

Choice Literature.

A MODERN JACOB.

BY HESTER STUART.

CHAPTER XI.—(Continued.)

Dr. Grant took the wasted hand in both his own, but could not speak. After a long silence he asked, with an effort at his professional manner, "How long have you been like this?"

"Only a week or two. I have been strangely tired all through the summer, and at last I have had to stop. This is a good place to rest in, but I begin to think only the rest of the grave will restore me."

Dr. Grant marked the extreme weariness with which he spoke, and the fluttering pulse between his hands. The time was plainly short.

"Arthur," he said, "I will not deceive you. You must soon leave us. Would you like to see Margaret before you go?"

A sudden flash passed over his face. "You are sure that I cannot live? For if I once see her, I can never take up the struggle of the past five years. Are you sure?"

"Only too sure, my poor Arthur."

"Then send at once. Hector is here; let some one ride him over to the village, and telegraph to-night."

He spoke with feverish eagerness, and the doctor hastened to calm him before this fire destroyed the frail remnant of his life.

"She is here, Arthur—here in this very house. She came with me to-day. To-morrow you may see her, but to-night she is very tired."

The doctor judged rightly of the effect of this appeal to his selfishness. Mr. Berkeley at once became calm.

"Poor Margaret," he said: "it has been a hard day for her, and for you, too, Roger. Go to bed now, and get your rest. It will be a comfort to know you are under the same roof."

"Let me sit with you to-night. I feel as fresh as a lark, and it will relieve the others a little. But you must stop talking now, and try and go to sleep again," and Dr. Grant, taking a paper from his pocket, went over to the shaded night lamp and sat down to read.

Mr. Berkeley watched him for a while with quiet, happy eyes, then he sank into a light sleep, from which he woke once or twice to ask, "You said to-morrow I might see her?" and each time the doctor's cheerful voice answered, "To-morrow." And so the night passed away, and Mr. Berkeley woke in the gray dawn, to find the same patient weather beside him, and hear the same kind voice say, "It is to-morrow."

And so the time came when the two so hopelessly separated in life met at the threshold of death. What that meeting meant was sacred to themselves. What revelations of past love, what agonies of separation, what hopes of reunion the room witnessed the closed doors gave no token. When Miss Lenox came among them again, there were traces of tears on her cheeks, but her eyes were heavenly, and Dr. Grant, going to his friend, fearful of the effect of this interview, found him with a countenance from which the pain and sadness of the past were all swept away, and in their stead a foreshadowing of the joy beyond.

"Roger," he said, "you have always been a tower of strength to me; help me once more. Before I go I want to call Margaret my wife. Will you make all the necessary arrangements at once? Soon it may be too late."

A few days later the two so lately met, so soon to be again parted, were made one. Mrs. Balcome wept silently through the short service, and Rhoda's suppressed sobs stirred the quiet of the room, but the bride stood calm and steadfast, and her low "I will," was spoken without faltering. When the ceremony was over, she took her place, as by right, at her husband's side, and to the swift end she did not leave him. Others came and went; the village lawyer to draw up the brief will, the worn out doctor on his last useless visit, some of his people for one more look at his face, but after each interruption his eyes turned and rested on her.

It had been a gray day, and at nightfall a dreary rain set in. Through the raised window of the sick room they could hear its steady drip, drip, on the lilac bush outside, and from the adjoining room the measured tick, tick, of the clock fell like leaden drops upon their hearts, for they counted by minutes now.

Once Dr. Grant, with a feeling of suffocation, went to the outer door and opened it. As the light streamed out into the wet night, it fell on a dark figure leaning against a tree near the house. Dr. Grant went quickly down the steps and approached it.

"Who is it?" he asked. "and why do you stand here in the rain?"

"It's me—Jack Felch, from the Holler," answered the man huskily. "They told me to-day that the minister was here, and that he was near dying."

"It is true," said the doctor sadly. "The end is very near."

The man turned, and leaned his head against the tree with a groan.

Dr. Grant laid his hand on his shoulder. "Come into the house out of the rain. You must be very tired after your long walk. Go to the kitchen, and some one will give you a cup of coffee."

"I couldn't swallow it," said Jack. "I'll bide here a while. I know you who are, sir; you mended my arm, and a good job you made of it. But him yonder did far more for me, and now I'll never see him again."

The doctor thought an instant. "You see the second window from the door behind the bush. Step up there quietly, and I think you can see his face."

Dr. Grant went in, and a minute later the lilac bush stirred slightly and there was a quick sound which was not the wind nor the rain, and then the faint fall of receding footsteps told that poor Jack had turned to retrace his weary miles.

Mr. Berkeley lay quietly, with closed eyes. Suddenly he opened them: "Margaret!"

"I am here," she answered, pressing the hand she held.

"Sing!"

There was a moment's pause, then the clear voice rose in the still room:

"O, Paradise! O, Paradise!

Who doth not crave for rest?

Who would not seek the happy land

Where they that love are blest?

"O, Paradise! O, Paradise!

The world is growing old;

Who would not be at rest and free,

Where love is never cold?

"Where loyal hearts and true

Stand ever in the light,

All rapture through and through,

In God's most holy sight."

And as the song ceased, the loyal heart entered into the rest of Paradise.

CHAPTER XII.—APPLES OF SODOM.

From the day Jacob Balcome settled in his new home, Fortune seemed to take him under her special care. His thrifty New England ways of farming, brought to bear on the fertile acres of the West, resulted in wonderful crops, and the same shrewd vigilance manoeuvred safely all his business schemes. Everything that he touched prospered, and it came to be considered a guaranty of success to be associated with him in any undertaking. With his widening resources he soon abandoned the slow gains of agriculture that once seemed so dazzling, and launched out into speculation. Did a railroad send forth an iron shoot across those broad prairies, Jacob Balcome was sure to own land on either side of it. Did a water power, touched by capital, bring some town into sudden life, the best corner lots were found to belong to Jacob Balcome. Wherever a business scheme looked promising, he was ready to furnish money and brains to insure its success. With the change in his mode of life had come a corresponding change in his person. Relieved from manual labour, his thin figure had rounded, his hands softened, and now, well dressed, and polished by the attrition of the more cultivated men with whom he came in contact, he looked the keen, suave man of business, only now and then betraying by a rustic phrase the farm life that lay so few years behind him.

And how had it fared with his inner life? He himself was scarcely conscious of any inner life, except that which throbbed in his eager, scheming brain. He was a respected member of the church that his money had helped to found, and night and morning his formal petitions rose from his wife's bedside; daily couched in smoother phrase, but always with the same burden; thanks for present prosperity, and deprecation for its continuance if it were the Lord's will; the addition slightly less emphatic. If Mrs. Balcome, in her weakness and weariness, missed anything from these prayers, she offered no criticisms. If her heart hungered for closer contact with the Great Helper whom her husband's prayers seemed to put farther and farther away, she made no complaint, but, lying with closed eyes and folded hands, listened quietly, always waiting a few moments after he ended before turning to other topics. Either she did not see his danger, or felt powerless to help him. Sometimes, in his long rides across the prairies, Jacob Balcome thought with a feeling of strangeness and remoteness of the prayer meetings at Wilton Corners, and of the young man whose heart glowed as he spoke of nearness of God, and he wondered if he could be same one, so utterly foreign seemed those feelings now. The love of gold was doing its work on him, and it seemed only a question of time when its work should be complete.

By and by this love of gold had a rival. The men about him had been quick to see his fitness for political life, and, by offers of various civic honours, had tried to draw him into its service. In his hot chase for wealth he had avoided these honours, but with the tender of an influential office, the thirst for power got full hold upon him, and he threw himself into the current. His old success attended him, and woe to the men or measures set against this watchful, crafty, far-seeing opponent, for their overthrow was only a question of time. His zeal did not go unrewarded. Step by step he ascended the political ladder, the game growing constantly more enthralling and costly, until the day came when he was named for the highest office in the gift of the State.

It was a long and bitter campaign—fought by the opposite party with a virulence proportioned to their past defeats—and to the very end the issue was uncertain. In the excitement of the few weeks preceding election, Jacob Balcome forgot everything but the work of the hour, and it came to him with the shock of a blow when the doctor told him Mrs. Balcome's life was numbered by days. "Why was I not told before?" he demanded. Even in his grief he had an angry sense of defeat that this grim enemy should have come upon him unawares.

"Mrs. Balcome positively forbade me. She is very anxious for your success in this campaign, and feared the diversion of your thoughts might affect your chances. I tell you now, on my own responsibility, because I find her this morning weaker even than I had supposed."

"How soon will it come?" He shrank from giving a name to this foe against whom his utmost craft was powerless.

"Probably within four or five days," and the doctor bowed himself out.

Leaving others to carry on the fight, Jacob Balcome went to his wife. He reproached himself for his seeming indifference, but when he tried to say as much to her she changed the subject by asking about his chances in a doubtful county. Several times he approached the subject, but each time she evaded it, and finally he gave up the attempt, and sat down beside her to await the end. In the presence of death these two had little to say to each other. They had been congenial companions, for their in-

terests had been identical; but all their hopes and plans and ambitions had centred in this world, and now that to one of them this world was fast receding, there seemed nothing left upon which they could dwell. Her one wish was to live to know the result of the election; but when the day came she lay with closed eyes and folded hands, only a little colder and stiller than her wont, but beyond awakening.

As Jacob Balcome sat beside his dead wife, a telegram was brought to him; it contained the news of his triumphant election. Dropping it, he buried his face in his hands, and, for the first time in all his dissembling life, took an honest reckoning with himself. First he was a boy, cheating over his game of marbles, and driving sharp bargains with his brother; then he saw himself as a young man, grasping and hypocritical—for, in his self-abasement, he questioned even the genuineness of his early religious life. He saw himself sowing dissension between his father and brother, and plotting against an unsuspecting girl. He looked with clear vision upon his early married life at Wilton Corners; on the intriguing, plausible arts by which he secured the farm to himself, and the unflinching desertion of his parents in their time of need. He saw in vivid light the night of terror and his cowardly vow, and shrank in shame from the memory of its half fulfilment. As by a flash of lightning, he saw the whole course of life in the West; the crafty schemes growing wider and deeper, but always tending to his own advantage and the loss of others. As though it were a thing separate from himself, he held up and reviewed his whole selfish, double-dealing life—so fair outside, so black within.

He turned to the still form beside him. At least he had been true to her. With a sudden longing for sympathy he laid his hand on hers. When had she ever failed him before? He felt no passionate sorrow for her death, and in this hour of clarified vision he saw plainly what she had been to him—only another self, feeding and strengthening the worst elements of his character—but she was his, and she was dead, and the honour which had come to him seemed a worthless thing.

From the bitter ashes of his self-abasement rose a new man. A man not all at once open and generous, but one knowing and hating his faults, and with his face set steadily toward the right. One of the first practical proofs of this change was a letter to his father, in which, without concealment or palliation, he laid bare the past. His share in Squire Lovell's extortions, his falsehoods about Rhoda, his connection with the forged letter; nothing was omitted. He asked especially that Joel and Rhoda should be told everything, and if they found it possible to forgive him, and if his parents could receive him again as their son, he hoped when his term of office ended, to come back to the old home. He told them of the vision which he had had of himself, and spoke with great humility of his hopes for future years in which to redeem the past. And he thanked his father for his upright example, which, unheeded for years, now came back to strengthen him.

Nothing in all their life ever gave Mr. Balcome and his wife the happiness that this letter did. The genuineness of its tone, and the affection with which he spoke of his home and parents, touched them deeply. A good many tears fell on the knitting in Mrs. Balcome's lap, and her husband's reading was interrupted by several spells of huskiness.

"That's got the right ring to it," he said, as he folded the letter and took off his spectacles. "We haven't lost our boy after all, mother."

"No," said his wife. "I knew we shouldn't. Faith and prayer can reach a good deal farther than Minnesota."

"I don't know about letting Joel and Rhody see this letter," said Mr. Balcome. "They've about forgotten the trouble, and this will bring it all up again. What do you think, mother?"

"I think we better do as Jacob says; let everything come to the light, and then we'll know where we stand. We can trust the children to be forgiving when they read this letter."

"The children" were over to Adoniram Roper's spending the day, but when they returned, and a certain small Balcome had been tucked away for the night, Mrs. Balcome put the letter into her son's hand. As he read, an angry flush came in his cheeks, and he knit his black brows.

"Come here, dear!" he said, and Rhoda, perched on the arm of his chair, with one arm around his neck, followed down the pages. Although ignorant of the forged letter, she had long ago suspected Jacob's share in the past troubles, and in her contented, happy life forgiven him. So when Joel looked up at her, still with the two deep lines between his brows, she said nothing, but making a soothing-iron of her plump palm, ironed his forehead until he smiled in spite of himself. But his face grew stern again. The old wrongs raked, and he found it hard to forgive. That night at family prayers Farmer Balcome did not open the Bible at Habakkuk, where the bookmark rested, but he turned to the New Testament, and when he read the words, "I say not unto thee, until seven times; but unto seventy times seven," Joel looked at his mother with a smile, and she knew the old score was wiped out.

Miss Almira Dow was sewing for a few days at Mr. Nathan Roper's. She had turned Mrs. Roper's striped mohair and discussed the affairs at East Wilton, and now directed her energies to a new black cashmere and the doings at Wilton Corners.

"They do say," she began, holding a corner of the cloth between her eyes and the light, and pulling it crosswise, "that Jacob Balcome is as rich as mud."

"He's well-to-do, I guess," said Mrs. Roper.

"Mrs. Syke's nephew's sister in law has been visiting to the Corners, and she came right from the very place where Jacob lives. She says he's one of the big men out there. Has his horses and carriages and driver, and all that sort of thing—I'm a good mind to let your cashmere pollonay, seeing that your two last have been basques," and she looked at Mrs. Roper's plump figure reflectively.

"I don't care which. You're pretty sure to fit me."