

CHOICE LITERATURE.

A BITTER LESSON.

BY FLORENCE B. HALLOWELL.

"Dear Hugh: Prepare to be surprised. Father and I will be in E— on Thursday. Father has some business to attend to there, and is also to see the oculist about his eyes. Doctor Patterson says he feels sure that complete recovery will follow a course of treatment. O Hugh, if father's sight can only be restored, how happy we will all be! It is so sad to see him groping his way about, and unable to go anywhere away from home without someone with him. He has grown much worse since you were home at Christmas, but is as patient and resigned as ever. Of course, if he puts himself under the care of this oculist, he will have to go to E— very frequently—perhaps board there for a time—and that will be expensive; but he has one hundred and fifty dollars on hand from the sale of old Betty and her colt, and in a case like this we must not think of cost. We will, on Thursday, go directly from the depot to the college, to pay you a call before attending to anything else. I know how glad you will be to see us.

"Your loving sister,
"ANNA."

Hugh Haven's face was radiant as he finished reading his sister's letter. The thought of seeing any one from home was delightful to him; for though the college in which he was a student was only fifty miles from the old farm where he had been born, his father's narrow circumstances made frequent visits out of the question.

Mr. Haven, though an energetic, industrious man, had failed to make farming pay him very well, and thought himself fortunate if at the close of each year he could make both ends meet. Hugh the only son, had been sent to college to gratify his ambition for an education that would fit him to be a civil engineer, at the cost of many a sacrifice on the part of his parents and sister. But of this he knew nothing, for they carefully concealed from him anything that might have had a tendency to worry or sadden him, and cheerfully economized in every way for his sake, feeling sure that the day would come when he would do honour to the name he bore.

But they could not keep from him the sorrow which entered the old home when his father's eyesight began to fail. At first Mr. Haven paid little attention to this misfortune, believing it only temporary, and thinking that bathing his eyes in weak tea or salt and water would soon restore them to their former strength.

But when he found after several months of such treatment that they grew worse instead of better, he consulted the family doctor, who pronounced them seriously affected, and advised him to consult an oculist without delay.

Mr. Haven did not follow this advice immediately, for the reason that his pecuniary circumstances just at that time did not render it, in his opinion, practicable. He needed every cent he could raise to meet a note which would fall due very soon, and therefore several weeks elapsed between the consultation with Dr. Patterson and the receipt of the letter which gave Hugh so much pleasure.

"I shall miss old Bet when I go home again," thought the boy, "but if it was necessary that she should be sold in order that father should have the money for this oculist, I shan't regret her."

It was very early the following morning when Mr. Haven and Anna arrived, and Hugh had only just finished his toilet. He recognized Anna's knock, and rushed to open the door; but he could scarcely utter the words of welcome which rose to his lips, so shocked was he at the appearance of his father, who seemed to have grown many years older since he had last seen him.

Mr. Haven was happily spared the sight of the sorrow and trouble in his son's face, but Anna saw it at once, and at the first opportunity drew Hugh aside to whisper,

"Don't feel so terribly about it, brother. Doctor Patterson says that father's recovery under careful treatment is certain, and this oculist we are to consult to-day is famous for his skill. Try to talk cheerfully, or father will notice your gloom, and it will worry him."

So Hugh tried to appear gay, and even essayed a laugh occasionally; but his heart was very heavy, and it was almost a relief to him, when, after a stay of an hour, his father and sister went away.

"We would stay longer, my boy," said Mr. Haven, as he rose to go, "but Anna has some shopping to do, and I have a little business to attend to before I see the oculist."

"Then I shan't see you again," said Hugh in a tone of regret.

"No," answered Anna, "but I will write to you as soon as we reach home, and let you know just what the oculist says."

"If I didn't have to attend class in about fifteen minutes," said Hugh, "I would go with you; I feel so anxious to know his opinion."

"Oh, its sure to be favourable; so don't worry. Father will be seeing as well as ever in a few weeks, I know," said Anna, as she left the room.

"I hope so! I hope so," murmured Hugh, as he opened a book to take a last glance at some definition which puzzled him. "He has been such a good father to me."

Just then the door flew open, without the preliminary ceremony of a knock, and Harry Rathbone, a fellow-student, came in.

"I say, Haven," he cried, "I've been deputed to ask you to pull in the boat-race to come off in June. What do you say? Of course you'll accept?"

"I don't know about that," said Hugh the blood mounting to his face as he thought that the only reason which kept him from answering gladly in the affirmative was the fear that he might not be able to meet the expenses an acceptance would involve. "You'll have to give me a day or two to think about it."

"Here's conceit," said Harry with a laugh. "A day or two to think about it, indeed! Why, do you know what an honour it is to take part in an affair of this kind?"

"Certainly; but I can't give you my answer now; I'll let you know to-morrow."

"All right. Perhaps you've only a proper appreciation of your own worth," and Harry went out whistling "Over the Garden Wall."

Hugh was an excellent oarsman, having had much practice on the river near his home, and nothing would have given him greater pleasure than to take part in the forth-coming boat-race with the crew of a rival college. But he knew that such a thing was out of the question, for his allowance was necessarily very limited, and he could not ask his father for even an extra ten dollars just at this time. It was pride alone which had prevented him from giving Harry a definite answer at once.

He sighed as he put on his hat and went out, wishing he had a little more of this world's goods, and his face wore a look of discontent very unusual to it; for Hugh had a singularly amiable disposition, and was generally inclined to look on the bright side of things.

It was a cold, windy February day, and as he crossed the street which led to the college a great gust of wind whirled something to his feet. He stooped down and picked it up. It was a brown envelope addressed in a sprawling hand to "William Raymond," and though it was sealed, a tear at one end revealed a roll of bills.

Hugh knew William Raymond by reputation. He was a resident of E—, a broker and real estate dealer, and reputed very wealthy. His office was at the other end of the town.

Hugh's first impulse—ah, if he had but acted on it how much sorrow would he have been saved!—was to take the money to Mr. Raymond at once; but the sight of several students hurrying into the college warned him that he had no time to spare if he wished to be in time for his class.

"There's no particular hurry about returning it," he thought. "I can hunt Raymond up at his house this evening, and I can't afford to lose this recitation," and he hurried on.

But before evening came a great temptation had assailed Hugh. An evil spirit had suggested that he should keep the money for his own use. Mr. Raymond was wealthy and would not feel the loss of the trifling sum this envelope doubtless contained.

"And I am in such dire need of a little money just now," thought the boy, as conscience whispered that he had no right to use what was not his own.

When he went back to his room after dinner, he took the money out of the envelope and counted it. One hundred and forty-seven dollars and twenty-eight cents! It seemed like a small fortune to Hugh. The temptation to keep it was very great. Twenty-five dollars would cover the cost of joining in the boat-race, and it would be such a mortification to have to refuse on the score of expense.

In such argument with his conscience did Hugh pass the hours until his bedtime. He slept little that night, and rose with a severe headache when morning dawned.

He went out and walked several times around a park which lay near the college; but he felt no better.

"Shall I, or shall I not?" These were the words which keep repeating themselves in his brain, and he could think of nothing else.

As he was returning to his room again he met Harry Rathbone on the stairs. He would have passed him with only a nod, but Harry stepped before him.

"You might as well give me your answer now about the race, Haven," he said; "you've slept on the matter and can't need any more time. Is it yes or no?"

"No I'm sorry; I'd like it of all things; but—the truth is, I can't afford it."

"Oh, well, of course if that's the case we'll say no more about it," said Harry looking very much embarrassed; and he let Hugh pass on at once.

Hugh had spoken on impulse, but he did not regret having done so, for a heavy load seemed lifted of his heart. He sat down in his room, opened a book, and began to study with a vim.

"I'll take the money to Mr. Raymond this evening," he thought, as the gong sounded for breakfast in the hall below; "then I'll feel better still."

He was in high spirits all day, and heard without a pang that the place in the boat crew that had been tendered to him was to be filled by Lionel Tucker, a young man for whom he had a strong antipathy.

"Tucker's a good hand at an oar; I'll say that much for him," he remarked to Harry Rathbone; and Tucker hearing of this, wondered what made Haven so awfully civil all at once.

As Hugh entered his room late in the afternoon, with the intention of procuring the money which was locked in his trunk, he found a letter on his table. It was from his sister, and he eagerly tore it open.

It was short.

"My dear Hugh," it ran, "after all, father did not consult the oculist. He concluded to wait a while. Please don't distress him by alluding to the subject in your letters. Dear brother, I don't like to caution you about your expenses; but I earnestly hope you will be prudent for the next few months, for I am afraid we will have to lessen your present meagre allowance, and it would pain us all to have you go in debt. You must not be discouraged or out of patience. All will come right after a time. Some of the greatest men that ever lived had to contend with poverty worse than yours in their youth. Remember this when you feel inclined to think your path harder than that of some others, and keep up a brave heart."

The letter fluttered from Hugh's hand and fell to the floor. For a long, long time he sat with his head on his hand, deep in thought. When at last he started up, his face wore a look of sullen resolution.

"I'll keep it," he muttered. "The day may come when I'll have great need of it, and it isn't just that one man should roll in riches while another nearly starves. I found the money, and I'll keep it."

And keep it he did. Even the sight of an advertisement of its loss in Mr. Raymond's name did not alter his resolution. But, though often tempted, he never used a dollar of it. Again and again, as the weeks went by, he took out a five or ten dollar note with the intention of spending it; but it seemed to burn his fingers, and was invariably returned to the envelope.

Sometimes he thought of going to Mr. Raymond and telling him the whole story, but his courage failed when he reflected what that gentleman might do and say in such an event; and how terrible it would be to confess himself lacking in that strict integrity with which he had always been credited by all who knew him.

It was a passage in a letter from his sister which made him take the dreaded step at last. The letter came the day before he was to leave college for the summer vacation, and only a short time before the hour set for the great boat-race.

The passage was as follows:

"You will, I know, be surprised and shocked to hear that your old friend, Luke Alby, has turned out very badly. He took a situation in Mr. Hunt's store about a month ago, and yesterday robbed the till of forty-odd dollars and ran off, no one knows where. His parents are almost broken-hearted. O Hugh, you cannot tell how proud we feel of the knowledge that we could trust you always, under any circumstances, to do what was right, and that no dishonest act of yours will ever bring the blush of shame to the cheeks of those who love you."

Over and over again Hugh read this sentence; then starting up, he unlocked his trunk, took out the envelope of money, and without giving himself a chance to think a second time of what he was doing, rushed off to the office of Mr. Raymond.

The broker was fortunately at his desk in a private room and Hugh was at once admitted.

The confession was a hard one for any boy to make; but Hugh went through it bravely, making no excuses for his conduct, giving only the bare, terrible facts. As he concluded, he drew the money from his pocket and laid it on the desk with a sigh of relief.

To his surprise Mr. Raymond handed it back to him.

"I have no right to this," said the broker. "Oddly enough, it belongs to your own father."

"My father!" echoed Hugh, turning very pale.

"Yes; he came to E— last February to pay me this money; but had the misfortune to lose it on his way here. Your sister retraced her steps, and searched everywhere for it, even in your room, but without success. They returned home at once, and a couple of days later your father sent me the money due me. It is strange they did not write to you about it."

Hugh's lips moved, but no sound left them. He rose, and walked out of the office like one in a dream. A terrible fear was knocking at his heart. Could it be possible that it was the loss of this money which had decided his father not to see the oculist?

He determined to go home at once. He could not wait a moment longer than was necessary for the answer to that question. He threw his few belongings into his trunk, and hurried to the depot. Several of his friends met him, and one or two inquired if he were not going to the race; but he did not answer; he only stared at them in a bewildered way. He had forgotten all about the boat-race.

He reached the farm at seven o'clock in the evening, dusty and weary, for he had walked from the station three miles away. As he pushed open the yard-gate he saw that some one was sitting on the front-porch. His heart bounded joyfully, but sank again like lead in his breast as he hurried up the path. Could that bent, white-haired old man sitting in the easy-chair, with his chin sunk down on his breast and his hands crossed listlessly before him, be his father? Hugh had thought him changed when he had seen him in February; but that was nothing to the change which had taken place since.

The blind man's quick ears caught the sound of the familiar footsteps.

"Is it my dear boy come back?" he asked. "Why, Hugh lad, we did not expect you so soon."

"Father," and Hugh dropped on one knee by the chair, and took his father's hand in his, "I want to ask you one question. If you love me, answer me without reserve. Why did you decide not to see that oculist last February?"

For an instant Mr. Haven hesitated, then he said in a low voice.

"Because I couldn't afford it, lad."

"I thought so," groaned Hugh; and then, for the second time that day, he faltered out his miserable confession.

Mr. Haven listened in silence; but though his face paled a little as Hugh proceeded, he did not relax his hold on the boy's hand.

"I won't say I'm not sorry to hear this, Hugh," he said, when his son had finished his story. "It grieves me very much to know that you were so weak. But I am sure you have learned a lesson, and will know how to resist temptation in the future. You see, when we decided to send you to college, ready money was necessary, and I was obliged to mortgage the farm to Raymond for four hundred dollars. When I took that trip to E—in February, part of my business was to pay the second note, which fell due at that time; and of course when I lost the money in the envelope there was no help for it but to send Raymond the money I had raised by the sale of old Bet and the colt, and which I had laid aside for the oculist. I had no more stock that I could sell, and would not borrow, for I dared not go any deeper into debt while my health was so poor. It has taken all our ingenuity to meet the payments on the mortgage and to keep you going. I wish I had told you all this before, Hugh."

"Oh, if you only had!" exclaimed the boy. "It almost maddens me to think that through my culpable weakness you have been kept in darkness nearly five long months. But we must delay no longer. To-morrow we will go to E—and you shall place yourself immediately under treatment. You can still see a little, father?"

"No," was the reply, uttered in a sad tone. "All is quite dark now, Hugh."