

CHOICE LITERATURE.

FROM JEST TO EARNEST.

BY REV. E. P. ROE.

CHAPTER II.—THE VICTIM.

Frank Hemstead was expected on the evening train from the north, so that the conspirators would not have long to wait. To pass the brief intervening time Lottie went to the piano and gave them some music like herself, brilliant dashing, off-hand, but devoid of sentiment and feeling. Then she sprang up and began playing the maddest pranks on languid Bel, and with Addie was soon engaged in a romp with De Forrest and Harcourt, that would have amazed the most festive Puritan that ever schooled or masked a frolicsome nature under the sombre deportment required. The young men took their cue from the ladies, and elegance and propriety were driven away in shreds before the gale of their wild spirits. Poor Bel! buffeted and helpless, half-enjoying, half-frightened, protested, cried, and laughed at the tempest around her.

"I mean," said Lottie, panting after a desperate chase among the furniture, "to have one more spree, like the toppers before they reform."

Though these velvety creatures, with their habits of grace and elegance could romp without roughness, and glide where others would tear around, they could not keep their revel so quiet but that hurrying steps were heard. Bel warned them, and before Mrs. Marchmont could enter, Lottie was playing a waltz, and the others appeared as if they had been dancing. The lady of precedent smiled, whereas if she had come a moment earlier she would have been horrified.

But the glow from the hearth, uncertain enough for their innocent deeds of darkness, had now to fade away before the chandelier, and Mrs. Marchmont, somewhat surprised at the rumpled plumage of the young ladies, and the fact that Mr. De Forrest's neck-tie was awry, suggested that they retire and prepare for supper, whereat they retreated in literal disorder. But without the door their old frenzy seized them, and they nearly ran over the dilatory Bel upon the stairs. With sallies of nonsense, smothered laughter, a breezy rustle of garments, and the rush of swift motion, they seemed to die away in the upper halls as might a summer gust. To Mrs. Marchmont they had vanished like a suppressed whirlwind.

"The young people of my day were more decorous," soliloquized the lady complacently. "But then the De Forrests have French blood in them, and what else could you expect? It's he that sets them off."

The approaching sound of sleigh-bells hastened the young people's toilets, and when they descended the stairs, this time like a funeral procession, a tall figure, with one side that had been to the wind-ward well sifted over with snow, was just entering the hall.

Mrs. Marchmont welcomed him with as much warmth as she ever permitted herself to show. She was a good and kind lady at heart, only she insisted upon covering the natural bloom and beauty of her nature with the artificial enamel of mannerism and conventionality. During the unwrapping process the young people stood in the back-ground, but Lottie watched the emergence from overcoat and muffler of the predestined victim of her wiles with more than ordinary curiosity.

The first thing that impressed her was his unusual height, and the next a certain awkwardness and angularity. When he came to be formally presented, his diffidence and lack of ease were quite marked. Bel greeted him with a distant inclination of her head. De Forrest also vouchsafed merely one of his slightest bows, while Harcourt stood so far away that he was scarcely introduced at all; but Lottie went demurely forward and put her warm hand in his great cold one, and said, looking up shyly:

"I think we are sort of cousins, are we not?"

He blushed to the roots of his hair and stammered that he hoped so.

Indeed, this exquisite vision appearing from the shadows of the hall, and claiming kinship, might have disconcerted a polished society man; and the conspirators retired back into the gloom to hide their merriment.

As the stranger, in his bashful confusion, did not seem to know for the moment what to do with her hand, and was inclined to keep it, for in fact it was warming, or rather, electrifying him, she withdrew it, exclaiming:

"How cold you are! You must come with me to the fire at once."

He followed her with a rather bewildered expression, but his large gray eyes were full of gratitude for her supposed kindness, even if his unready tongue was slow in making graceful acknowledgment.

"Supper will be ready in a few moments Frank," said his aunt, approaching them and rather wondering at Lottie's friendliness. "Perhaps you had better go at once to your room and prepare. You will find it warm," as she glanced significantly at his rumpled hair and general appearance of disorder, the natural results of a long journey.

He started abruptly, blushed as if conscious of having forgotten something, and timidly said to Lottie:

"Will you excuse me?"

"Yes," she replied sweetly, "or a little while."

He again blushed deeply and for a second indulged in a shy glance of curiosity at the "cousin" who spoke so kindly. Then, as if guilty of impropriety, he seized a huge carpet-bag as if it were a lady's reticule. But remembering that her eyes were upon him, he tried to cross the hall and mount the stairs with dignity. The great leather bag did not conduce to this, and he succeeded in appearing awkward in the extreme, and had a vague, uncomfortable impression that such was the case.

Mrs. Marchmont having disappeared into the dining-room, the young people went off into silent convulsions of laughter, in which even Bel joined, though she said she knew it was wrong.

"He is just the one of all the world on whom to play such a joke," said Lottie, pirouetting into the parlor.

"It was capital!" chimed in De Forrest. "Lottie, you would make a star actress."

"He has an intelligent eye," continued she, a little more thoughtfully. "He may be able to see more than we think. I insist that you all be very careful. Aunt will suspect something, if he doesn't, and may put him on his guard."

Mr. Hemstead soon appeared, for it was plain that his toilets were exceedingly simple. The elegance wanting in his manners was still more clearly absent from his dress. The material was good, but had evidently been put together by a country tailor, who limped a long way behind the latest mode. What was worse, his garments were scarcely ample enough for his stalwart form. Altogether he made in some externals, a marked contrast to the city exquisite, who rather enjoyed standing beside him that this contrast might be seen.

To Lottie he appeared excessively comical as he stalked in and around, trying vainly to appear at ease. And yet the thought occurred to her, "If he only knew what to do with his colossal proportions—knew how to manage them—he would make an imposing looking man." And when De Forrest posed beside him just before they went out to tea, even this thought flashed across her, "Julian seems like an elegant mannikin beside a man." If De Forrest had only known it, the game of contrasts was not wholly in his favor.

But poor Mr. Hemstead came to grief on his way to the supper room. Miss Marchmont tried to disguise her diminutive stature by a long trailing dress. Upon this he placed his by no means delicate foot, as she was sweeping out with Mr. Harcourt. There was an ominous sound of parting stitches, and an abrupt period in the young lady's graceful progress. In his eager haste to remedy his awkwardness, he bumped up against Mr. Dimmerly, who was advancing to speak to him, with a force that nearly overthrew that dapper gentleman, and rendered his uncle's greeting rather peculiar. Hemstead felt, to his intense annoyance, that the young people were at the point of exploding with merriment at his expense, and was in a state of mingled indignation at himself and them. His aunt and Mr. Dimmerly, who soon recovered himself, were endeavouring to look serenely unconscious, but with partial success. All seemed to feel as if they were over a mine of discourteous laughter. The unfortunate object looked nervously around for the beautiful "cousin," and noted with a sigh of relief that she had disappeared.

"I hope she did not see my meeting with uncle," he thought. "I was always a gawk in society, and to-night seem possessed with the very genius of awkwardness. She is the only one who has shown me any real kindness, and I don't want her to think of me only as a blundering, tongue-tied fool."

He would not have been reassured had he known that Lottie, having seen all, had darted back into the parlor and was leaning against the piano, a quivering, and for the moment, a helpless subject of suppressed mirth. Mr. Dimmerly was always a rather comical object to her, and his flying arms and spectacles as he tried to recover himself from the rude shock of his nephew's burly form, made a scene in which absurdity, which is said to be the chief cause of laughter, was pre-eminent.

But the paroxysm passing, she followed them and took a seat opposite her victim, with a demure sweetness and repose of manner that was well-nigh fatal to the conspirators.

As Mr. Hemstead was regarded as a clergyman, though not quite through with his studies, his aunt looked to him for the saying of grace. It was a trying ordeal for the young fellow under the circumstances. He shot a quick glance at Lottie, which she returned with a look of serious expectation, then dropped her eyes and veiled a different expression under the long lashes. But he was sorely embarrassed, and stammered out he scarcely knew what. A suppressed titter from Addie Marchmont and the young men was the only response he heard, and it was not reassuring. He heartily wished himself back in Michigan, but was comforted by seeing Lottie looking gravely and reproachfully at the irreverent giggles.

"She is a good Christian girl," he thought, "and while the others ridicule my wretched embarrassment, she sympathizes."

Hemstead was, himself, as open as the day and equally unsuspecting of others. He believed just what he saw, and saw only what was clearly apparent. Therefore Lottie, by tolerably fair acting, would have no difficulty in deceiving him, and she was proving herself equal to very skillful feigning. Indeed she was one who could do anything fairly that she heartily attempted.

A moment after "grace"—Harcourt made a poor witticism, at which the majority laughed with an immoderateness quite disproportionate. Mrs. Marchmont and her brother joined in the mirth, though evidently vexed with themselves that they did. Even Hemstead saw that Harcourt's remark was but the transparent excuse for the inevitable laugh at his expense. Lottie looked around with an expression of mingled surprise and displeasure, which nearly convulsed those in the secret. But her aunt and uncle felt themselves justly rebuked, while wondering greatly at Lottie's unwonted virtue. But there are times when to laugh is a dreadful necessity, whatever be the consequences.

"Mr. Hemstead," said Lottie, gravely, beginning, as she supposed, with the safe topic of the weather, "in journeying East have you come to a colder or a warmer climate?"

"Decidedly into a colder one," he answered significantly.

"Indeed, that rather surprises me!"

"Well, I believe that the thermometer has marked lower with us, but it has been said, justly I think, that we do not feel the cold at the West as at the East."

"No matter," she said sweetly. "At the East, as in the West, the cold is followed by thaws and spring."

He looked up quickly and gratefully, but only remarked, "It's a change we all welcome."

"Not I, for one," said Mr. Harcourt. "Give me a clear, steady cold. Thaws and spring are synonymous with the sloppy season or sentimental stage."

"I, too, think steady cold is better in the season of it," remarked Mr. Dimmerly, sententiously.

"But how about it out of season, uncle?" asked Lottie.

"Your hint, perhaps, is seasonable, Lottie," quietly remarked her aunt, though with somewhat heightened color. "I trust we shall keep the steady cold out of doors, and that all our guests will find only summer warmth within."

"Really, auntie, you put me in quite a melting mood."

"No need of that, Lottie, for you are the month of June all the year round," said her aunt.

"The month of April, rather," suggested Bel.

"I should say July or August," added Mr. Dimmerly, laughing.

"Would you not say November?" asked Lottie of Mr. Hemstead.

"Yes, I think so," he replied with a blush, "for Thanksgiving comes in that month."

There was a general laugh, and Mr. Dimmerly chuckled, "Very good, you are getting even, Frank."

"I hardly understand your compliment, if it is one," said Lottie demurely. "Is it because you are so fond of sermons or dinners that Thanksgiving glorifies the dreary month of November?"

"Neither a sermon nor a dinner is always a just cause for Thanksgiving," he replied with a pleasant light in his gray eyes.

"Then where is the force of your allusion?" she said, with a face innocently blank.

"Well," replied he, hesitatingly, and blushing deeply, "perhaps my thought was that you might be an occasion for Thanksgiving if both sermon and dinner were wanting."

Again there was a general laugh, but his aunt said, "Frank, Frank, have you learned to flatter?"

Lottie shot a quick look of pleased surprise at him, and was much amused at his evident confusion and flaming cheeks. To be sure his words were part of the old complimentary tune that she knew by heart, but his offering was like a flower that had upon it the morning dew. She recognized his grateful effort to repay her for supposed kindness, and saw that, though ill at ease in society, he was not a fool.

"Would it not be better to wait till in possession before keeping a Thanksgiving?" said De Forrest satirically.

"Not necessarily," retorted Hemstead quickly, for the remark was like the light touch of a spur. "I was grateful for the opportunity of seeing a fine picture at Cleveland, on my way here, that I never expect to own."

Lottie smiled. The victim was not helpless. But she turned, and with a spice of coquetry said:

"Still I think you are right Mr. De Forrest."

Then she noted that Mr. Hemstead's eyes were dancing with mirth at her hint to one who was evidently anxious to keep "Thanksgiving" over her any month in the year.

"I am sure I am," replied De Forrest. "I could never be satisfied to admire at a distance. I could not join in a prayer I once heard, 'Lord, we thank thee for this and all other worlds.'"

"Could you?" asked Lottie of Hemstead.

"Why not?"

"That is no answer."

Hemstead was growing more at ease, and when he only had to use his brains was not half so much at a loss as when he must also manage his hands and feet, and he replied laughingly:

"Well, not to put too fine a point upon it, this world is quite useful to me at present. I should be sorry to have it vanish and find myself whirling in space, if I am a rather large body. But as I am soon to get through with this world, though never through with life, I may have a chance to enjoy a good many other worlds—perhaps all of them—before eternity is over, and so be grateful that they exist and are in waiting."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Lottie. "What a traveller you propose to be. I should be satisfied with a trip to Europe."

"To Paris, you mean," said Bel.

"Yes," replied Mr. Hemstead, "until the trip was over."

"Then I trust she will be content with New York," insinuated De Forrest; "for Mr. Hemstead speaks as if the stars were created for his especial benefit."

"You are enjoying some honey, Mr. De Forrest?" said Hemstead, quietly.

"Yes."

"Did the flowers grow and the bees gather for your especial benefit?"

"I admit I'm answered."

"But," said sceptical Mr. Harcourt, "when you have got through with this world how do you know but that you will drop off into space?"

"Come," said Addie, rising from the table, "I protest against a sermon before Sunday."

They now returned to the parlor, Hemstead making the transition in safety, but with no little trepidation.

(To be continued.)

PRINCESS BISMARCK.

The wife of Prince Bismarck, Johanna von Puttkammer, of an old and noble Pomeranian family, was born in 1824. He made her acquaintance at the marriage of one of his friends, where she acted as bridesmaid, and two years later—in 1847—he asked her to become his wife. Her family was not at first disposed to accept his proposals. At that time Herr Von Bismarck enjoyed a rather curious reputation. He was surnamed "der tolle Bismarck" (mad Bismarck), and had earned this title by his numerous duels, his daring feats of horsemanship, and some widely-spread anecdotes concerning his attitude generally toward professors, burgomasters and other respectable members of what German students call "Philistine Society." But more especially he owed his surname to the very noisy revels he used to hold with a number of exceedingly loud young men at Kniephof and at Schoenhausen. To quiet, respectable, religious people like the Puttkammers, he did not appear a very eligible suitor for an only beloved child. Bismarck, however, settled the question at once. He walked up to Miss Johanna, and having ascertained by a look that she sided with him, he folded her in his arms and said, turning to her astonished