

CHOICE LITERATURE.

TOM'S HEATHEN.

CHAPTER V.—CHECKERS AND DESTINY.

About this time my brilliant young nephew made a discovery that set him as wild as a locust. It chanced one very busy day that after my morning call upon Mr. Dyer, a vial of medicine and directions were to be sent to Miss Agnes for her father. I had not a moment to spare just then, and Hal, who was lounging about the house, generously volunteered his services. The directions were oral, and of course the fellow saw Miss Agnes. At dinner he pounced upon me.

"Uncle Doctor, why didn't you tell me I was going to meet the most elegant young lady in town? There I went striding into the house, with the stoppel out, ready to pour the concentrated wisdom of your directions into the ear of some puffed-up old maid of a nurse, and asked for Miss Agnes; when lo! in came the daintiest and completest creature I ever beheld. By George! she took my breath away. Such eyes! such a figure! such a hand! And there I stood like a gaping fool!"

"And forgot the directions, you young idiot?"

"No. I grabbed them when my breath came again, and got them out somehow; but whether right end first, or wrong end first, I never can tell. She must have thought me a verdant specimen."

"As you are. And probably she did not notice you at all. Something of more consequence demands her attention."

"But you don't mean, Uncle Doctor, that she is the nurse?"

"Yes."

"Wish I were sick!"

"She is his daughter."

"Oh! that alters the case. It was Miss Dyer, then?"

"Eat your dinner."

Hal took up his fork and balanced it upon his forefinger, while the other hand stroked his brown moustache. He was a healthy, good-looking cub.

"Hold on, please," he said, deprecatingly, "till I get myself together. I should as soon think of stuffing on Mount Parnassus as of eating with this divinity in my thoughts. I have a project. You just get another influenza, Uncle Doctor, and I will come home and take care of you and this old patient of yours too. He would be a good one to begin upon, since he is old and rich and wouldn't be missed. And I should become quite reconciled to my fate as an M.D. if I were to meet such an interesting nurse daily."

After a pause, receiving no answer, he broke out again: "I say it is a sin and a shame to keep her mewed up in the house with a sick man."

"She is on the street every day, per order."

"She is? Does she ride or walk?"

"Mary, feel the lad's pulse. He is in a fever."

"It is of no use, Uncle Doctor. I am going to see her again, riding or walking."

"She would not know you, and besides, your time is up. You return to New Haven to-morrow."

"See if I stay there! I will find some excuse for running home. I'll have a filial fit," and he looked mischievously at his mother. Mary was proud of her eldest son, and with reason, though he had his full share of nonsense and student self-complacency.

I, too, liked Hal. He brought back the old jolly days of my own student life, and was every way refreshing and entertaining. I adopted him with the rest of Mary's fatherless children, and he was currently reported my favorite.

It was during the long weeks of Mr. Dyer's slow convalescence that I really became acquainted with him. After he began to mend there was no necessity for medical attendance, but he had become accustomed to my visits and querulously insisted that I should continue to call. And if I was not unusually busy I found time during the day to run in and chat a few moments. Sometimes I passed whole evenings with him, and he was becoming a singularly interesting study. I found him unusually well-informed for a business man. His conversation roved over a wide range, often seeking to draw me out, but carefully avoiding anything that looked personal. I discerned, however, in an unguarded moment, an uneasiness, a mental fret so deep as to leave little trace on the surface. Its cause I could not conjecture, nor its probable duration.

Then, too, his willingness—perhaps I should say his suppressed eagerness—to avail himself of suggested remedies, was quite in contrast to his former indifference, and proved that he had still an object in living.

Agnes detected this, and one day as I was taking leave of her in the hall, she said: "Doctor, I believe you are my father's best friend and mine also. Find out for me the thing he is living for?"

I looked straight into her deep eyes to reach the bottom of her thought. "You think there is something, then—something that was not there a while ago?"

"I am quite sure?"

"I had an impression of that sort, but I am apt to distrust my own impressions till they are fortified by proof. That you have divined the same thing is a sort of proof. But I think you would be more likely than I to find out what it is."

"No; free as he is about anything else, I cannot get even a hint of the thing that is absorbing his thought. He knows how I feel, and if it is any concern for what is hereafter, he will not tell me. He has no suspicion that you want to 'convert him,' as the phrase goes, and you can get at him more easily than I. Are you willing to try?"

"Yes," taking the hand she offered me. It was a pretty hand, as Hal averred. Somehow this girl assumed that I sympathized fully in her desires concerning her father's spiritual welfare; as if saving souls as well as bodies had become a part of my profession. Well, perhaps her enthusiasm like many another enthusiasm was contagious.

The solution of her perplexity was nearer than either sup-

posed. While I was at tea that night this note was handed in:

"DEAR DOCTOR:—Agnes has an invitation to pass the evening with a friend. If you are at liberty be compassionate enough to come over and let me defeat you at a game of checkers. Yours, JOEL DYER."

He did not say that Agnes's acceptance depended upon my compliance with his request, but I knew that it did, and sent back a verbal message that I would come.

During the later stages of his convalescence we played many a game of checkers in my non-professional calls. He was a good player, and we were not badly matched. It was the only recreation for which he seemed to have a taste.

I went early, lest I should be detained by calls, professional or otherwise; but early as it was I found Mr. Dyer alone.

It was my privilege to enter unannounced, and having ascertained that he was in the library, for he was able to range about the house, I went in through the half-open door, and saw him sitting by the table, surrounded by newspapers which he had pushed aside. He was leaning his elbows on the table, his forehead resting in the upturned palms of his hands, and I caught a glimpse of a worried, depressed face that through all his pain and sickness I had never seen before. A slight noise caused him to change his position and look up. The face I met was the one I had always seen—intelligent, imperturbably calm, but perhaps a shade more thoughtful and refined than before his sickness.

"Ah, I am glad you have come. It was getting dull," said he, rising and offering me a seat with his habitual courtesy. I believe he never shook hands with any one. He seemed to have an unconquerable aversion to personal contact.

After a little he reached for the checker-board, saying, "I like this game because there is no room for chance. It is all cause and effect. If you are defeated you have only your own carelessness and inexperience to blame. In fact, the existence of such a thing as chance, fate or destiny is to be questioned. All things are caused, though we see only results."

"Somebody says, 'All things that exist have sufficient reason for existing.'"

"And somebody says true; otherwise we should be in a pretty muddle. I hate mysteries, abstractions, things that cannot be seen, heard or touched, or taken into rational cognizance," said he, with unwonted energy.

There was a kind of suppressed eagerness within the man that betrayed itself in his checked intonations and the nervous motions of his hands as he placed the men; and besides he played badly. The fruitless attempts of a fly to escape from a spider's web were somehow suggested to me as I watched him. My own game was more careless than usual, for I was preoccupied; but for some reason he played worse, and was defeated in three straight games.

CHAPTER VI.—TOM PEEBLES AND BOB LYON.

"It is useless," said he, shoving back the board at the close of the third game. "There is a 'combination,' and I have gone short."

"You are not feeling as well to-night," I remarked, picking up the stray men.

"Yes," indifferently. He lifted his long arms, and resting the back of his head in his clasped hands, said positively: "Doctor, a sick man is a spoiled man. He gets full of notions and whimsies, and is no longer judicial or master of himself. For instance, a little affair pesters me that is not worth a moment's consideration. At any other time it would not trouble me an instant, but now, I cannot rid myself of it." Musingly—"If I consult you, possibly you may think of some way out of it." And without waiting for a reply, he went on in a matter-of-fact way.

"Some years ago I was engaged in the broking business, and at first was unfortunate in two or three transactions, but after watching the knowing ones, I retrieved my losses, and became reasonably expert. It is an occupation in which the perceptions are acutely trained. If anything will give a man a sixth sense, that sort of training will. It happened—No! Nothing happens. I will put it this way: For reasons perfectly intelligible to myself, I purchased at a low figure, and at the right moment, a stock that was sure to rise. In a short time it verified my expectations, by going up and up, and with a little urging, reached a dangerous elevation. Sometimes the very impetus or momentum of a rapidly rising stock, carries it out of sight, and men lose their heads, forgetting that all these things follow a Paw, and that in such a case, there must be a collapse. Just before this stock reached that point, I began to scent danger, as a fox scents a hound. There was something in the financial atmosphere like the density that sends the mercury down before the coming storm, though the sky be never so clear, and the day never so bright. I passed a sleepless night, and went down town the next morning, determined to unload."

He paused a moment, thinking closely before he said: "Half-way down the street I espied my man. He was the son of an old acquaintance, who was about to come into possession of his inheritance, which had been delayed by the terms of his father's will, till he should be twenty-five. He had previously paid me the compliment of consulting me as a shrewd and successful operator, and asked my advice as to the disposition of his money when it should come into his hands."

"Good morning!" said he, cheerily. "You are just the man I want to see. I came into possession yesterday, and now I want to get rich quickly and quietly."

"Where is your money?"

"He mentioned the securities in which it was invested. They were perfectly safe, but slow, paying small percentages, and could be called at any time. If I was the man he wanted to see, he was the man I wanted to see. He was wild for the very stock that I wished to sell, and before noon, the transfer was made."

Joel Dyer lapsed into silence for a moment, rubbing his hands in a pleasurable, self-congratulatory way, that revealed an altogether new phase of this complex man. He

evidently admired his own shrewdness and sagacity, and would have been astonished if one had called it by a harder name. He had no patience or compassion for a man less shrewd than himself. His lips curled contemptuously as he said to himself, "Poor fool! he deserved his fate for his haste and indiscretion." Then addressing me: "In twenty-four hours the storm that had been so long brewing, suddenly burst. That stock immediately collapsed. The man came to me in alarm. I told him not to be frightened, and not to sell, it was sure to come up again. But he would not listen, and went up and down as wild to sell as he had been to buy. Of course just then no one would purchase."

"The silly fellow was half crazed, and at length when I became satisfied that the stock had touched bottom, and must commence slowly but surely to rise—(for it was a good stock, no wild-cat affair; only it had been blown up out of all reason, and of course had fallen out of all reason)—I offered to buy. He grabbed as hastily as before, and sold for a song what had cost him so much. He went off with the absurd impression that I was still his benefactor. But, sometime later, when he found that this stock was rising and would approximate to a true value, if there be such a thing, he wished to repurchase a few shares with a margin, so as to retrieve in part his former loss. Again he showed his inexperience by supposing that I would sell on a rising market. And when I convinced him that stock-broking knows neither friend nor foe, he said some very unhandsome things, and took himself out of the way."

"I heard of him afterwards as dabbbling in stocks, in desperate attempts to cover his loss. Nature never intended him for a stockbroker, and he ought to have known enough to have kept out of it; but he was one of those men who cannot be taught by experience. After repeated failures he fell into the contemptible habit of gambling, and lost thereby what little money and reputation remained to him."

"He passed quite out of mind, and probably I never should have thought of him again, but that he had the assurance to present himself ten years ago. He had then become a miserable, drunken wretch, and it is likely was more than half intoxicated at the time. He claimed to be a ruined man, and I did not dispute him. And he went on to charge his ruin home upon me in language that none but a lunatic would have used. I had the patience to show him conclusively that our transactions were perfectly legal and business-like, and that he had no one but himself to blame. He would not listen, and was so outrageous that I felt compelled to turn him out of doors."

"He went away cursing me and mine, as if there was any efficacy in his curses to hurt me or to help him. Then again he dropped from my recollection, till, as I sat on Sunday listening to the Rev. Mr. Peebles, pastor of our church—and a very able man he is—something in his voice as he was speaking earnestly, and a singular gesture of his left hand, unnoticed before, brought up instantly that crazy-headed, would-be broker, as he stood in my door-way cursing me. I must confess to a genuine surprise. I suppose this disease was working in me then, disturbing the firm poise of my nervous system; for, thereafter, as often as I saw the Rev. Mr. Peebles, I saw that despicable broker."

"Somehow, by a process I cannot understand, and therefore am ashamed to own, I felt compelled to go to church Sabbath after Sabbath, and look constantly and intently at Mr. Peebles as if I were giving the closest attention; whereas, the fact is, I scarcely heard a word that he said. I saw only that cursing broker, and felt that I must look him down. I would not own this contemptible weakness to any one else; but you, a physician, must know that it is caused solely by my disease."

"Well! it grew worse, and from being a thing that would stay with me on Sunday, and that I could thrust off on Monday, it began to abide with me through the week. After Agnes came home, that accursed broker haunted me day and night. I was never under bondage to any man, or anything, and this sort of surveillance is anything but pleasant. I have fought hard, giving no quarter, but there he is, and there he will be, unless somebody or something can rid me of his presence. After I was compelled to take my bed, it occurred to me that if I could find the man and secure him the amount he claimed to have lost through me, I should get free again. I say 'claimed,' for do not understand me as admitting for an instant that I had done anything wrong. I had not. It was all legal and fair. I make this concession to a shadow, as a tribute exacted by my disease."

He paused with a weary sigh, and when he began again, his chin had dropped upon his chest, and he seemed speaking to something within himself.

"Another thought comes and goes, and proves the more harassing of the two. I said that curses have no efficacy; and they have not. But Agnes is a singular child, and has notions that I cannot understand. And if she should ever come to know that she had been cursed as belonging to me, it might affect her unpleasantly. What was that she said a few days ago about the sins of the parents descending to the third or fourth generation? I suppose she believes that sort of thing, and to believe it is as bad as to have it true."

Raising his head and again addressing me he said: "I have instituted a search for this man. He appears to have lived a vagabond life, wandering from place to place. He stopped longer in San Francisco than elsewhere, and shipped from thence to the Sandwich Islands, and disappeared as effectually as if he had gone down the crater of a volcano. There is a shocking rumor concerning him which I do not believe. No, he is alive, somewhere. But where? is the question."

"You will understand that I have spoken to you of this matter, partly to get it out of my mind, and partly in the hope that you could suggest some scheme for unearthing this man, and freeing me from his detestable presence."

It is impossible to describe the eagerness and intensity with which he told me all this. The smothered fire in his eyes, the nervous play of his sharp features, no longer under perfect control, and the continuous opening and shutting of his gaunt hands, produced a sort of uncanny fascination, that for the time shut out everything else. When, exhausted, he sank back in his chair, my gaze was still riveted upon his face. He sat with his eyes closed, and his hands fallen