

## CHOICE LITERATURE.

## A DAY OF FATE.

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BOOK FIRST.—CHAPTER XIII.—THE LIGHTNING AND A  
SUBTLE FLAME.

On entering the parlour, I found Mr. Yocomb standing up and looking around in a dazed manner. He did not seem to know me, and in my deep anxiety I did not heed him. Kneeling beside Miss Warren I found that her pulse was very feeble. I lifted her gently upon the sofa, and threw open a window, so that the damp, gusty wind, full of spray from the rain, might blow in upon her.

Mr. Yocomb laid his hand heavily on my shoulder, and asked, in a thick voice, "What does it all mean?"

I saw that he was deathly pale, and that he tottered. Taking his arm, I supported him to a lounge in the hall, and said, "Mr. Yocomb, you were taken ill. You must lie down quietly till the physician comes."

He seemed so confused and unable to think that he accepted my explanation. Indeed, he soon became so ill from the effects of the shock that he could not rise.

Again I knelt at Miss Warren's side, and began chafing her hands; but the cool wind and spray did most to revive her. She opened her eyes, looked at me fixedly a few moments, and then tried to rise.

"Please keep quiet," I said, "till I bring you some brandy;" and I hastened to my room, tore open my valise, and was soon moistening her lips from a small flask. After swallowing a little she regained self-possession rapidly.

"What happened?" she asked.

"I fear you swooned."

She passed her hand over her brow, and looked around as if in search of some one, then said, "Where is Mrs. Yocomb?"

"She is in her room with Zillah."

"Please let me go to her;" and she again essayed to rise.

"Miss Warren," I said gently, "I have no right to ask a favour of you, but I will thank you very much if you will just remain quietly on this sofa till you are better. You remember we had a frightful storm. I never knew such heavy thunder."

"Ah! there it is again," she said, shuddering, as a heavy peal rolled away to the north.

"Miss Warren, you said once to-day that you could trust me. You can. I assure you the storm is past; there is no more danger from it, but there is danger unless you do as I bid you. Remain quietly here till you have recovered from your nervous prostration. I happen to have some knowledge in a case of this kind, and I know that much depends on your being quiet for an hour or more. You need not be alarmed if you do as I bid you. I will see to it that some one is within call all the time;" and I tried to speak cheerfully and decisively.

She smiled as she said, "Since you have assumed the rôle of doctor, I'll obey, for I know how arbitrary the profession is."

Then she again reclined wearily on the sofa, and I went out, closing the door.

I found Reuben beside his father, who certainly needed care, for the terrible nausea which attends recovery from a severe shock from electricity had set in.

"Reuben," I urged, "do go for the doctor; I'll do everything for your father that I can, but we must have a good physician at once. Go in your buggy as fast as you can drive in the dark—can't you take a lantern?—and bring the doctor with you. First tell him what has happened, so that he can bring the proper remedies. Be a man, Reuben; much depends on you to-night."

Within five minutes I heard the swift feet of Dapple splash out upon the road. The night was growing still and close, and the gusts occurred at longer intervals. The murky cloud had covered the sky, utterly obscuring the moonlight, and there was a steady and heavy fall of rain.

After Reuben had gone, a terrible sense of isolation and helplessness oppressed me. I remembered strange tales of lightning and its effects that I had heard. Would the mother and her two daughters survive? Was Mr. Yocomb seriously ill? But I found that the anxiety which tortured me most was in behalf of the one who gave the best promise of speedy recovery; and it was my chief hope that she would remain quietly where I had left her till the physician arrived. I had pretended to a far greater knowledge than I possessed, since in truth I had had very little experience in illness. If Miss Warren should leave the parlour, and thus learn that the farmhouse might become the scene of an awful tragedy, the effect upon her would probably be disastrous in the extreme.

These and like thoughts were coursing swiftly through my mind as I waited upon Mr. Yocomb, and sought to give him relief.

"Ice!" he gasped; "it's in the cellar."

I snatched up the candle that Reuben had left burning on the hall-table, and went for it. The place was strange, and I was not so quick and deft as many others would have been, and so was absent some moments.

Great was my surprise and consternation when I returned, for Miss Warren stood beside Mr. Yocomb, holding his head.

"Why are you here?" I asked, and my tone and manner betokened deep trouble.

"I'm better," she said, quietly and firmly.

"Miss Warren," I remonstrated, "I won't answer for the consequences if you don't go back to the parlour and remain there till the doctor comes. I know what I'm about."

"You don't look as if master of the situation. You are haggard—you seem half desperate—"

"I'm anxious about you, and if—"

"Mr. Morton, you are far more anxious about others. I've had time to think. A swoon is not such a desperate affair. You guessed rightly—a thunder-storm prostrates me, but as it passes I am myself again."

After aiding Mr. Yocomb to recline feebly on the lounge, she came to the table where I was breaking the ice, and said, in a low tone,

"Something very serious has happened."

I could not look at her. I dared not to speak even, for I was oppressed with the dread of a worse tragedy. With her morbid fear of lightning she might almost lose her reason if now, in her weak, unnerved condition, she saw its effect on Mrs. Yocomb and Adah.

"Mother," moaned Mr. Yocomb; "why don't mother come?"

"She's with Zillah upstairs," I faltered. "Zillah's ill."

"Then why does not Adah come to her father?" Miss Warren questioned, looking at me keenly.

I felt that disguise was useless.

"Mr. Morton, your hand so trembles that you can scarcely break the ice. Something dreadful has happened—there's the smell of smoke and fire in the house. Tell me, tell me!" and she laid her hand appealingly on my arm.

"Oh, Miss Warren," I groaned, "let me shield you. If further harm should come to you to-night—"

"Further harm will come unless you treat me as a woman, not as a child," she said firmly. "I know you mean it kindly, and no doubt I have seemed weak enough to warrant any amount of shielding."

At this moment there came a peal of thunder from the passing storm, and she sank shudderingly into a chair. As it passed she sprang up and said,

"I can't help that, but I can and will help you. I understand it all. The house has been struck, and Zillah, Adah, and Mr. Yocomb have been hurt. Let me feed Mr. Yocomb with the ice. Are you sure he should have ice? I would give him brandy first if I had my way, but you said you knew—"

"Miss Warren, I don't know—I'm in mortal terror in behalf of the family, but my chief dread has been that you would come to know the truth, and now I can't keep it from you. If you can be brave and strong enough to help me in this emergency, I will honour you and thank you every day of my life."

"Mother! mother! why doesn't mother come?" Mr. Yocomb called.

Miss Warren gave me a swift glance that was as reassuring as sunlight, and then went quietly into the parlour. A moment later she was giving Mr. Yocomb brandy and water, and quieting him with low, gentle words.

"You remember, Mr. Yocomb," she said, "that Zillah was greatly frightened by the storm. You would not have the mother leave the child just yet. Mr. Morton, will you go up-stairs and see if I can be of any assistance? I will join you there as soon as I have made Mr. Yocomb a little more comfortable," and she went to the parlour and brought out another pillow, and then threw open the hall-door in order that her patient might have more air, for he respired slowly and laboriously. Her words seemed to quiet him, and he gave himself into her hands. I looked at her wonderingly for a moment, then said, in a low tone,

"You are indeed a woman and a brave one. I recognize my superior officer, and resign command at once."

She shook her head as she gave me a glimmer of a smile, but urged, in a whisper, "Hasten, we must not lose a moment."

I swiftly mounted the stairs, relieved of my chief anxiety.

Through the open door I saw Adah's fair white face. She had not stirred. I now ventured in and spoke to her, but she was utterly unconscious. Taking her hand I was overjoyed to find a feeble pulse.

"It may all yet be well. God grant it," I muttered.

"He will," said Miss Warren, who had joined me almost immediately; "this is not a day of fate, I trust;" and she began moistening Adah's lips with brandy, and trying to cause her to swallow a little, while I chafed her pretty hands and rubbed brandy on her wrists.

"It seems to me as if an age, crowded with events, had elapsed since I started on my aimless walk this morning," I said, half in soliloquy.

"That you were directed hither will be cause for lasting gratitude. Was not the house on fire?"

"Yes, but Reuben was invaluable. He was out on the piazza, and so was not hurt."

"Was Mrs. Yocomb hurt?" she asked, looking at me in wild alarm.

"Please do not fail me," I entreated; "you have been so brave thus far. Mrs. Yocomb will soon revive, I think. You were unconscious at first."

She now realized the truth that Mrs. Yocomb was not caring for Zillah, and hastened to their room, impelled by an overmastering affection for the woman who had treated her with motherly kindness.

I followed her, and assured her that her friend was living. It needed but a moment to see that this was true, but little Zillah scarcely gave any sign of life. Both were unconscious.

The young girl now looked at me as if almost overwhelmed, and said, in a low, shuddering tone, "This is awful—far worse than I feared; I do wish the doctor was here."

"He must be here soon. I know you won't give way. In great emergencies a true woman is great. You may save—"

A thunder-peal from the retreating storm drowned my words. She grew white, and would have fallen had I not caught her and supported her to a chair.

"Give me—a few moments," she gasped, "and I'll be myself again. This shock is awful. Why, we would all have burned up—had you not put the fire out," and her eyes dilated with horror.

"We have no time for words," I said brusquely. "Here, take this brandy, and then let us do everything in our power to save life. I scarcely know what to do, but something must be done. If we can only do the right thing, all may yet be well."

In a moment the weakness passed, and she was her brave, quiet self once more.

"I won't fail you again," she said resolutely, as she tried

to force a little brandy between Mrs. Yocomb's pallid lips.

"You are a genuine woman," I replied heartily, as I chafed Mrs. Yocomb's wrists with the spirits; "I know how terrible the ordeal has been for you, and most young ladies would have contributed to the occasion nothing but hysterics."

"And you feared I would."

"I feared worse. You are morbidly timid in a thunder-storm, and I dreaded your learning what you now know, beyond measure."

"You were indeed burdened," she said, looking at me with strong sympathy.

"No matter. If you can keep up and suffer no ill consequences from this affair, I believe that the rest will come through all right. After all, they are affected only physically, but you—"

"I have been a little weak-minded. I know it, but if it doesn't thunder any more I'll keep up. Ever since I was a child the sound of thunder paralyzed me. Thank God, Mrs. Yocomb is beginning to revive."

"I will leave her in your care, and see if I can do anything for Mr. Yocomb. I thus show that I trust you fully."

As I passed out I heard a faint voice call, "Mother!"

Going to the door of Adah's room I saw that she was conscious, and feebly trying to rise. As I entered she looked at me in utter bewilderment, then shrank with instinctive fear from the presence of a seeming intruder. I saw the impulse of her half-conscious mind, and called Miss Warren, who came at once, and her presence seemed reassuring.

"What's the matter?" she asked, with the same thick utterance that I had noted in Mr. Yocomb's voice. It seemed as if the organs of speech were partially paralyzed.

"You have been ill, my dear, but now you are much better. The doctor will be here soon," Miss Warren said, soothingly.

She seemed to comprehend the words imperfectly, and turned her wondering eyes towards me.

"Oh that the doctor would come!" I groaned. "Here you have two on your hands, and Mr. Yocomb is calling."

"Who's that?" asked Adah, feebly pointing to me.

"You remember Mr. Morton," Miss Warren said quietly, bathing the girl's face with cologne. "You brought him home from meeting this morning."

The girl's gaze was so fixed and peculiar that it held me a moment, and gave the odd impression of the strong curiosity of one waking up in a new world. Suddenly she closed her eyes and fell back faint and sick. At that moment, above the sound of the rain, I heard the quick splash of a horse's feet, and hastened down to greet the doctor.

In a few hasty words I added such explanation of the catastrophe as Reuben's partial account rendered necessary, and by the time I had finished we were at Mrs. Yocomb's door. Mr. Yocomb seemed sufficiently at rest to be left for a while.

"This is Miss Warren," I said. "She will be your invaluable assistant, but you must be careful of her, since she, too, has suffered very severely, and, I fear, is keeping up on the strength of her brave will, mainly."

The physician, fortunately, was a good one, and his manner gave us confidence from the start.

"I think I understand the affair sufficiently," he said; "and the best thing you can do for my patients, and for Miss Warren also, Mr. Morton, is to have some strong black coffee made as soon as possible. That will now prove an invaluable remedy, I think."

"I'll show you where the coffee is," Miss Warren added promptly. "Unfortunately—perhaps fortunately—Mrs. Yocomb let the woman who assisted her go away for the night. Had she been here she might have been another burden."

Even though I had but a moment or two in the room, I saw that the doctor was anxious about little Zillah.

As Miss Warren waited on me I said earnestly, "What a godsend you are!"

"No," she replied with a tone and a glance that, to me, was sweeter and more welcome than all the June sunshine of that day. "I was here, and you were sent." Then her eyes grew full of dread, reminding me of the gaze she had bent on the storm before which she had cowered. "The house was on fire," she said; "we were all helpless—unconscious. You saved us. I beg, to realize it all."

"Come, Miss Warren, you now are 'seeing double.' Here, Reuben," I said to the young fellow, who came dripping in from the barn, "I want to introduce you in a new light. Miss Warren doesn't half know you yet, and I wish her to realize that you are no longer a boy, but a brave, level-headed man, that even when stunned by lightning could do as much as I did."

"Now, Richard Morton, I didn't do half as much as thee did. How's mother?" and he spoke with a boy's ingenuousness.

"Doing well under the care of the doctor you brought," I said; "and if you will now help me make this dying fire burn up quickly, she will have you to thank more than any one else when well again."

"I'm going to thank you now," Miss Warren exclaimed, seizing both of his hands. "God bless you, Reuben! You don't realize what you have done for us all."

The young fellow looked surprised. "I only did what Richard Morton told me," he protested, "and that wasn't much."

"Well, there's a pair of you," she laughed. "The fire put itself out, and Dapple went after the doctor." Then, as if overwhelmed with gratitude, she clasped her hands and looked upward, as she said, in low, thrilling tones, "Thank God, oh thank God! what a tragedy we have escaped!"

"Yes," I said, "it might have been a day of fate indeed. Life would have been an unendurable burden if what you feared had happened. What's more, I would have lost my faith in God had such a home and its inmates been destroyed. The thought of it makes me sick," and I sank into a chair.

"We must not think of it," she cried earnestly, "for there's much to be done still. There, I've helped you all I