

CHOICE LITERATURE.

A DAY OF FATE.

BY REV. E. F. ROK.

CHAPTER IX.—A WRETCHED FAILURE.

The excitement that had sustained me was passing away, and I felt myself growing miserably weak and depressed. The remainder of the meal was a desperate battle, in which I think I succeeded fairly. I talked that it might not be noticed that I was eating very little; joked with Mr. Yocomb till the old gentleman was ruddy and tremulous with laughter, and made Reuben happy by applauding one of Dapple's exploits, the history of which was easily drawn from him.

I spoke often to both Adah and Zillah, and tried to be as frank and unconscious in one case as the other. I even made the acquaintance of Mr. Hearn's little girl—indeed, her father formally presented her to me as his daughter Adela. I knew nothing of his domestic history, and gained no clue as to the length of the widowhood which he now proposed to end as speedily as possible.

I was amused by his not infrequent glances at Adah. He evidently had a keen eye for beauty as for every other good thing of this world, and he was not so desperately enamored but that he could stealthily and critically compare the diverse charms of the two maidens, and I imagined I saw a slight accession to his complacency as his judgment gave its verdict for the one toward whom he manifested proprietorship by a manner that was courtly, deferential, but quite pronounced. A stranger present could never have doubted their relationship.

A brief discussion arose as to taste, in which Mr. Hearn assumed the ground that nothing could take the place of much observation and comparison, by means of which effects in colour could be accurately learned and valued. In reply I said,

"Theories and facts do not always harmonize any more than colours. Miss Adah's youth and rural life have not given her much opportunity for observation and comparison, and yet few ladies on your avenue have truer eyes for harmony in colour than she."

"Mr. Morton being the judge," said the banker, with a profound and smiling bow. "Permit me to add that Miss Adah has at this moment only to glance in a mirror to obtain an idea of perfect harmony in colour," and his eyes lingered admiringly on her face.

I was worsted in this encounter, and I saw the old gleam of thoughtfulness in Miss Warren's eyes. How well I remembered when I first saw that evanescent illumination—the quick flash of a bright, genial spirit. She delights in her lover's keen thrust, was now my thought, "and is pleased to think I'm no match for him. She should remember that it's a poor time for a man to tilt when he can scarcely sit erect." But Adah's pleasure was unalloyed. She had received two decided compliments, and she found herself associated with me in the new-comer's mind, and by my own actions.

"I frankly admit," I said, "that I'm a partial judge, and perhaps a very incompetent one." Then I was stupid enough to add, "But newspaper men are prone to have opinions. Mr. Yocomb was so sarcastic as to say that there was nothing under heaven that an editor did not know."

"Oh, if you judge by her father's authority, you are on safe ground, and I yield at once."

He had now gone too far, and I flushed angrily as we rose from the table. I saw, too, that Mr. and Mrs. Yocomb did not like it either, and that Adah was blushing painfully. It was one of those attempted witticisms that must be simply ignored.

My anxiety now was to get back to my room as speedily as possible. Again I had overrated myself. The excitement of the effort was gone, and my heart was like lead. I, too, would no longer permit my eyes to rest even a moment on one whose ever-present image was only too vivid in spite of my constant effort to think of something else; for so complete was my enthralment that it was intolerable pain to see her the object of another man's preferred attentions. I knew it was all right; I was not jealous in the ordinary sense of the word; I merely found myself unable longer, in my weak condition, to endure in her presence the consequences of my fatal blunder. Therefore I saw with pleasure that I might in a few moments have a chance to slip back to my refuge as quietly as I had left it. Mrs. Yocomb was summoned to the kitchen; a farm labourer was inquiring for her husband, and he and Reuben went out toward the barn. Adah would have lingered, but the two children pulled her away to the swing.

Mr. Hearn and Miss Warren stood by me a moment or two as I sat on the lounge in the hall, and then the former said, "Emily, this is just the time for a twilight walk. Come, and shew me the old garden; and he took her away, with an air of proprietorship at which I sickened, to that place consecrated by my first conscious vision of the woman that I hoped would be my fair love.

The moment they were off the porch I tottered to the stairway, and managed to reach the turn of the landing, and there my strength failed, and I held on to the railing for support, feeling ill and faint. A light step came quickly through the hall and up the stairway.

"Why, Mr. Morton!" exclaimed Miss Warren, "you are not going up so soon?"

"Yes, thank you, I managed to say cheerily. "Invalids must be prudent. I'm only resting on the landing a little."

"I found it rather cool and damp, and so came back for a shawl," she exclaimed, and passed on up to her room, for she seemed a little embarrassed at meeting me on the stairs.

In her absence I made a desperate effort to go on, but found that I would fail. I must wait till she returned, and then crawl up the best I could.

"You see I'm prudence personified," I laughed, as she came back. "I'm taking it so leisurely that I have even sat down about it."

"Are you not overtaking yours if?" she asked gently. "I fear—"

"Oh, no, indeed—will sleep all the better for a change. Mr. Hearn is waiting for you, and the twilight isn't. Don't worry; I'll surpass Samson in a week."

She looked at me keenly, and hesitatingly passed down the dusky stairway. Then I turned and tried to crawl on, eager to gain my room without revealing my condition; but when I reached the topmost stair it seemed that I could not go any farther if my life depended on it. With an irritable imprecation on my weakness, I sank down on the topmost step.

"Mr. Morton," said a low voice, "why did you try to deceive me. You have gone far beyond your strength."

"You here—you of all others," I broke out, in tones of exasperation. "I meant that your first evening should be without a shadow, and have failed, as I now fail in everything. Call Reuben."

"Let me help you?" she pleaded, in the same hurried voice.

"No," I replied harshly, and I leaned heavily against the wall. She held out her hand to aid me, but I would not take it.

"I've no right even to look at you—I who have been doubly enjoined to cherish such a scrupulous sense of honour. I'd better have died a thousand times. Call Reuben."

"How can I leave you so ill and unhappy!" and she made a gesture of protest and distress whose strong effect was only intensified by the obscurity. "I had hoped—you led me to think to-night—"

"That I was a weather-vane. Thank you."

Steps were heard entering the hall.

"Oh! oh!" she exclaimed, in bitter protest.

"Emily," called the banker's voice, "are you not very long?"

I seized her hand to detain her, and said, in a fierce whisper, "Never so humiliate me as to let him know. Go at once; some one will find me."

"Your hand is like ice," she breathed.

I ignored her presence, leaned back, and closed my eyes.

She paused a single instance longer, and then, with a firm, decisive bearing, turned and passed quietly down the stairway.

"What in the world has kept you?" Mr. Hearn asked, a trifle impatiently.

"Can you tell me where Reuben is?" she answered, in a clear, firm voice, that she knew I must hear.

"What does thee want, Emily?" cried Reuben from the piazza.

"Mr. Morton wishes to see you," she replied, in the same tone that she would have used had my name been Mrs. Yocomb's, and then she passed out with her affianced.

Reuben almost ran over me as he came bounding up the stairs.

"Hold on, old fellow," I whispered, and I pulled him down beside me. "Can you keep a secret? I'm played out—Reuben—to speak elegantly—and I don't wish a soul to know it. I'm sitting very comfortably on this step—you see—that's the way it looks—but I'm stuck—hard aground—you'll have to tow me off. But not a word, remember. Lift me up—let me get my arm around your neck—there. Lucky I'm not heavy—slow and easy now—that's it. Ah, thank the Lord! I'm in my refuge again. I felt like a scotched snake that couldn't wriggle back to its hole. Hand me that brandy there—like a good fellow. Now I won't keep you—any longer. If you care—for me never speak of this."

"Please let me tell mother?"

"No, indeed."

"But doesn't Emily Warren know?"

"She knows I wanted to see you."

"Please let me do something or get thee something."

"No; just leave me to myself a little while, and I'll be all right. Go at once, that's a good fellow."

"Oh, Richard, thee shouldn't have come down. Thee looks so pale and sick that I'm afraid thee'll die yet. If thee does, thee'll break all our hearts," and the warm-hearted boy burst out crying, and ran and locked himself in his room.

I was not left alone very long, for Mrs. Yocomb soon entered, saying,

"I'm glad thee' so prudent, and has returned to thy room. Thee acted very generously to-night, and I appreciate it. I had no idea thee could be so strong and carry it out so well. Emily was greatly surprised, but she enjoyed her first evening far more than she otherwise could have done, for she's one of the most kind-hearted, sensitive girls I ever knew. I do believe it would have killed her if thee hadn't got well. But thee looks kind of weak and faint, as far as I can see. Let me light the lamp for thee."

"No, Mrs. Yocomb, I like the dusk best. The light draws moths. They will come, you know, the stupid things, though certain to be scorched. One in the room at a time is enough. Don't worry—I'm a little tired—that's all. Sleep is all I need."

"Is thee sure?"

"Yes, indeed; don't trouble about me. You won't know me in a few days."

"Thee was a brave, generous man to-night, Richard. I understood the effort thee was making, and I think Emily did. A good conscience ought to make thee sleep well."

I laughed very bitterly as I said, "My conscience is gutta serena to-night, through and through, but please say no more, or I'll have to shuck you again. I'll be in a better mood to-morrow."

"Well, good-night. Thee'll excuse a house-keeper on Saturday evening. If thee want's anything, ring thy bell."

She came and stroked my brow gently for a moment, and then breathed softly.

"God bless thee, Richard. May the Sabbath's peace quiet thy heart to-morrow."

CHAPTER X.—IN THE DEPTHS.

I awoke late Sunday morning and found Reuben watching beside me.

"Thee's better, isn't thee?" he asked eagerly.

"Well, I ought to be. You're a good fellow, Reuben. What time is it—nearly night again, I hope."

"Oh, no, its only about eleven; they're all gone to meeting. I made 'em leave you in my care. Adah would have stayed, but mother told her she was to go. Emily Warren's grandfather wanted to go spooning off in the woods, but she made him go to meeting too. I don't see how she ever came to like him, with his grand airs."

"She has good reasons, rest assured."

"Well, he ain't the kind of a man I'd go for if I was a girl."

"Miss Warren is not the girl to go for any man, Reuben. He had to seek her long and patiently. But that's their affair—we have nothing to do with it."

"I thought thee was taken with her at first," said Reuben innocently.

"I do admire Miss Warren very much—now as much as ever. I admire a great many ladies, especially your mother. I never knew a truer, kinder lady."

"And if it had not been for thee, Richard, she might have been burned up," and tears came into his eyes.

"Oh, no Reuben. You could have got them all out easily enough."

"I fear I would have lost my head."

"No, you wouldn't; you are not of that kind. Please say no more about that affair. I've heard too much of it."

"Does thee think thee'll be able to come down to dinner? Mother and father and all of us will be awfully disappointed if thee isn't."

"Yes, I'll come down if you'll stand by me, and help me back when I give you the wink. I won't go down till dinner's ready; after its over you can help me out under some tree. I'm just wild to get out of doors."

I had a consuming desire to retrieve myself, and prove that I was not weakness personified, and I passed through the ordeal of dinner much better than I expected. Mr. Hearn was benignness itself, but I saw that he kept a keen eye on me. The shrewd Wall Street man had the eye of an eagle when his interests were concerned, and he very naturally surmised that no one could have seen so much of Miss Warren as I had, and still remain entirely indifferent; besides, he may have detected something in my manner, or imagined that the peculiar events of the past few weeks had made us better acquainted than he cared to have us.

Miss Warren's greeting was cordial, but her manner toward me was so quiet and natural that he had no cause for complaint, and I felt that I had rather be drawn asunder by wild horses than give him a clew to my feelings. I took a seat next to Mr. Yocomb, and we chatted quietly most of the time. The old gentleman was greatly pleased about something, and it soon came out that Mr. Hearn had promised him five hundred dollars to put a new roof on the meeting-house and make other improvements. I drew all the facts readily from the zealous friend, together with quite a history of the old meeting-house, for I proposed to make a complimentary item of the matter in my paper, well knowing how grateful such incense was to the banker's soul. Mr. Hearn, who sat nearest to us, may have heard my questions and divined my purpose, for he was peculiarly gracious.

I was not able to do very much justice to Mrs. Yocomb's grand dinner, but was unstinted in my praise. The banker made amends for my inability, and declared he had never enjoyed such a repast even at Delmonico's. I thought Miss Warren's appetite flagged a little, but to the utmost extent of my power I kept my eyes and thoughts from her.

After dinner Reuben helped me to a breezy knoll behind the dwelling, and spreading some robes from the carriage-house under a wide-branching tree, left me, at my request, to myself. The banker now had his way, and carried Miss Warren off to a distant grove. I would not look at them as they went down the lane together, but shut my eyes and tried to breathe in life and health.

Adah read to the two little girls for some time, and then came hesitatingly toward me. I feigned sleep, for I was too weak and miserable to treat the girl as she deserved. She stood irresolutely a moment or two, and then slowly and lingeringly returned to the house.

My feigning soon became reality, and when I awoke Reuben was sitting beside me, and I found had covered me well to guard against the dampness of the declining day.

"You are always on hand when I need you most," I said smilingly. "I think I will go back to my room now, while able to make a respectable retreat."

I saw Mr. Hearn and Miss Warren entering the house, and thought they had had a long afternoon together, but that time no doubt had passed more quick with them than with me, even though I had slept for hours. When reaching the parlour door I saw Miss Warren at the piano; she turned so quickly as almost to give me the impression that she was waiting to intercept me.

"Would you not like to hear your favourite nocturne again?" she asked, with a friendly smile.

I hesitated, and half entered the parlour. Her face seemed to light up with pleasure at my compliance. How divine she appeared in the quaint, simple room! I felt that I would gladly give the best years of my life for the right to sit there and feast my eyes on a grace and beauty that to me were indescribable and irresistible; but the heavy tread of the banker in the adjoining room reminded me that I had no right—that to see her and to listen would soon become unendurable pain. I had twice been taught my weakness.

"Thank you," I said, with a short, dry laugh; "I'm sorely tempted, but it's time I learned that for me discretion is certainly the better part of valour," and I turned away, but not too soon to see that her face grew sad and wistful.

"Heaven bless her kind heart!" I murmured as I wearily climbed the stairs.

Adah brought me up my supper long before the others