

## CHOICE LITERATURE.

## A KNIGHT OF THE XIX. CENTURY.

BY REV. E. F. ROR. AUTHOR OF "FROM JEST TO EARNEST."

## CHAPTER VII.—BIRDS OF PREY.

Mr. Arnot in his widely-extended business owned several factories, and in the vicinity of one located at a suburb of New York there were no banking facilities. It was, therefore, his custom at stated times to draw from his bank at Hillaton such amounts in currency as were needed to pay those in his employ at the place indicated, and send the money thither by one of his clerks. Upon the present occasion, in compliance with his wife's request, he decided to send Haldane. He had no hesitation in doing this, as the errand was one that required nothing more than honesty and a little prudence.

"Mr. Haldane," said his employer, in tones somewhat less cold and formal than those habitual with him, "we will let bygones be bygones. I am inclined to think that hereafter you will be disposed to give your thoughts more fully to business, as a man should who proposes to amount to anything in the world. In these envelopes are one thousand dollars in currency. I wish you to place them securely in your breast-pockets, and take the five-thirty train to New York, and from thence early to-morrow go out on the Long Island road to a little station called Arnotville, and give these packages to Mr. Black, the agent in charge of my factory there. Take his receipt, and report to me to-morrow evening. With that amount of money upon your person you will perceive the necessity of prudence and care. Here is a check paying your salary for the past month. The cashier will give you the currency for it. Report your expenses on your return, and they will be paid. As the time is limited, perhaps you can get some lunch at or near the depot."

"I prefer to do so," said Haldane, promptly, "and will try to perform the business to your satisfaction."

Mr. Arnot nodded a cool dismissal, and Haldane started for a hotel restaurant near the depot with a step entirely too quick and elastic for one who must walk henceforth in the shadow of "bitter memories and dark disappointment." The exercise brought colour to his cheek, and there certainly was a sparkle in his dark eyes. It could not be hope, for he had assured himself again and again that "hope was dead in his heart." It might have been caused after his long fast by the anticipation of a lunch at the depot and a petit souper in the city, and the thought of washing both down with a glass of wine, or possibly with several. The relish and complacency with which his mind dwelt on this prospect struck Haldane as rather incongruous in a being as blighted as he supposed himself to be. With his youth, health, and unusually good digestion he would find no little difficulty in carrying out the "gloomy grandeur" scheme, and he began to grow conscious of the fact.

Indeed, in response to a law of nature, he was already inclined to react from his unwonted depression into reckless hilarity. Impulse and inclination were his controlling forces, and he was accustomed to give himself up to them without much effort at self-restraint. And yet he sought to imagine himself consistent, so that he could maintain his self-approval.

"I will hide my despair with laughter," he muttered: "the world cannot know that it is hollow, and but a mask against its vulgar curiosity."

A good cold lunch and a cup of coffee—which he could have obtained at once at the hotel near the depot—would not answer for this victim of despair. Some extra delicacies, which require time for preparation, were ordered. In the meantime he went to the bar for an "appetiser," as he termed it. Here he met an acquaintance among the loungers present, and, of course, asked him to take a social glass also. This personage complied in a manner peculiarly felicitous, and in such a way as to give the impression that his acceptance of the courtesy was a compliment to Haldane. Much practice had made him perfect in this art, and the number of drinks that he was able to secure gratis in the course of a year by being always on hand and by maintaining an air of slight superiority, combined with an appearance of bonhomie and readiness to be social, would have made a remarkable sum total.

Before their glasses clinked together, he said, with the off hand courtesy indigenous to bar-rooms, where acquaintances are made with so little trouble and ceremony:

"Mr. Haldane, my friends from New York, Mr. Van Wink and Mr. Ketchem."

Haldane turned and saw two young men standing conveniently near, who were dressed faultlessly in the style of the day. There was nothing in their appearance to indicate that they did not reside on Fifth Avenue, and indeed they may have had rooms on that fashionable street.

Messrs. Van Wink and Ketchem had also a certain air of superiority, and they shook hands with Haldane in a way that implied,

"While we are metropolitan men, we recognize in you an extraordinary fine specimen of the provincial." And the young man was not indifferent to their unspoken flattery. He at once invited them also to state to the smirking bar-tender their preferences among the liquid compounds before them, and soon four glasses clinked together.

With fine and thoughtful courtesy they had chosen the same mixture that he had ordered for himself, and surely some of the milk of human kindness must have been infused in the punches which they imbibed, for Messrs. Van Wink and Ketchem seemed to grow very friendly toward Haldane. Perhaps taking a drink with a man, inspired these worthies with a regard for him similar to that which the social eating of bread creates within the breasts of Bedouins, who, as travellers assert, will protect with their lives a stranger that has sat at their board, but rob and murder, as a matter of course, all who have not enjoyed that distinction. Whatever may have been the cause, the stylish men from the city were evidently pleased with Haldane, and they delicately suggested that he was such an

unusually clever fellow that they were willing to know him better.

"I assure you, Mr. Haldane," protested Mr. Van Wink, "our meeting is an unexpected pleasure. Having completed our business in town, time was hanging heavily on our hands, and it is still a full half-hour before the train leaves."

"Let us drink again to further acquaintance," said Mr. Ketchem, cordially, evincing a decided disposition to be friendly; "Mr. Haldane is in New York occasionally, and we would be glad to meet him and help him pass a pleasant hour there, as he is enlivening the present hour for us."

Haldane was not cautious by nature, and had been predisposed by training to regard all flattering attention and interest as due to the favourable impression which he supposed himself to make invariably upon those whose judgment was worth anything. It is true there had been one marked and humiliating exception. But the consoling thought now flashed into his mind that perhaps, after all, Miss Romeyn was, as she asserted, but a mere "child," and incapable of appreciating him. The influence of the punch he had drunk, and the immediate and friendly interest manifested by these gentlemen who knew the world, gave a plausible colouring to this explanation of her conduct. After all, was he not judging her too harshly? She had not realized whom she had refused, and when she grew up in mind as well as in form she might be glad to act very differently. "But I may choose to act differently also," was his haughty mental conclusion.

This self-communion took place while the still smirking bar-tender was mixing the decoctions ordered by the cordial and generous Mr. Ketchem. A moment later four glasses again clinked together, and Haldane's first acquaintance—the young man with the air of slight but urbane superiority—felicitated himself that he had "made two free drinks" within a brief space of time.

The effect of the liquor upon Haldane, after his long fast, was far greater than if it had been taken after a hearty meal, and he began to reciprocate the friendliness of the strangers with increasing interest.

"Gentlemen," said he, "our meeting is one of these fortunate incidents which promise much more pleasure to come. I have ordered a little lunch in the dining-room. It will take but a moment for the waiters to add enough for three more, and then we will ride into the city together for my business takes me there this evening also."

"I declare," exclaimed Mr. Van Wink, in a tone of self-gratulation, "were I piously inclined I should be tempted to call our meeting quite providential. But if we lunch with you it must be on condition that you take a little supper with us at the Brunswick after we arrive in town."

"No one could object to such agreeable terms," cried Haldane; "come, let us adjourn to the dining-room. By-the-way, Mr. Bar-tender, send us a bottle of your best claret."

The young man, who an hour before had regarded himself cruelly blighted for life, was quite successful in "hiding his despair with laughter." Indeed, from its loudness and frequency, undue exhilaration was suggested rather than a "secret sorrow." It gave him a fine sense of power and of his manly estate to see the waiters bustling around at his bidding, and to remember that he was the host of three gentlemen who, while very superior in style, and evidently possessed of wealth, still recognized in him an equal with whom they were glad to spend a social hour.

Scarcely ever before had he met anyone who appreciated him as fully as did Messrs. Van Wink and Ketchem, and their courteous deference confirmed a view which he had long held, that only in the large sphere of the metropolis could he find his true level and most congenial companionships. These young men had a style about them which provincials could not imitate. Even the superior gentleman who introduced them to him had a slightly dimmed and tarnished appearance as he sat beside his friends. There was an immaculate finish and newness about all their appointments—not a speck upon their linen, nor a grain of dust upon their broadcloth and polished boots. If the theory be true that character is shown in dress, these men, outwardly so spotless, must be worthy of the confidence with which they had inspired their new acquaintance. They suggested two bright coins just struck from the mint, and "they have the ring of true metal," thought Haldane.

It seemed to the young men that they had just fairly commenced to enjoy their lunch when a prolonged shriek of a locomotive, dying away in the distance, awakened them to a sense of the flight of time. Hastily pulling out his watch, Haldane exclaimed with an oath,

"There goes our train."

Messrs. Van Wink and Ketchem were apparently much concerned.

"Haldane," they exclaimed, "you are much too entertaining a fellow for one to meet when there's a train to be caught."

"This is a serious matter for me," said Haldane, somewhat sobered by the thought of Mr. Arnot's wrath; "I had important business in town."

"Can it not be arranged by telegraph?" asked Mr. Van Wink, in a tone of kindly solicitude.

"One can't send money by telegraph. No; I must go myself."

The eyes of Haldane's three guests met for a second in a way that indicated the confirmation of something in their minds, and yet so evanescent was this glance of intelligence that a cool, close observer would scarcely have detected it, much less their flushed and excited host.

"Don't worry, Haldane," said his first acquaintance; "there is an owl train along at eleven to-night, and you can mail your check or draft on that if you do not care to travel at such an unearthly hour."

"Oh, there is a late train!" cried the young man, much relieved. "Then I'm all right. I am obliged to go myself, as the funds I carry are in such a shape that I cannot mail them."

Again the eyes of his guests met with a furtive gleam of satisfaction.

Now that Haldane felt himself safely out of his dilemma, he began to be solicitous about his companions.

"I fear," he said, "that my poor courtesy can make but small amends for the loss of your train."

"Well, Haldane," said Mr. Ketchem, with great apparent candour, "I speak for myself when I say that I would regret losing this train under most circumstances, but with the prospect of a social evening together I can scarcely say that I do."

"I, too," cried Mr. Van Wink, "am inclined to regard our loss of the train as a happy freak of fortune. Let us take the owl train also," Ketchem, and make a jovial night of it with Mr. Haldane."

"Fill up your glasses and we'll drink to a jolly night," cried Haldane, and all complied with wonderful zest and unanimity. The host, however, was too excited and pre-occupied to note that while Mr. Van Wink and Mr. Ketchem were always ready to have their glasses filled, they never drained them very low, and thus it happened that he and the slightly superior gentleman, who made free drinks one of the chief objects of existence, shared most of the bottle of wine between them.

As the young men rose from the lunch table Haldane called this individual aside and said:

"Harker, I want you to help a fellow out of a scrape. You must know that I was expected to leave town by the five-thirty train. I do not care to be seen in the public rooms, for old cast-iron Arnot might make a row about my delay, even though it will make no difference in his business. Please engage a private room where we can have a bottle of wine and a quiet game of cards, and no one be the wiser."

"Certainly—nothing easier in the world—I know just the room—cosy—off one side—wait a moment, gentlemen."

It seemed but a moment before he returned and led them, preceded by a bell-boy, to just such an apartment as he had described. Though the evening was mild, a fire was lighted in the grate, and as it kindled, it combined with the other appointments to give the apartment an air of luxurious comfort.

"Bring us a bottle of sherry," said Haldane to the bell-boy.

"Also a pack of cards, some fine old brandy and cigars, and charge to me," said Mr. Ketchem; "I wish to have my part in this entertainment. Come, Harker, take a seat."

"Desperately sorry I can't spend the evening with you," said this sagacious personage, who realized with extreme regret that not even for the prospect of unlimited free potations could he afford to risk the loss of his eminent respectability, which he regarded as a capitalist does his principal—something that must be drawn upon charily. Mr. Harker knew that his mission was ended, and, in spite of the order for the sherry and brandy, he had sufficient strength of mind to retire. In delicate business transactions like the one under consideration he made it a point to have another engagement when matters got about as far along as they now were in Haldane's case. If anything unpleasant occurred between parties whom he introduced to each other, and he was summoned as a witness, he grew so exceedingly dignified and superior in his bearing that everyone felt like asking his pardon for their suspicions. He always proved an alibi, and left the court-room with the air of an injured man. As people, however, became familiar with his haunts and habits, there was an increasing number who regarded his virtuous assumptions and professions of ignorance in respect to certain cases of swindling with incredulous smiles.

Mr. Harker, however, could not tear himself away till the brandy and sherry appeared, and, after paying his respects to both, went to keep his engagement, which consisted in lounging about another hotel on the other side of the depot.

Messrs. Van Wink and Ketchem of course both knew how to deal the cards, and with apologetic laughter the young men put up small stakes at first, just to give zest to the amusement. Haldane lost the first game, won the second and third, lost again, had streaks of good and bad luck so skillfully intermingled that the thought often occurred to him,

"These fellows play as fair a game as I ever saw, and know how to win and lose money like gentlemen."

But these high-toned "gentlemen" always managed to keep the bottle of sherry near him, and when they lost they would good-naturedly and hilariously propose that they take a drink. Haldane always complied, but while he drank they only sipped.

As the evening waned the excitement of the infatuated youth deepened. The heat of the room and the fumes of tobacco combined with the liquor to unman him and intensify the natural recklessness of his character.

There is probably, no abnormal passion that so completely masters its victims as that for gambling, and as Haldane won, lost, and won again, he became so absorbed as to be unconscious of the flight of time and all things else. But as he lost self-control, as he half-unconsciously put his glass to his lips with increasing frequency, his companions grew cooler and more wary. Their eyes no longer beamed good-naturedly upon their victim, but began to emit the eager, cruel gleams of some bird of prey.

But they still managed the affair with consummate skill. Their aim was to excite Haldane to the last degree of recklessness, and yet keep him sufficiently sober for further playing. From Harker they had learned that Mr. Arnot had probably sent him in the place of the clerk usually employed, and, if so, it was quite certain that he had a large sum of money upon his person. Haldane's words on becoming aware that he had missed his train confirmed their surmises, and it was now their object to beguile him into a condition which would make him capable of risking his employer's funds. They also wished that he should remain sufficiently sober to be responsible for this act, and to remember, as he recalled the circumstances, that it was his own act. Therefore they kept the brandy beyond his reach; that was not needed.

By the time the evening was half over, Haldane found that, although he had apparently won considerable money