

CHOICE LITERATURE.

A DAY OF FATE.

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BOOK SECOND.—CHAPTER III.—RETURNING CONSCIOUSNESS.

I seemed to waken as if from a long, troubled sleep. At first I was merely conscious that I was awake, and I wondered how long I had slept. Then I was glad I was awake, and that my confused and hateful dreams, of which no distinct memory remained, had vanished. The only thing I could recall concerning them was an indefinite and oppressive sense of loss of some kind, at which I had vaguely and impatiently protested.

I knew I was awake, and yet I felt too languid to open my eyes. I was little more than barely conscious of existence, and I rather enjoyed this negative condition of complete inertia. The thought floated through my mind that I was like a new-born child, that knows nothing, fears nothing, thinks nothing, but simply breathes, and I felt so tired and "gone" that I coveted an age of mere respiration.

But thought slowly kindled in a weak, fitful fashion. I first became slightly curious about myself. Why had I slept so profoundly? Why was I so nerveless and stupid after such a sleep?

Instead of answering these questions, I weakly wandered off into another train of thought. "My mind seems a perfect blank," I said to myself. "I don't remember anything; I don't know where I am, and don't much care; nor do I know what my experience will be when I fully rouse myself. This is like beginning a new existence. What shall be the first entry on the blank page of my wakening mind? Perhaps I had better rouse up and see whether I am truly alive."

And yet I did not rise, but just lay still, heavy with a strange, painless inertia, over which I puzzled in a vague, weak way.

At last I was sure I heard a child crying. Then there was a voice, that I thought I had heard before, trying to hush and reassure the child, and I began to think who they were, and yet I did not seem to care enough to open my eyes to see.

I next heard something like a low sob near me, and it caused a faint thrill among my sluggish nerves. Surely I had heard that sound before, and curiosity so far asserted itself that I opened my eyes and looked wonderingly around.

The room was unfamiliar, and yet I was certain I had seen it on some previous occasion. Seated at a window, however, was a lady whose room absorbed my whole weak and wavering attention. My first thought was, "How very pretty she is!" Then, "What is she looking at so steadfastly from the window?" After a moment I mentally laughed at my stupidity. "She's looking at the sunset. What else should she be looking at? Can I have slept all day?"

I saw her bosom heave with another convulsive sob, and that tears fast followed each other down her cheeks. I seemed to have the power of noting everything distinctly, but I couldn't understand or account for what I saw. Who was that sweet-faced girl? Beyond a doubt I had seen her before, but where? Why was she crying? Why was she in my room?

Then I thought, "It must be all imaginary; I doubt whether I am awake yet. If she were only smiling instead of crying, I would like to dream on forever. How strangely familiar her face is! I must have seen it daily for years, and yet I can't recognize it."

The loud whinny of a horse seemed to give my paralyzed memory an impetus and suggestion, by means of which I began to reconstruct the past.

"That's Old Plod!" I exclaimed mentally. "And—and—why, that's Miss Warren sitting by the window. I remember now. We were in the barn together, and I was jealous of the old horse—how absurd! Then we were in the garden, and she was laughing at me. How like a dream it all is! It seemed as if she was always laughing, and that the birds might well stop singing to listen. Now she is crying here in my room. I half believe it's an apparition, and that if I speak it will vanish. Perhaps it is a warning that she's in trouble somewhere, and that I ought to go to her help. How lovely she looks, with her hands lying in her lap, forgetful of the work they hold, and her tearful eyes fixed on the glowing west! Her face is very pale in contrast. Surely she's only a shadow, and the real maiden is in need of my aid;" and I made an effort to rise.

It seemed exceedingly strange that I could scarcely lift my hand; but my slight movement caused her to look around, and in answer to my gaze of eager inquiry she came softly and hesitatingly toward me.

"Miss Warren," I said, "can it be you in very truth?"

"Yes," she replied, with a sudden and glad lighting up of her face, "but please don't talk."

"How you relieve me," I tried to say joyfully, but I found I could only whisper. "What the mischief—makes my voice—so weak? Do you know—that I had the odd—impression—that you were an apparition—and had come to me—as a token—that you were in trouble—and I tried to rise—to go to your aid—then it seemed yourself—that looked around. But you are in trouble—why can't I get up and help you?"

She trembled, and by her gesture tried to stop my words. "Will you do what I ask?" she said, in a low, eager tone.

I smiled as I replied, "Little need of your asking that question."

"Then please to try to get well speedily; don't talk, but just keep every little grain of strength. Oh, I'm so glad you are in your right mind. You have been very ill, but will soon get well now if only careful. I'll call Mrs. Yocomb."

"Please don't go," I whispered. "Now that I know you—it seems so natural—that you should be here. So I've

been ill—and you have taken care of me;" and I gave a deep sigh of satisfaction. "I did not not know you at first—idiot!—but Old Plod whinnied—and then it all began to come back."

At the word "Old Plod" she turned hastily toward the door. Then, as if mastered by an impulse, she returned, and said, in a tone that thrilled even my feeble pulse, "Oh, live! in mercy live, or else I can never forgive myself."

"I'll live—never fear," I replied, with a low laugh. "I'm not such a fool as to leave a world containing you."

A rich glow overspread her face, she smiled, then suddenly her face became very pale, and she even seemed frightened as she hastily left the room.

A moment later Mrs. Yocomb came in, full of motherly solicitude.

"Kind Mrs. Yocomb," I murmured, "I'm glad I'm in such good hands."

"Thank God, Richard Morton," she said, in low, fervent tones, "thee's going to get well. But don't speak a word."

"Wasn't that Zillah crying?"

"Yes, she was heart-broken about thee being so sick, but she'll laugh now when I tell her thee's better. Take this, and sleep again."

"Bless her kind heart!" I said.

Mrs. Yocomb laid her finger on my lips. I saw her pour out something, which I swallowed unquestioningly, and after a moment sank into a quiet sleep.

CHAPTER IV.—IN THE DARK.

"Yes, Mrs. Yocomb, good nursing and nourishment are all that he now requires," were the reassuring words that greeted my waking later in the evening. I opened my eyes, and found that a physician was feeling my pulse.

I turned feebly toward my kind hostess, and smilingly whispered,

"There's no fear of my wanting these where you are, Mrs. Yocomb; but don't let me make trouble. I fear I've made too much already."

"The only way thee can make trouble, Richard, is to worry about making trouble. The more we can do for thee the better we shall be pleased. All thee's got to do is to get well and take thy time about it."

"That's just like you. How long have I been ill?"

"That's none of thy business at present. One thing at a time. The doctor has put thee in my hands, and I'm going to make thee mind."

"I've heard that men were perfect bears when getting well," I said.

"Thee can be a bear if thee feels like it, but not another word to-night—not another syllable; am I not right, doctor?"

"Yes, I prescribe absolute quiet of mind and body; that and good living will bring you around in time. You've had a narrow graze of it, but if you will mind Mrs. Yocomb you will yet die of old age. Good-night."

My nurse gave me what she thought I needed, and darkened the room. But it was not so dark but that I saw a beautiful face in the doorway.

"Miss Warren," I exclaimed.

"It was Adah," said Mrs. Yocomb quietly; "she's been very anxious about thee."

"You are all so kind. Please thank her for me," I replied eagerly.

"Mother may I speak to Richard Morton?" asked a timid voice from the obscurity of the hall-way.

"Not to-night, Adah—to-morrow."

"Forgive me if I disobey you this once," I interrupted hastily.

"Yes, Miss Adah, I want to thank you."

She came instantly to my side, and I held out my hand to her. I wondered why hers throbbed and trembled so strangely.

"It's I who should thank thee; I can never thank thee enough. Oh, I feared I might—I might never have a chance."

"There, Adah, thee mustn't say another word; Richard's too weak yet."

Her hand closed tightly over mine. "Good-bye," she breathed softly, and vanished.

Mrs. Yocomb sat down with her knitting by a distant and shaded lamp.

Too weak to think, or to realize aught except that I was surrounded by an atmosphere of kindness and sympathy, I was well content to lie still and watch, through the open window, the dark foliage wave to and fro, and the leaves grow distinct in the light of the rising moon, which, though hidden, I knew must be above the eternal mountains. I had the vague impression that very much had happened, but I would not think; not for the world would I break the spell of deep quietude that enthralled every sense of my body and every faculty of my mind.

"Mrs. Yocomb," I said at last, "it must be you who creates this atmosphere of perfect peace and restfulness. The past is forgotten, the future a blank, and I see only your serene face. A subdued light seems to come from it, as from the shaded lamp."

"Thee is weak and fanciful, Richard. The doctor said thee must be quiet."

"I wish it were possible to obey the doctor forever, and that this exquisite rest and oblivion could last. I am like a ship becalmed on a summer sea in a summer night. Mind and body are both motionless."

"Sleep, Richard Morton, and when rested and well, may gales from heaven spring up and carry thee homeward. Fear not even rough winds, if they bear thee toward thee only true home. Now your only duty is rest."

"You are not going to sit up to-night, Mrs. Yocomb."

She put her finger on her lips.

"Hush!" she said.

"Oh, delicious tyranny!" I murmured. "The ideal government is that of an absolute and friendly power."

I had a vague consciousness of being awakened from time to time, and of taking something from Mrs. Yocomb's hand, and then sinking back into an enthrallment of blessed and

refreshing slumber. With every respiration life and health flowed back.

At last, as after my first long sleep in the country, I seemed to hear exquisite strains of music that swelled into richer harmony until what seemed a burst of song awoke me. Opening my eyes, I looked intently through the open window and gladly welcomed the early day. The air was fresh, and I felt its exhilarating quality. The drooping branches of the elm swayed to and fro, and the mountains beyond were bathed in light. I speedily realized that it was the song of innumerable birds that had supplied the music of my waking dream.

For a few moments I gazed through the window, with the same perfect content with which I had watched the foliage grow distinct in the moonlight the previous evening, and then I looked around the room.

I started slightly as I encountered the deep blue eyes of Adah Yocomb fixed on me with an intent, eager watchfulness.

"Can I do anything for thee, Richard Morton?" she asked, rising from her chair near the door. "Mother asked me to stay with thee a while, and to let her know if thee woke and wanted anything."

"With you here this bright morning, how could I want anything more?" I asked, with a smile, for her young, beautiful face comported so well with the early morning of the summer day as to greatly please both my eye and fancy. The colour of the early morning grew richer in her face as she replied,

"I'm glad thee doesn't want me to go away; but I must go and have thy breakfast brought up."

"No, stay; tell me all that's happened. I seem to have forgotten everything so strangely! I feel as if I had known you all a long time, and yet that can't be, for only the other day I was at my office in New York."

"Mother says thee's too weak to talk yet, and that I must not answer questions. She says thee knows thee's been sick and thee knows thee's getting well, and that must do till thee's much stronger."

"Oh, I feel ever so much stronger. Sleep and the good things your mother has given me have made a new man of me."

"Mother says thee has never been sick, and that thee doesn't know how to take care of thyself, and thee'll use thy strength right up if we don't take good care of thee."

"And are you going to take care of me?"

"Yes, if thee pleases. I'll help mother."

"I should be hard to please were I not glad. I shall have so nice a time getting well that I shall be tempted to play sick."

"I'll—I'll wait on thee as long as thee'll let me, for no one owes thee more than I do."

"What in the world do you owe me?" I asked, much perplexed. "If you are going to help me to get well, and will come to my room daily with a face like this summer morning, I shall owe you more than I can ever repay."

"My face would have been black enough but for thee; but I'm glad thee thinks I look well. They are all saying I look pale and am growing thin, but if thee doesn't think so I don't care," and she seemed aglow with pleasure.

"It would make a sick man well to look at you," I said, smiling. "Please come and sit by me and help me to get my confused brain straight once more. I have the strangest sense of not knowing what I ought to know well. You and your kind father and mother brought me home from meeting. Your mother said I might stay here and rest. Miss Warren was here—she was singing in the parlour. Where is Miss Warren?"

"She's has gone out for a walk," said the girl a little coldly.

Her manner perplexed me, and, together with my thought of Miss Warren, there came a vague sense of trouble—of something wrong. I tried to raise my hand to my brow, as if to clear away the midst that obscured my mind, and my hand was like lead, it was so heavy.

"A plague on my memory!" I exclaimed. "We were in the parlour, and Miss Warren was singing. Your mother spoke—would that I might hear her again!—it's all tolerably clear up to that time, and then everything is confused."

"Adah, how's this?" said Mrs. Yocomb reproachfully.

"Thee was not to let Richard Morton talk."

"I only am to blame, Mrs. Yocomb; I would talk. I'm trying to get the past straightened out; I know that something happened the other evening when you spoke so beautifully to us, but my memory comes up to that point as to an abyss, and I can't bridge it over."

"Richard Morton, doesn't thee believe that I'm thy friend?"

"My mind would indeed be a total blank if I doubted that."

"Well, then, do what I ask thee; don't question, don't think. Isn't it sufficient to know that thee has been ill, and that thy life depends on quiet? Thee can scarcely lift thy hand to thy head; thy words are slow and feeble. Can't thee realize that it is thy sacred duty to rest and grow strong before taking up the cares and burdens that life brings to us all? Thee looks weak and exhausted."

"I am indeed weak enough, but I felt almost well when I awoke."

"Adah, I fear I can't trust thee as a nurse," her mother began gravely.

"Please don't blame her; it was wholly my fault," I whispered. "I'll be very good now, and do just what you bid me."

"Well, then, thee must take what I have prepared, and thy medicine, and sleep again."

"Good-bye, Adah," I said, smiling. "Don't look so concerned; you haven't done me a bit of harm. Your face was as bright and welcome as the sunshine."

"If it hadn't been for thee—" she began.

Mrs. Yocomb raised a warning finger, and the girl stole away.

"Can—can I not see Miss Warren this morning?" I asked hesitatingly.

"Thee must sleep first."

The medicine she gave evidently contained a sedative, or