

CHOICE LITERATURE.

A KNIGHT OF THE XIX. CENTURY.

BY REV. E. P. ROE, AUTHOR OF "FROM JEST TO EARNEST."

CHAPTER XXII.—A MAN WHO HATED HIMSELF.

The light of the following day brought little hope or courage; but Haldane started out, after a meagre breakfast, to find some means of obtaining a dinner and a place to sleep. He was not as successful as usual, and noon had passed before he found anything to do.

As he was plodding wearily along through a suburb, he heard some one behind a high board fence speaking so loudly and angrily that he stopped to listen, and was not a little surprised to find that the man was talking to himself. For a few moments there was a sound of a saw, and when it ceased, a harsh, querulous voice commenced again:

"A-a-h!"—it would seem that the man thus given to soliloquy often began and finished his sentences with a vindictive and prolonged guttural sound like that here indicated—"Miserable hand at sawin' wood! Why don't you let some one saw it that knows how? Tryin' to save a half dollar, when you know it will give you the rheumatiz, and cost ten in doctor bills! 'Nother thing; it's mean—mean as dirt. You know there's poor devils who need the work, and you're cheatin' 'em out of it. But it's jist like yer! A-a-h!" and then the saw began again.

Haldane was inclined to believe that this irascible stranger was as providential as the croaking ravens that fed the prophet, and he promptly sought the gate and entered. An old man looked up in some surprise. He was short in stature, and had the stoop of one who is bending under the weight of years and infirmities. His features were as withered and brown as a russet apple that had been kept long past its season, and his head was surmounted by a shock of white locks that bristled out in all directions, as if each particular hair was on bad terms with his neighbours. Curious seams and wrinkles gave the continuous impression that the old gentleman had just swallowed something very bitter, and was making a wry face over it. But Haldane was in no mood for the study of physiognomy and character, however interesting a subject he might stumble on, and he said:

"I am looking for a little work, and with your permission I will saw that wood for whatever you are willing to pay."

"That won't be much."

"It will be enough to get a hungry man a dinner."

"Haven't you had any dinner?"

"No."

"Why didn't you ask for one, then?"

"Why should I ask you for a dinner?"

"Why shouldn't you? If I be a tight-fisted man I'm not mean enough to refuse a hungry man."

"Give me some work and I can buy my dinner."

"What's your name?"

"Egbert Haldane."

"Ah ha! That name has been in the papers lately."

"Yes, and I have been in gaol."

"And do you expect me to have a man around that's been in gaol?"

"No; I don't expect any humanity from any human being that knows anything about me. I am treated as if I were the devil himself, and hadn't the power or wish to do anything save rob and murder. The public should keep such as I am in prison the rest of our lives, or else cut our throats. But this sending us out in the world to starve, and to be kicked and cuffed during the process, is scarcely in keeping with the Bible civilization they are always boasting of."

He spoke recklessly and bitterly, but his experience made his words appear to him only too true. But his shrivelled and shrunken auditor grinned appreciatively, and said, with more than his usual vindictive emphasis:

"A-a-h that is the right kind of talk. Now you're gettin' past all this make-believe to the truth. We're a cussed mean set—we folks who go to church and read the Bible, and then do just what the devil tells us, a-helpin' him along all the time. Satan's got a strong grip on you, from all I hear, and we're all a-helpin' him to keep it. You've gone half way to the devil, and all the good people tell you to go the rest of the way, for they won't have anything to do with you. Hain't that the way?"

"Oh, no," said Haldane with a bitter sneer; "some of the good people to whom you refer put themselves out so far as to give me a little good advice."

"What was it worth to you? Which would you rather—some good advice from me, or the job of sawin' the wood there?"

"Give me the saw—no matter about the advice," said Haldane, throwing off his coat.

"A-a-h! wasn't I fool to ask that question? Well, I don't belong to the good people, so go ahead—I don't suppose you know much about sawin' wood, bro't up as you've been; but you can't do it worse than me. I don't belong to anyone. What I was made for I can't see, unless it is to be a torment to myself. Nobody can stand me. I can't stand myself. I've got a cat and dog that will stay with me, and sometimes I'll git up and kick them just for the chance of cussin' myself for doing it."

"And yet you are the first man in town that has shewn me any practical kindness," said Haldane, placing another stick on his saw-buck.

"Well, I kinder do it out of spite to myself. There's somethin' inside of me sayin' all the time, 'Why, are you spendin' time and money on this young scape-grace? It'll end in you're havin' to give him a dinner, for you can't be so blasted mean as to let him go without it, and yet all the time you're wishin' you needn't do it.'"

"Well, you need not," said Haldane.

"Yes, I must, too."

"All I ask of you is what you think this work is worth."

"Well, that ain't all I ask of my confounded old self. Here, you're hungry you say—s'pose you tell the truth sometimes; here you're down, and all the respectable peo-

ple sittin' down hard on you; here you are in the devil's clutches, and he's got you halfway toward the brimstone, and I'm grudgin' you a dinner, even when I know I've got to give it to you. That's what I call bein' mean and a fool both. A-a-h!"

Haldane stopped a moment to indulge in the first laugh he had enjoyed since his arrest.

"I hope you will pardon me, my venerable friend," said he; "but you have a rather strangely honest way of talking."

"I'm old, but I ain't venerable. My name is Jeremiah Growther," was the snarling reply.

"I'm afraid you have too much conscience, Mr. Growther. It won't let you do comfortably what others do as a matter of course."

"I've nothin' to do with other people. I know what's right, and I'm all the time hatin' to do it. That's the mean thing about me which I can't stand. A-a-h!"

"I'm sorry my coming has made you so out of sorts with yourself."

"If it ain't you it's somethin' else. I ain't more out of sorts than usual."

"Well, you'll soon get rid of me—I'll be through in an hour."

"Yes, and here it is in the middle of the afternoon, and you haven't had your dinner yet, and, for all I know, no breakfast nuther. I was precious careful to have both of mine, and find it very comfortable standin' here a-growlin' while you're workin' on an empty stomach. But it's jist like me, A-a-h! I'll call you in a few minutes, and I won't pay you a cent unless you come in;" and the old man started for the small dilapidated cottage which he shared with the cat and dog that, as he stated, managed to worry along with him.

But he had not taken many steps before he stumbled slightly against a loose stone, and he stopped for a moment, as if he could find no language equal to the occasion, and then commenced such a tirade of abuse with his poor wizen little self as its object, that one would naturally feel like taking sides with the decrepit body against the vindictive spirit. Haldane would have knocked a stranger down had he said half as much to the old gentleman, who seemed bent on befriending him after his own odd fashion. But the man finished his oburgation with the words:

"What's a man doin' above ground who can't lift his foot over a stone only an inch high? A-a-h!" and then he went on, and disappeared in the house, from the open door of which not long after came the savoury odour of coffee.

Partly to forget his miserable self in the old man's strange manner, and partly because he was almost faint from hunger, Haldane concluded to accept this first invitation to dine out in Hillaton, resolving that he would do his queer host some favour to make things even.

"Come in," shouted Mr. Growther a few minutes later.

Haldane entered quite a large room, which presented an odd aspect of comfort and disorder.

"There's a place to wash your hands, if you think it's wuth while. I don't often, but I hope there's few like me," said the busy host, lifting the frying pan from some coals, and emptying from it a generous slice of ham and three or four eggs on a platter.

"I like your open fire-place," said Haldane, looking curiously around the hermitage as he performed his ablutions.

"That's another of my weaknesses—I know a stove would be more convenient and economical, but I hate all improvements."

"One would think, from what you said, your cat and dog had a hard time of it; but two more sleek, fat and lazy animals I never saw."

"No thanks to me. I s'pose they've got clear consciences."

As the table began to fairly groan with good things, Haldane said,

"Look here, Mr. Growther, are you in the habit of giving disreputable people such a dinner as that?"

"If it's good enough for me, it's good enough for you," was the tart reply.

"O, I'm not finding fault; I only wanted you to know that I would be grateful for much less."

"I'm not doin' it to please you, but to spite myself."

"Have your own way, of course," said Haldane, laughing; "it's a little odd, though, that your spite against yourself should mean so much practical kindness to me."

"Hold on!" cried his host, as Haldane was about to attack the viands; "aint you goin' to say grace?"

"Well," said the young man, somewhat embarrassed, "I would rather you would say it for me."

"I might as well eat your dinner for you."

"Mr. Growther you are an unusually honest man, and I think a kind one; so I am not going to act out any lies before you. Although your dinner is the best one I have seen for many a long day, or am likely to see, yet, to tell you the truth, I could swear over it easier than I could pray over it."

"A-a-h! that's the right spirit; that's the way I ought to feel. Now you see what a mean hypocrite I am. I'm no Christian—far from it—and yet I always have a sneaking wish to say grace over my victuals. As if it would do anybody any good! If I'd just swear over 'em, as you say, then I would be consistent."

"Are you in earnest in all this strange talk?"

"Yes, I am; I hate myself."

"Why?"

"Because I know all about myself. A-a-h!"

"How many poor, hungry people have you fed since the year opened?"

"Your question shews me just what I am. I could tell you within three or four. I found myself a-countin' them up and a-gloryin' in it all the tother night, takin' credit to myself for givin' away a few victuals after I had had plenty myself. Think of a man gettin' self-righteous over givin' to some poor fellow critters what he couldn't eat himself! If that ain't meanness, what is it? A-a-h!"

"But you haven't told me how many you have fed."

"No, and I aint a-goin' to—just to spite myself. I want to tell you, and to take credit for it, but I'll head myself off this time."

"But you *could* eat these things which you are serving to me—if not to-day why then to-morrow."

"To-morrow's income will provide for to-morrow. The Lord shews He's down on this savin' and hoardin' of things, for He makes 'em get musty right away; and if anything spiles on my hands I'm mad enough to bite myself in two."

"But if you treat all stragglers as you do me, you do not give away odds and ends and what's left over. This coffee is fine old Java, and a more delicate ham I never tasted."

"Now you hit me twice. I will have the best for myself, instead of practisin' self-denial and economy. Then I'm always wantin' to get some second-hand victuals to give away, but I daresn't. You see I read the Bible sometimes, and it's the most awfully uncomfortable book that ever was written. You know what the Lord says in it—or you ought to—about what we do for 'the least of these His brethren'; that means such as you, only you're a sort of black sheep in the family; and if words have any sense at all, the Lord takes my givin' you a dinner the same as if I gave it to Him. Now s'pose the Lord came to my house as He did to Mary and Martha's, and I should get Him up a slimpsey dinner of second-hand victuals, and stand by a-chucklin' that I had saved twenty-five cents on it, wouldn't that be meanness itself? Some time ago I had a ham that I couldn't and wouldn't eat, and they wouldn't take it back at the store, so I got some of the Lord's poor brethren to come to dinner and I palmed it off on them. But I had to cuss myself the whole evening to pay up for it. A-a-h!"

"By Jove!" cried Haldane, dropping his knife and fork, and looking admiringly at his host, who stood on the hearth, running his fingers through his shock of white hair, his shrivelled and bristling aspect making a marked contrast with his sleek and lazy cat and dog—"by Jove, you are what I call a Christian!"

"Now, look here, young man," said Mr. Growther wrathfully, "though you are under no obligations to me, you've got no business makin' game of me and callin' me names, and I won't stand it. You've got to be civil and speak the truth while you're on my premises, whether you want to or no."

Haldane shrugged his shoulders, laughed, and made haste with his dinner, for with such a gusty and variable host he might not get a chance to finish it. As he glanced around the room, however, and saw how cosy and inviting it might be made by a little order and homelike arrangement, he determined to fix it up according to his own ideas, if he could accomplish it without actually coming to blows with the occupant.

"Who keeps house for you?" he asked.

"Didn't I tell you nobody could stand me?"

"Will you stand me for about half an hour, while I fix up this room for you?"

"No!"

"What will you do if I attempt it?"

"I'll set the dog on you."

"Nothing worse?" asked Haldane, with a laughing glance at the lazy cur.

"You might take something."

An expression of sharp pain crossed the young man's face; the sunshine faded out of it utterly, and he said in a cold, constrained voice, as he rose from the table,

"Oh, I forgot for a moment that I am a thief in the world's estimation."

"That last remark of mine was about equal to a kick, wasn't it?"

"Little worse."

"Aint you used to 'em yet?"

"I ought to be."

"Why, do many speak out as plain as that?"

"They act it out just as plainly. Since you don't trust me, you had better watch me, lest I put some cordwood in my pocket."

"What do you want to do?"

"If the world is going to insist upon it that I am a scoundrel to the end of the chapter, I want to find some deep water and get under it," was the reckless reply.

"A-a-h! Didn't I say we respectable people and the devil were in partnership over you? He wants to get you under deep water as soon as possible, and we're all a-helpin' him along. Young man, I am afraid of you like the rest, and it seems to me that I think more of my old duds here than of your immortal soul that the devil has almost got. But I'm goin' to spite him and myself for once. I'm goin' down town after the evenin' paper, and, instead of lockin' up as I usually do, I shall leave you in charge. I know it's risky, and I hate to do it, but it seems to me that you oughter have sense enough to know that if you take all I've got you would be just that much wuss off;" and before Haldane could remonstrate or reply, he took a curiously twisted and gnarled cane, that resembled himself, and departed.

CHAPTER XXIII.—MR. GROWTHER BECOMES GIGANTIC.

Haldane was so surprised at Mr. Growther's unexpected course, that the odd old man was out of the gate before the situation was fully realized. His first impulse was to follow, and say that he would not be left alone in circumstances that might compromise him; but a second thought assured him that he was past being compromised. So he concluded to fall in with his host's queer humour, and try to prove himself worthy of trust. He cleared away his dinner with as much deftness as could be expected of one engaging in an unusual task, and put everything in its place, or what should be its place. He next found a broom, and commenced sweeping the room, which unwonted proceeding aroused the slumbering cat and dog, and they sat up and stared at the stranger with unfeigned astonishment.

The cat looked on quietly and philosophically, acting on the generally received principle of the world, of not worrying until her own interests seemed threatened. But the dog evidently thought of the welfare of his absent master and had a vague, troubled sense that something was wrong. He waddled up to the intruder, and gravely smelt him. By some