, when one could get nothing into him or out of him without breaking his shell. To-night, of all nights, I would have him communicative. The direct way was the best way to deal with him, and I turned upon him suddenly, asking:

"Tom, what ever became of that brilliant half-brother of yours, Bob Lyon?"

If I had struck him a stinging blow, the effect could not have been more immediate or surprising. He came instantly to his feet, and glared at me; pained, outraged, and defiant.

"That is a matter I never speak of," said he, between set teeth.

"Pardon me, Tom," said I, quickly, with outstretched hand. "You know I have no wish to hurt or offend. As I sat here last night thinking of you I thought also of him, and remembering how much you loved him and that you no longer spoke of him, I thought he might be dead."

Tom grasped my hand before I was half through, and when I paused I found his eyes were full of tears, and still holding my hand he said, with unsteady utterance:

"Would to God he were dead, or had died years ago."

Intense as my interest had now become, I could question him no farther. Unless he chose to tell me I should never know.

In the silence that followed he buried his face in his hands and groaned. Presently he reached for his hat and went to the door. There he paused and turned, facing me. I sincerely regretted my hasty question, and probably he saw it, for he looked steadily and sorrowfully in my eyes for a moment, threw his hat on the table, and to my great relief came back to his seat, saying apologetically:

"I am unreasonably depressed to-night, and your question fell upon an old sore that has been dumbly aching for days. Otherwise I should have treated you with more consideration."

"You acquit me of any intent to wound?"

"Certainly, certainly. You know nothing of poor Bob, and how could you know the pain, shame and indignation his name called up. And having said so much, I will explain, and we will never touch the matter again."

He stopped and thrust back that lock of hair, visibly moved and pained. My thoughts ran back twenty-four hours, and I saw Joel Dyer sitting with his thin hands clasped back of his head, his deep eyes gleaming like smothered coals, while he told me of the Robert Lyon he had used to save himself, and whose shadow followed him relentlessly. And now here was Tom stung with pain and humiliation, while I waited with the growing conviction that to-night I should hear the counterpart of the same sorrowful story.

"You remember," began he, speaking slowly, as if the words were dragged out of him, "what a good-hearted, generous fellow he was; genial and happy, carrying sunshine wherever he went, and how we all loved him and how proud we all were of him. I had no other brother and no sister. My father died before I could know my loss, and Bob and I had no one but each other and our mother. No boys ever loved each other more, and our mother said we were the two halves of her heart. Bob's father left him quite a little fortune—a yearly allowance and an inheritance when he should be twenty-five. My father left me only his good name. When Bob knew this he insisted that I should share his allowance, and would have made it more but that our mother interfered. Bob cared little for books and insisted that I could study enough for both, and would not hear a word of college for himself. It was his allowance generously

shared that gave me my opportunities and set me on my feet. He used to say that study was my forte and money-making his; in which he divined himself as many another man has done—mistaking the desire for the ability. He had little of the shrewdness and forethought that in some men amount to prescience, and none of the concentrated selfishness that enters so largely into the characters of most money-making men. Nor do I think he cared for money for himself. It was always for some one else; for mother and for me. We should be rich; we should have an abundance. Full of his hopes and plans, he took his inheritance as soon as it came into his possession; confidently expecting to make a fortune for himself and us." Tom paused, mentally going through the past, and when he spoke again he said rapidly: "To make the story short, Bob fell into the hands of a sharper who had all along been waiting for him, and under a pretence of friendship and disinterested kindness fleeced him clean."

"Do you know who the sharper was?"

"No; Bob never told his name, nor the fact till long after. Disappointment and chagrin kept him silent. We only know that he made desperate struggles to recover himself, getting deeper in at every attempt. The genial, happy fellow grew capricious and unaccountable. Seasons of boisterous gaiety alternated with periods of deepest gloom. We saw the change long before we knew the cause. Mother took alarm, I thought needlessly; for I was so fully absorbed by the duties of my first parish that I saw but little of these moods or the changes that were manifest in his personal appearance; and besides, the thought that Bob could go astray never occurred to me."

"One day mother sent for me and told me all her fears and apprehensions. She had not seen Bob for more than three weeks, and begged me to find him and bring him home. For one long, terrible week I sought him, going from one gambling hell to another, till I found my once innocent, happy brother in a place I shall never forget. I got him away, re-clothed him in body and mind, and took him home to our mother. Then he told us the whole story. If ever a man was full of penitence and remorse he was. I went with him through all his sin and sorrow; it seemed laid upon me. And at length I thought, and do still sometimes believe, a crisis was reached and passed. He reformed and appeared to manifest all the symptoms of a truly penitent and regenerate soul. But—" and Tom stopped, breathing hard, as if he was bearing an insufferable burden, "In a few months he went to the bad again—how or why I cannot tell. He who knows all only knows. I followed him to no purpose. He would not return and could not be found. It killed our poor mother; she died with her hands in mine, and her last words were a solemn charge. 'Bring your brother back to Christ, as a seal of your ministry.' I have seen her face and heard her words ever since. And God knows how I have striven to obey my mother's charge, and how unavailing my efforts have been. He has fled from me as if I were his mortal enemy, and all I could do was to hope and pray. He was followed to California and beyond."

Had he heard the rumor to which Mr. Dyer alluded? I could not tell. He had stopped speaking, his head was bowed and his lips silently moving as if in prayer.

"And now," said he, raising his head, "there is nothing more to be said. It is one of those hopeless things that cannot be touched and that must be borne, and that tries a man's faith in God more than almost anything else. He is all-powerful. I ask not for myself, I ask only that He will for Christ's sake, reach out and take His own. If He will, He will; and I must leave it there. You understand now why I cannot speak of this."

"Yes; and after you have answered one question we will allude to it no more. Do you know where he is now, or where he was last?"

"No, I am totally in the dark," answered he, too deeply filled with his own thoughts to wonder if I had a special reason for asking. "He was reported dead more than two years ago. But I cannot think it true, though sometimes I feel as if it would be a relief to know that the worst was passed. And then at times I have a belief, uncertain and tremulous, but still a belief strong enough to be a little comfort, that He who remembered the Prodigal will also remember him, and that I shall yet see his face and hear his voice and know that his soul is saved, if not here, why then hereafter."

Tom stood with a far-off look in his eyes, seeing beyond the walls of the room and the gathered darkness without, an unknown place that held the brother he had loved and lost, and whose ruin lay so heavily on his own soul. Poor Tom! I understood him better now; and as he gave me his hand at parting, both knew, though neither spoke, that this night had brought us closer than ever before.

CHAPTER VIII.—I AM APPROPRIATED.

This promised to be a very uncomfortable and unsatisfactory affair, and I wished myself well out of it. If Joel Dyer must have help, why not pitch upon some one having more leisure and an aptitude for the detective business? The hope that I might help Tom as well as Joel Dyer was the only consideration that made it at all endurable. The silence and secrecy I thoroughly detested. Tom had opened his inmost heart to me, and I had withheld the fact that Mr. Dyer was the man who had injured his brother. I could see no good to be gained by the disclosure, even if I were not held to secrecy, but it had a mean look and made me feel uncomfortable. Then, too, there was Agnes to be kept in the dark. Never in all my life was I so disquieted with myself and my position; and with all my pondering I could see no way out of it except through it—and the end I could not conjecture.

An impression of which I was at first but vaguely conscious now began to verify itself. Mr. Dyer found early occasion to send for me, and the moment we were alone plunged into the matter of Robert Lyon and the growing necessity of finding him. Having once vented himself, and finding the relief experienced thereby, he fastened upon me as a pent-up pond fastens upon a sluice-way. There was no denying or getting away from him. Before I knew it I was appropri-