

## CHOICE LITERATURE.

## FROM JEST TO EARNEST.

BY REV. E. P. ROE.

And so at last Christmas eve came; and with it a few guests. Harcourt and Miss Martell had been specially invited; for the fact of their engagement had transpired at once, and Mrs. Marchmont hastened to assure them, by this invitation, that she had no regrets or resentment. Not for the world would she have Miss Martell imagine that any maternal projects had been frustrated.

Harcourt, grateful for all the kindness he had received at Mrs. Marchmont's, induced Alice to accept; and so their illumined faces were added to the circle that gathered around the yule log in the large dining-room that had been cleared for games and dancing.

And in spite of the incongruous elements composing that circle, it made, with the crackling fire playing on happy faces and Christmas decorations, a pretty picture—one that might convert a pagan into willingness to honour the chief Christian festival.

After some old-fashioned country dances—through which even Hemstead had been induced to blunder, to Lottie's infinite delight—they sat down to nuts, apples and cider. Billets of hickory were piled higher than ever against the great yule log; and never did the sacred flame light up fairer and happier faces than those of Alice Martell and Lottie Marsden. And yet they were as different as could be. One was the lily, and the other the rose. Harcourt and Hemstead also looked as if some angelic messenger had brought them "tidings of great joy."

Harcourt and Alice sat together; but Lottie, with seeming perverseness, got as far away as possible. But it was only seeming, for she sat where she could look Hemstead full in the face, and with her brilliant eyes, indulge in love's mystic telegraphy without restraint.

Now was the time for Mr. Dimmerly to shine out; and he proposed that some one should commence a story, and carry it forward to a certain point, then stop abruptly, while some one else took it up for a brief time, when, in like manner, it would again be dropped that another might continue it, so that each one who was willing might have a chance to contribute.

"You commence, Mr. Harcourt," said Mr. Dimmerly.

After a preface of hemming, the young man said:

"Once upon a time, in a village in the south of France, it was arranged that there should be a general fête and dance on the village green the afternoon before Christmas. Little Ninon was a peasant's daughter, and she was only fourteen. If she were *petite*, she was also piquant and pretty—"

"Very good, very good," cried a chorus of voices; and a round of applause stimulated the narrator.

"But, until this occasion, Ninon had always been kept at home as a child; but, after interminable coaxings, she obtained her mother's permission to go to the fête. Now her mother was a widow, and it so happened that she could not go with her daughter, and after she had given her consent, had not one whom she could send with her child as a protector. But Ninon was in such glee that her mother had not the heart to take back her promise.

"Now, mother, tell me what shall I say when the boys, and perhaps some of the very young men, ask me to dance with them?"

"Say I'm only a little child who have come to see. Go thy ways."

"But suppose they don't go their ways," pouted Ninon.

"Go thine then, and come home."

"Now, mother, dear, am I not almost old enough to have a lover?"

"Lover indeed! Silly child, but yesterday I rocked thee in the cradle there. I'm a fool to let thee go."

"Then Ninon, in fear, kept still, lest her mother should change her mind, a thing which women sometimes do, even in France—"

"Now, I protest against innuendoes," cried Lottie. "It is the Frenchman, as it is *man* all over the world, who changes his mind. Adam first said he wouldn't eat the apple, and then he did!"

"Where's your authority for that?" said Harcourt.

"It's in the Bible," answered Lottie stoutly; at which there was a great explosion.

"Miss Marsden equals modern commentators in amplifying the text," laughed Hemstead.

"Well," persisted Lottie, "if it isn't just so written, I know enough of human nature to be sure that was just how it happened."

"On with the story," cried Mr. Dimmerly. "Come, Miss Martell."

"The afternoon of the fête came," said Alice, "and Ninon's mother was depressed with a boding of evil."

"Who shall I send with thee my child? My heart fails in sending thee alone."

"Little brother Pierre shall go with me," said Ninon. "He's an odd child, and talks to the saints and angels more than to us. If he goes with me, the saints will take care of us both."

"This seemed to strike the mother as true, and she was comforted; and the pale, little boy, with large, spiritual eyes that appeared to look into the other world, took his sister's hand without even a smile flitting across his sad face; and they started for the fête."

"Now, Miss Marchmont," said Miss Martell, with a graceful inclination to Addie.

"And the pale little boy, with big, owl-like eyes," continued Addie slipshantly, "stalked along as if going to a funeral, while Ninon tripped and danced at his side. But soon the young girl's steps grew slower and slower, and her face thoughtful, and she began to question her mother's words—that she was too much of a child to have a lover; and by the time she reached the village green, she gave her pretty head a toss as she said, 'Well we'll see about this. Mother don't know everything.'"

"Now Bel."

"But poor little Ninon," said Bel, "soon became sadly bewildered, for there were so many people all talking at once, and they pushed against and jostled as if she were very small and insignificant indeed, and she began to think that her mother was right, and that she was only a child; and she grew frightened and wished herself home again. But she kept fast hold of the hand of her brother whom the saints loved, and felt that as long as he was with her she was safe. Finally they were pushed and jostled to a quiet nook on the edge of the green, under a tree, and here they sat down. Soon the dancing commenced, and Ninon amused herself by criticising the people and making remarks to her brother about their dress and manner. But he did not seem to hear her, and his eyes were fixed on the sky, as if he saw more that was wonderful there than she upon the village green."

"Mr. De Forrest, you next."

"But as Ninon sat there smiling and talking more to herself than to her queer little brother, who didn't listen, the young men began to notice her, and to nudge each other and ask who she was; for in truth she reminded every one of a half-blown rose. But no one knew who she was, and no one had seen her before. Then the handsomest young man in the village—indeed he was the one at whom all the girls were setting their caps—stepped forward and took a deliberate survey, and soon was convinced that, among all the village maidens, there was not a face as fair as Ninon's. And while he looked at her, Ninon from under her long lashes as intently watched him. At last the young man made up his mind, and said to himself, 'I will be her lover for this afternoon,' and in a manner that was the very embodiment of grace, he stepped up to her and said:

"My pretty maiden, will dance with me?"

And De Forrest bowed to Lottie to continue. It was strange how the foolish little story was gaining the breathless interest of all present—all the more so because each one was unconsciously colouring their bit of the mosaic with his or her individuality. Lottie's manner by no means tended to allay this interest, as she began her part of the impromptu tale. She was a natural actress, and, for the moment, became little Ninon. The scene had become present to her vivid fancy, and by some process that cannot be explained, she impressed it upon the minds of the others as real. They saw the crowded village green, the *petite* little maiden and her weird brother sitting upon its edge as she began.

"And Ninon shyly raised her eyes to the face of the handsomest young man of all the village, at whom the girls were setting their caps, and said, a trifle coldly:

"I'm only a little child who has come to see. Go thy ways."

And the handsome young man stalked away haughty and offended, and the youth of the village nudged each other and smiled and wondered and said, "She must be a princess in disguise, or she would dance with him whom all the girls covet." So no one else would venture to speak to her. But Ninon for a while was content to be left alone to watch all the funny people and their funny ways. She didn't see any one that she wanted to dance with.

"At last she became conscious that one who seemed a stranger like herself was watching her, and she began to look curiously at him. At first she did not like his looks at all. His dress was very plain; not a bit smart and gay like the other young men. Besides, he was so tall and grave; and once, when some one said a rude word to him, his eyes were so fiery that Ninon was afraid of him. But a moment later, when his eyes rested on her, they became so kind and gentle that she wondered how it could be. Then she began to grow sorry for him because, like herself, he was a stranger and had no one to talk to. But he seemed in quest of some one, for he would look all around among the people; but soon his eyes would come back and rest so wistfully upon her face as if she were the one he was looking for after all. This puzzled Ninon greatly as she asked herself, 'Now, can it be that I am the one he's looking for?' At last it seemed that the stranger wished to speak to her, but hadn't the courage, and this amused Ninon vastly. Twice he advanced, faltered and then retreated. Ninon was convulsed with laughter and whispered:

"Oh, Pierre, isn't this the funniest thing that was ever in this great world. That big man there, is afraid of me—little Ninon."

"Then she saw that he thought she was laughing at him, and that he had straightened himself up stiff and haughty and had looked the other way. But he couldn't keep looking the other way very long. Lottie said, with an indescribable air that brought out a round of applause; "and when he timidly glanced toward her again, she gave him such an encouraging smile that he came at once to her side, and said:

"Little sister, will walk with me?"

"A happy thought struck Ninon. Her mother said she was too young to have a lover, but nothing had been said against her having another brother. So, with conscience clear, she whispered, 'Sit still here till I come back;' and the little boy sat still looking up into the sky, while Ninon let the tall stranger take her hand and lead her away. But his eyes were so gentle and true, she lost all fear and asked:

"Why do you call me sister?"

"Perhaps you can tell me," he said. "I came here an utter stranger, and I looked all around among the people and their faces were strange, and it seemed to me that they ever would be strange; but when I saw your face, you appeared to belong to me. I think we must be related."

"I never saw you before," said Ninon, shaking her head.

"I've seen you in my dreams all my life," he replied, looking at her so earnestly that the colour deepened on her cheek.

"I never heard anything so queer in all my life," said Ninon.

"You have much to learn," said the stranger.

"Yes," said Ninon humbly, "as mother says, I'm only a little child."

"You are not a little child, you are a beautiful maiden, Ninon," said the stranger earnestly.

"Nonsense," she said blushing. "I'll never be that?" But she liked to hear him say it, nevertheless. Lottie added, with an accent that again brought out a round of applause.

"I'm taking too much time," Lottie said, deprecatingly.

"Go on, go on," was the unanimous cry; and her little brother Dan, who had dropped nuts and apples and was leaning, open-mouthed on her knee, said:

"Lottie, if you don't go on, I'll do something dreadful."

So Lottie continued. "And the tall stranger smiled down upon her and said, 'Violets are my favourite flower, and you are a modest little violet.'

"Now you are wrong again," said Ninon; 'violets are a pale blue flower, and my cheeks are burning so oddly—I never had them do so before. I know I look like the peonies in the cure's garden.'

"You look like the sweetest rose in the cure's garden."

"Is that the way big brothers talk to their little sisters?"

"That is the way I talk to you, and I'm in earnest."

"How do little sisters treat a brother as big as you are?"

"Well, for one thing, they kiss them."

"That's queer," said Ninon innocently. "I should think it would be just the other way."

"Now I think of it, you are right," and the stranger gave her a kiss that set every nerve tingling.

"How odd," she exclaimed, half-frightened, half-delighted. "Pierre sometimes kisses me, but I never felt that way before."

"And big brothers take their little sisters in their arms and lift them over the rough places, as I do."

"And he carried her over a low stone wall that separated them from a shadowy grove.

"Oh, how nice," sighed Ninon, complacently, "I've always had to get over the rough places myself before."

"You will no longer," said the youth, as they passed under the low branches of a sheltering tree. "Oh, Ninon, as innocent as beautiful, can you not see that I am not your brother, but your lover; and he threw himself at her feet.

"But Ninon clasped her hands in the deepest distress, and cried, 'Oh, why did you say that? You might have been my brother as long as you chose. But mother says I can have no lover—that I am only a child; and like a startled fawn she fled from him, and a few moments later, panting and breathless, was sitting again beside her strange, little brother, who was still looking into the sky as if he saw a vision."

"The young stranger followed sadly, thinking how he might still win her, and teach her that she was no longer a child. Ninon soon became more composed, and looked around as if she would like to see him again. As from a distance he watched her from under his bent eyebrows, a happy thought struck him, and he said, 'I'll teach her that she is a woman,' and stepping forward, he selected out a neglected village maiden, who seemed ready for a little attention from anybody, and whirled her into the dance. Ninon, to her dismay, saw the arm of her whilom brother and lover encircling another girl, while she, apparently, was forgotten. She could scarcely believe her eyes. She looked at him fixedly, the picture of reproach, but he never seemed to look toward her. Surprise, resentment, grief, followed each other upon her fair face, like clouds passing over a sunny landscape. At last she buried her face upon Pierre's shoulder, and sobbed:

"He may be my lover or anything else, if he will only leave that hateful nunx to come to me once more."

"The tall stranger saw her drooping head, and quickly led his partner out of the dance and bowed himself away, leaving her bewildered; so quickly had he come and gone.

"Ninon looked up but he was nowhere to be seen, and the 'hateful nunx' stood alone. Suddenly a voice that had grown strangely familiar said at her side:

"May I be thy lover now?"

"Thou art false," she said faintly.

"Never to thee, Ninon. My thoughts were with thee every moment since you so cruelly left me. Do you not see why I sought another maiden? I wished to teach you that you were no longer a child, but a woman. I am your lover. Your heart has already claimed me, and these jealous tears prove it."

"Well, then," said Ninon, shyly smiling again, "if my heart has gone to you, and I half believe it has, I must follow my heart; and she put her hand in his."

Loud and long was the applause that greeted Lottie's conclusion. Dan executed a miniature breakdown as an expression of his feelings, and it would never seem that Mr. Dimmerly's chuckling laugh would never cease. De Forrest looked uneasy, and Hemstead was in a trance of bewildered delight. Alice and Harcourt exchanged significant glances, but upon the faces of Mrs. Marchmont and Bel were traces of disapproval.

"Now uncle," cried Lottie, "it's your turn. I have given you *comedy*; we shall expect from you high tragedy."

The word "comedy," as Lottie here used it, jarred unpleasantly upon Hemstead's ear, and the thought crossed Harcourt's mind, "Can she be leading Hemstead on in heartless jest, as we proposed at first? How I have changed since that day, and I was in hopes that she had, too, somewhat."

But Mr. Dimmerly had taken up the thread of the narrative where Lottie had dropped it. "Ninon," he said, "lived a long while ago, and did not properly refer the tall stranger to her mamma. A trysting place and time were agreed upon and the mysterious stranger in green, who was a forester, seemingly, said that he had a deer to kill before nightfall; and, raising her hand to his lips departed. Ninon sat a long time, lost in a maze of thought, and then, in the twilight, roused the rapt child from his visions, and they started for their home. But villainous faces had hovered on the outskirts of the village green, and ill-omened eyes had marked the beauty of Ninon and the spiritual face of her brother. At that time there was in France a terrible monster, known as Gilles de Laval, whose emissaries were ever