

CHOICE LITERATURE.

A KNIGHT OF THE XIX. CENTURY.

BY REV. E. F. ROE, AUTHOR OF "FROM FIRST TO LAST."

CHAPTER XV.—HALDANE'S RESOLVE.

It was not in accordance with nature nor with Haldane's peculiar temperament that he should remain long under a stony paralysis of shame and despair. Though tall and man-like in appearance, he was not a man. Boyish traits and impulses still lingered; indeed, they had been fostered and maintained longer than usual by a fond and indulgent mother. It was not an evidence of weakness, but rather a wholesome instinct of nature that his thoughts should gradually find courage to go to that mother as his only source of comfort and help. She, at least, would not scorn him, and with her he might find a less dismal refuge than his narrow cell, should it be possible to escape imprisonment. If it were not, he was too young and unacquainted with misfortune not to long for a few kind words of comfort.

He did not even imagine that Mrs. Arnot, the wife of his employer, would come near him in his deep disgrace. Even the thought of her kindness and his requital of it now stung him to the quick, and he fairly writhed as he pictured to himself the scorn that must have been on Larva's face as she saw him on his way to prison like a common thief.

As he remembered how full of rich promise life was but a few days since, and how all had changed even more swiftly and unexpectedly than the grotesque events of a horrid dream, he bowed his head in his hands and sobbed like a grief-stricken child.

"O mother, mother!" he groaned, "if I could only hear your voice and feel your touch, a little of this crushing weight might be lifted off my heart!"

Growing calmer after a time, he was able to consider his situation more connectedly, and he was about to summon the sheriff in charge of the prison that he might telegraph his mother, when he heard her voice, as in the company of that official she was seeking her way to him.

He shrank back in his cell. His heart beat violently as he heard the rustle of her dress. The sheriff unlocked the grated iron door which led to the long, narrow corridor into which the cells opened, and to which prisoners had access during the day.

"He's in that cell, ladies," said the officer's voice, and then, with commendable delicacy, he withdrew, having first ordered the prisoners in his charge to their cells.

"Lean upon my arm," urged a gentle voice, which Haldane recognized as that of Mrs. Arnot.

"O, this is awful!" moaned the stricken woman; "this is more than I can endure."

The pronoun she used threw a chill on the heart of her son, but when she tottered to the door of his cell he sprang forward with the low, appealing cry,

"Mother!"

But the poor gentlewoman was so overcome that she sank down on a bench by the door, and with her face buried in her hands, as if to shut out a vision that would blast her, she rocked back and forth in anguish, as she groaned,

"O Egbert, Egbert! you have disgraced me, you have disgraced your sisters, you have disgraced yourself beyond remedy. O God! what have I done to merit this awful, this overwhelming disaster?"

With deep pain and solicitude Mrs. Arnot watched the young man's face as the light from the grated window fell upon it. The appeal that trembled in his voice had been more plainly manifest in his face, which had worn an eager and hopeful expression, and even suggested the spirit of the little child when in some painful emergency it turns to its first and natural protector.

But most marked was the change caused by the mother's lamentable want of tact and self-control, for that same face became stony and sullen. Instead of showing a spirit which deep distress and crushing disaster had made almost child-like in its readiness to receive a mother's comfort once more, he suddenly became, in appearance, a hardened criminal.

Mrs. Arnot longed to undo, by her kindness, the evil which her friend was unwittingly causing, but could not come between mother and son. She stooped down, however, and whispered,

"Mrs. Haldane, speak kindly to your boy. He looked to you for sympathy. Do not let him feel that you, like the world, are against him."

"O no," said Mrs. Haldane, her sobs ceasing somewhat, "I mean to do my duty by him. He shall always have a good home; but oh, what a blight and a shadow he has brought to that home! That I should ever have lived to see this day! O Egbert, Egbert your sisters will have to live like nuns, for they can never even go out upon the street again; and to think that the finger of scorn should be pointed after you in the city where your father made your name so honourable!"

"It never shall be," said Haldane coldly. "You have only to leave me in prison to be rid of me a long time."

"Leave you in prison!" exclaimed his mother; "I would as soon stay here myself. No; through Mrs. Arnot's kindness, arrangements are made for your release. I shall then take you to our miserable home as soon as possible."

"I am not going home."

"Now, this is too much. What will you do?"

"I shall remain in this city," he replied, speaking from an angry impulse. "It was here I fell, and covered myself with shame, and I shall here fight my way back to the position I lost. The time shall come when you will no longer say I'm a disgrace to you and my sisters. My heart was breaking, and the first word you greet me with is 'disgrace'; and if I went home disgrace would always be in your mind if not upon your tongue. I should have the word and thought kept before me till I went mad. If I go home all my old acquaintances would sneer at me as a mean-spirited cur, whose best exploit was to get into gaol, and when his mother obtained his release he could do nothing more

manly than hide behind her apron the rest of his days. As far as I can judge, you and my sisters would have no better opinion of me. I have been a wicked fool, I admit, but I was not a deliberate thief. I did hope for a little comfort from you. But since all the world is against me, I'll face and fight the world. I have been dragged through these streets, the scorn of everyone, and I will remain in this city until I compel the respect of its proudest citizen."

The moment he ceased his passionate utterance, Mrs. Arnot said kindly and gravely,

"Egbert, you are mistaken. There was no scorn in my eyes, but rather deep pity and sorrow. While your course has been very wrong, you have no occasion to despair, and as long as you will try to become a true man you shall have my sympathy and friendship. You do not understand your mother. She loves you as truly as ever, and is willing to make any sacrifice for you. Only her fuller knowledge of the world makes her realize more truly than you can yet the consequences of your act. The sudden shock has overwhelmed her. Her distress shows how deeply she is wounded, and you should try to comfort her by a lifetime of kindness."

"The best way I can comfort her is by deeds that will wipe out the memory of my disgrace; and," he continued, his impulsive, sanguine spirit kindling with the thought and prospect, "I will regain all and more than I have lost. The time shall come when neither she nor my sisters will have occasion to blush for me, nor to seclude themselves from the world because of their relation to me."

"I should think my heart was sufficiently crushed and broken already," Mrs. Haldane sobbed, "without your adding to its burden by charging me with being an unnatural mother. I cannot understand how a boy brought up as religiously as you have been can show such strange depravity. The idea that a child of mine could do anything which would bring him to such a place as this!"

His mother's words and manner seemed to exasperate her son beyond endurance, and he exclaimed passionately:

"Well, curse it all! I am here. What's the use of harping on that any longer? Can't you listen when I say I want to retrieve myself? As to my religious bringing up, it never did me a particle of good. If you had whipped my infernal nonsense out of me, and made me mind when I was little. There, there, mother," he concluded more considerably, as she began to grow hysterical under his words, "do, for God's sake, be more composed! We can't help what has happened now. I'll either change the world's opinion of me or else get out of it."

"How can I be composed when you talk in so dreadful a manner? You can't change the world's opinion. It never forgives and never forgets. It's the same as if you had said I'll either do what is impossible or throw away my life!"

"My dear Mrs. Haldane," said Mrs. Arnot gently but firmly, "your just and natural grief is such that you cannot now judge correctly and wisely concerning this matter. The emergency is so unexpected and so grave that neither you nor your son should form opinions or make resolves until there has been time for calmer thought. Let me take you home with me now, and as soon as Egbert is released he can join you there."

"No, Mrs. Arnot," said Haldane decidedly; "I shall never enter your parlour again until I can enter it as a gentleman—as one whom your other guests, should I meet them, would recognize as a gentleman. Your kindness is as great as it is unexpected, but I shall take no mean advantage of it."

"Well, then," said Mrs. Arnot, with a sigh, "nothing can be gained by prolonging this painful interview. We are detaining Mr. Melville, and delaying Egbert's release. Come, Mrs. Haldane; I can take you to the private entrance of a quiet hotel, where you can be entirely secluded until you are ready to return home. Egbert can come there as soon as the needful legal forms are complied with."

"No," said the young man, with his former decision, "mother and I must take leave of each other here; mother wants no gaol-birds calling on her at the hotel. When I have regained my social footing—when she is ready to take my arm and walk up Main street of this city—then she shall see me as often as she wishes. It was my own cursed folly that brought me to the gutter, and if mother will pay the price of my freedom, I will alone and unaided, make my way back among the highest and proudest."

"I sincerely hope you may win such a position," said Mrs. Arnot gravely, "and it is not impossible for you to do so; though I wish you would make the attempt in a different spirit; but please remember that these considerations do not satisfy and comfort a mother's heart. You should think of all her past kindness: you should realize how deeply you have now wounded her, and strive with tenderness and patience to mitigate the blow."

"Mother, I am sorry, more sorry than you can ever know," he said, advancing to her side and taking her hand, "and I have been bitterly punished, but I did not mean to do what I did; I was drunk."

"Drunk!" gasped the mother. "Merciful Heaven!"

"Yes, drunk—may the next drop of wine I take choke me!—and I did not know what I was doing. But do not despair of me. I feel that I have it in me to make a man yet. Go now with Mrs. Arnot and aid her in her kind efforts to procure my release. When you have succeeded, return home, and think of me as well as you can until I make you think better," and he raised and kissed her with something like tenderness, and then placed within Mrs. Arnot's arm the hand of the poor weak woman, who had become so faint and exhausted from her conflicting emotions that she submitted to be led away after a feeble remonstrance.

Mrs. Arnot sent Mr. Melville to the prisoner, and also the food she had brought. She then took Mrs. Haldane to a hotel, where, in the seclusion of her room, she could have every attention and comfort. With many reassuring words she promised to call later in the day, and if possible bring with her the unhappy cause of the poor gentlewoman's distress.

CHAPTER XVI.—THE IMPULSES OF WOUNDED PRIDE.

That which at first was little more than an impulse, caused by wounded pride, speedily developed into a settled purpose, and Haldane would leave his prison cell fully bent on achieving great things. In accordance with a tendency in impulsive natures, he reacted from something like despair into quite a sanguine and heroic mood. He would "face and fight the world, aye, and conquer it, too." He would go out into the streets which had witnessed his disgrace, and, penniless, empty-handed, dowered only with shame, he would prove his manhood by winning a position that would compel respect and more than respect.

Mrs. Arnot, who returned immediately to the prison, was puzzled to know how to deal with him. She approved of his resolution to remain in Hillaton, and of his purpose to regain respect and position on the very spot, as it were, where, by his crime and folly, he had lost both. She was satisfied that such a course promised far better for the future than a return to his mother's luxurious home. With all its beauty and comfort it would become to him almost inevitably a slough, both of "despond," and of dissipation—dissipation of the worst and most hopeless kind, wherein the victim's ruling motive is to get rid of self. The fact that the young man was capable of turning upon and facing a scornful and hostile world was a good and hopeful sign. If he had been willing to slink away with his mother, bent only on escape from punishment and on the continuance of animal enjoyment, Mrs. Arnot would have felt that his nature was not sufficiently leavened with manhood to give hope of reform.

But while his action did suggest hope, it also contained elements of discouragement. She did not find fault with what he proposed to do, but with the spirit in which he was entering on his most difficult task. His knowledge of the world was so crude and partial that he did not at all realize the herculean labour that he now became eager to attempt; and he was bent on accomplishing everything in a way that would minister to his own pride, and proposed to be under obligations to no one.

Mrs. Arnot, with her deep and long experience, knew how vitally important it is that human endeavour should be supplemented by divine aid, and she sighed deeply as she saw that the young man not only ignored this need, but did not even seem conscious of it. Religion was to him a matter of form and profession, to which he was utterly indifferent. The truth that God helps the distressed as a father helps and comforts his child, was a thought that made no impression on him whatever. God and all relating to Him were abstractions, and he felt that the emergency was too pressing, too imperative, for considerations that had no practical and immediate bearing upon his present success.

Indeed, such was his pride and self-confidence that he refused to receive from Mrs. Arnot, and even from his mother, anything more than the privilege of going out empty-handed into the city which was to become the arena of his future exploits.

He told Mrs. Arnot the whole story, and she had hoped that she could place his folly and crime before him in its true moral aspects, and by dealing faithfully, yet kindly, with him, awaken his conscience. But she had the tact to discover very soon that such effort was now worse than useless. It was not his conscience, but his pride that had been chiefly wounded. He felt his disgrace, his humiliation, in the eyes of men almost too keenly, and he was consumed with desire to regain society's favour. But he did not feel his sin. To God's opinion of him he scarcely gave a thought. He regarded his wrong act in the light of a sudden and grave misfortune rather than as the manifestation of a soul and inherent disease of his soul. He had lost his good name as a man loses his property, and believed that he, in his own strength, and without any moral change, could regain it.

When parting at the prison, Mrs. Arnot gave him her hand, and said:

"I trust that your hopes may be realized, and your efforts meet with success; but I cannot help warning you that I fear you do not realize what you are attempting. The world is not only very cold, but also suspicious and wary in its disposition toward those who have forfeited its confidence. I cannot learn that you have any definite plans or prospects. I have never been able to accomplish much without God's help. You put only seem to forget your need of Him, but you are not even willing to receive aid from me or your own mother. I honour and respect you for making the attempt upon which you are bent, but I fear that pride rather than wisdom is your counsellor in carrying out your resolution, and both God's word and human experience prove that pride goes but a little way before a fall."

"I have reached a depth," replied Haldane, bitterly, "from whence I cannot fall; and it will be hereafter some consolation to remember that I was not lifted out of the mire, but that I got out. If I cannot climb up again it were better I perished in the gutter of my shame."

"I am sorry, Egbert, that you cut yourself off from the most hopeful and helpful relations which you can ever sustain. A father helps his children through their troubles, and so God is desirous of helping us. There are some things which we cannot do alone—it is not meant that we should. God is ever willing to help those who are down, and Christians are not worthy of the name unless they are also willing. It is our duty to make every effort of which we ourselves are capable, but this is only half our duty. Since our tasks are beyond our strength and ability, we are equally bound to receive such human aid as God sends us, and, chief of all, to ask daily, and sometimes hourly, that His strength be made perfect in our weakness. But there are some lessons which are only learned by experience. I shall feel deeply grieved if you do not come or send for me in any emergency or time of special need. In parting, I have one favour to ask, and I think I have a right to ask it. I wish you to go and see your mother, and spend at least one hour with her before she returns home. As a matter of manly duty, be kind and gentle. Remember how deeply you have wounded her, and that you are under the most sacred obligations to endure patiently all reproaches and expressions of grief. If you will do this you will do much to regain my respect, and it will be