

CHOICE LITERATURE.

A KNIGHT OF THE XIX. CENTURY.

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

CHAPTER XLIX.—Continued.

In the dusk of the evening Haldane had not seen Laura and Mr. Beaumont, as he entered, and he now greeted them with a quiet bow; but Laura came and gave him her hand, saying,

"We did not expect you to return so soon, Mr. Haldane."

"After hearing that Mrs. Arnot was ill I could not rest till I saw her, and I only received her note this morning."

He now saw that both Laura's eyes and Mrs. Arnot's were red with weeping.

The latter, in answer to his questioning, troubled face, said, "The yellow fever has broken out in the city where my sister resides. Her husband, Mr. Poland, has very important business interests there which he could not drop instantly. She would not leave him, and Amy, her daughter, would not leave her mother. Indeed, before they were aware of their danger, the disease had become epidemic, and Mr. Poland was stricken down. The first telegram is from my sister and states this fact; the second is from my niece, and it breaks my heart to read it," and she handed it to him, and he read as follows:

"The worst has happened. Father very low. Doctor gives little hope. Almost fear for mother's mind. The city in panic—our help leaving—medical attendance uncertain. It looks as if I should be left alone, and helpless. What shall I do?"

"Was there ever a more pathetic cry of distress?" said Mrs. Arnot with another burst of grief. "Oh, that I were strong and well, and I would fly to them at once."

"Do you think I could do any good by going?" asked Laura, stepping forward eagerly, but very pale.

"No," interposed Mr. Beaumont, with sharp emphasis; "you would only become an additional burden, and add to the horrors of the situation."

"Mr. Beaumont is right; but you are a noble woman even to think of such a thing," said Haldane, and he gave her a look of such strong feeling and admiration that a little colour came into her white cheeks.

"She does not realize what she is saying," added Mr. Beaumont. "It would be certain death for an unacclimated Northerner to go down there now."

Laura grew very pale again. She had realized what she was saying, and was capable of the sacrifice; but the man who had recognized and appreciated her heroism was not the one who held her plighted troth.

Paying no heed to Beaumont's last remark, Haldane snatched up the daily paper that lay upon the table, and turned hastily to a certain place for a moment, then looking at his watch, exclaimed eagerly:

"I can do it if not a moment is wasted. The express train for the South leaves in an hour, and it connects with all the through lines. Miss Romeyn, please write for me, on your card, an introduction to your cousin, Miss Poland, and I will present it, with the offer of my assistance, at the earliest possible moment."

"Egbert, no!" said Mrs. Arnot, with strong emphasis, and rising from her couch, though so ill and feeble. "I will not permit you to sacrifice your life for comparative strangers."

He turned and took her hand in both of his, and said,

"Mrs. Arnot, there is no time for remonstrance, and it is useless. I am going, and no one shall prevent me." Then he added, in tones and with a look of affection which she never forgot, "Deeply as I regret this sad emergency, I would not, for ten times the value of my life, lose the opportunity it gives me. I can now show you a small part of my gratitude by serving those you love. Besides, as you say, that telegram is such a pathetic cry of distress, that were you all strangers, I would obey its unconscious command. But haste, the card!"

"Egbert, you are excited; you do not realize what you are saying!" cried the agitated lady.

He looked at her steadily for a moment, and then said, in a tone so quiet and firm that it ended all remonstrance, "I realize fully what I am doing, and it is my right to decide upon my own action. To you, at least, I never broke my word, and I assure you that I will go. Miss Romeyn will you oblige me by instantly writing that card? Your aunt is not able to write it."

His manner was so authoritative that Laura wrote with a trembling hand:

"The bearer is a very dear friend of aunt's. How brave and noble a man he is you can learn from the fact that he comes to your aid now. In deepest sympathy and love,

"LAURA."

"Good-bye, my dear, kind friend," said Haldane, cheerily to Mrs. Arnot, while Laura was writing, "you overrate the danger. I feel that I shall return again, and if I do not, there are many worse evils than dying."

"Your mother," said Mrs. Arnot, with a low sob.

"I shall write to her a long letter on the way and explain everything."

"She will feel that it can never be explained."

"I cannot help it," replied the young man, resolutely. "I know that I am doing right, or my conscience is of no use to me whatever."

Mrs. Arnot put her arms around his neck as if she were his mother, and said in low, broken tones:

"God bless you, and go with you, my true knight; nay, let me call you my own dear son this once. I will thank you in heaven for all this, if not here," and then she kissed him again and again.

"You have now repaid me a thousandfold," he faltered, and then broke away.

"Mr. Haldane," said Laura, tearfully, as he turned to her, "cousin Amy and I have been the closest friends from childhood, and I cannot tell you how deeply I appreciate

your going to her aid. I could not expect a brother to take such a risk."

Haldane felt that his present chance to look into Laura's face might be his last, and again, before he was aware, he let his eyes reveal all his heart. She saw as if written in them, "A brother might not be willing to take the risk, but I am."

"Do I then render you a special service?" he asked, in a low tone.

"You could not render me a greater one."

"Why, this is better than I thought," he said. "How fortunate I was in coming this evening! There, please do not look so distressed. A soldier takes such risks as these every day and never thinks of them. You have before you a happy life, Miss Laura, and I am very, very glad. Good courage and good-bye," and his manner now was frank, cheerful, and brotherly.

She partly obeyed an impulse to speak, but checked it, and tremblingly bent her head; but the pressure she gave his hand meant more than he, or even she herself, understood at the time.

"Good-bye, Mr. Beaumont," he said, hurriedly. "I need not wish you happiness, since you already possess it;" and he hastened from the room and the house without once looking back.

A moment later they heard his rapid, resolute tread echoing from the stony pavement, but it speedily died away.

Laura listened breathlessly at the window until the faintest sound ceased. She had had her wish. She had seen a man who was good enough and brave enough to face any danger to which he felt impelled by a chivalric sense of duty. She had seen a man depart upon as knightly an expedition as any of which she had ever read; but it was not her knight.

"This young Haldane is a brave fellow, and I had no idea that there was so much in him," remarked Mr. Beaumont, in his quiet and refined tones. "Really, take it all together, this has been a scene worthy of the brush of a great painter."

"Oh, Auguste!" exclaimed Laura, "how can you look only on the æsthetic side of such a scene?" And she threw herself into a low chair, and sobbed as if her heart would break.

Mr. Beaumont was much perplexed, for he found that all of his elegant platitudes were powerless to either comfort or soothe her.

"Leave her with me," said Mrs. Arnot. "The excitements of the day have been too much for her. She will be better to-morrow."

Mr. Beaumont was glad to obey. He had been accustomed from childhood to leave all disagreeable duties to others, and he thought that Laura had become a trifle hysterical. "A little lavender and sleep is all that she requires," he remarked to himself as he walked home in the starlight. "But, by Jove! she is more lovely in tears than in smiles."

That he, Auguste Beaumont, should risk the loss of her and all his other possessions by exposing his precious person to a loathsome disease, did not enter his mind.

"O, auntie, auntie, I would rather have gone myself and died, than feel as I do to-night," sobbed Laura.

"Courage," Laura, was Egbert's last word to you," said Mrs. Arnot; "and courage and faith must be our watch-words now. We must act, too, and at once. Please tell your uncle I wish a draft for five hundred dollars immediately, and explain why. Then enclose it in a note to Egbert, and see that Michael puts it in his hands at the depot. Write to Egbert not to spare money where it may be of any use, or can secure any comfort. We cannot tell how your aunt Amy is situated, and money is always useful. We must telegraph to you, cousin Amy that a friend is coming. Let us realize what courage, prayer, and faith can accomplish. Action will do you good Laura."

The girl sprang to her feet and carried out her aunt's wishes with precision. That was the kind of "lavender" which her nature required.

After writing all that her aunt dictated, she added on her own part,

"If the knowledge that I honour you above other men can sustain you, rest assured that this is true; if my sympathy and constant remembrance can lighten your burdens, know that you and those you serve will rarely be absent from my thoughts. You make light of your heroic act. To me it is a revelation. I did not know that men could be so strong and noble in our day. Whether such words are right or conventional, I have not even thought. My heart is full, and I must speak them. That God may bless you, aid you in serving those I love so dearly, and return you in safety, will be my constant prayer."

"Auntie falters out one more message, 'Tell Egbert that sister Amy's household have not our faith,' suggest it, teach it if you can! Farewell truest of friends."

"LAURA ROMEYN."

Mr. Growther was asleep in his chair when Haldane entered, and he stole by him and made preparations for departure with silent celerity. Then, valise in hand, he touched his old friend, who started up and exclaimed:

"Lord a' massy, where did you come from, and where yer goin'? You look kinder speritlike. I say, am I awake? I was dreamin' you was startin' off to kill somebody."

"Dreams go by contraries. It may be a long time before we meet again. But we shall have many a good talk over old times, if not here, in the better home, for your 'peaked-faced little chap' will lead you there," and he explained all in a few brief sentences. "And now, my kind, true friend, good-bye. I thank you from my heart for the shelter you have given me, and for your staunch friendship when friends were so few. You have done all that you could to make a man of me, and now that you won't have time to quarrel with me about it, I tell you to your face that you are not a mean man. There are few larger-hearted, larger-souled men in this city," and before the bewildered old gentleman could reply, he was gone.

"Lord a' massy, Lord a' massy," groaned Mr. Growther, "the bottom is jest fallin' out o' everything. If he dies with the yellow-jack I'll git to cousin's as bad as ever."

Haldane found Mrs. Arnot's coachman at the depot with

the letter Laura had written. As he read it his face flushed with the deepest pleasure. Having a few moments to spare he pencilled hastily:

"MISS ROMEYN:—I have received from Michael the letter with the draft. Say to Mrs. Arnot I shall obey both the letter and spirit of her instructions. Let me add for myself that my best hopes are more than fulfilled. That you, who know all my past, could write such words seems like a heavenly dream. But I assure you that you over-estimate both the character of my action and the danger. It is all plain, simple duty, which hundreds of men would perform as a matter of course. I ask but one favour—please look after Mr. Growther. He is growing old and feeble; I owe him so much. Mrs. Arnot will tell you. Yours,—"

"He couldn't write a word more, Miss; the train was a-movin' when he jumped on," said Michael when he delivered the note.

But that final word had for Laura no conventional meaning. She had long known that Haldane was, in truth, hers, and she had deeply regretted the fact, and would at any time have willingly broken the chain that bound him, had it been in her power. Would she break it to-night? Yes, unhesitatingly; but it would now cost her a pain to do so, which, at first, she would not understand. On that stormy July evening when she gave Haldane a little private concert, she had obtained a glimpse of a manhood unknown to her before, and it was full of pleasing suggestion. To-night that same manhood which was at once so strong and yet so unselfish and gentle, had stood out before her distinct and luminous in the light of a knightly deed, and she saw with the absoluteness of irresistible conviction that such a manhood was above and beyond all surface polish, all mere æsthetic culture, all earthly rank—that it was something that belonged to God, and partook of the eternity of His greatness and permanence.

By the kindred and noble possibilities of her own womanly nature, she was of necessity deeply interested in such a man, having once recognized him; and now for weeks she must think of him as consciously serving her in the most knightly way and at the hourly risk of his life, and yet hoping for no greater reward than her esteem and respect. While she knew that he would have gone eagerly for her aunt's sake, and might have gone from a mere sense of duty, she had been clearly shewn that the thought of serving her had turned his dangerous task into a privilege and a joy. Could she follow such a man daily and hourly with her thoughts, could she in vivid imagination watch his self-sacrificing efforts to minister to, and save those she loved, with only the cool decorous interest that Mr. Beaumont would deem proper in the woman betrothed to himself? The future must answer this question.

When Haldane had asked for a ticket to the southern city to which he was destined, the agent stared at him a moment and said:

"Don't you know yellow fever is epidemic there?"

"Yes," replied Haldane with such cold reserve of manner that no further questions were asked; but the fact that he, a medical student, had bought a ticket for the plague-stricken city was stated in the "Courier" the following morning. His old friend, Mr. Iverson, soon informed himself of the whole affair, and in a glowing letter of eulogy made it impossible for anyone to assert that Mrs. Arnot had asked the young man to go to the aid of her relatives at such tremendous personal risk. Indeed it was clearly stated, with the unimpeachable Mr. Beaumont as authority, that she had entreated him not to go, and had not the slightest expectation of his going until he surprised her by his unalterable decision.

After reading and talking over this letter, sustained as it had been by years of straightforward duty, even good society concluded that it could socially recognize and receive this man; and yet as the old lady had remarked, there was still an excellent prospect that he would enter heaven before he found a welcome to the exclusive circles of Hillaton.

CHAPTER L.—"O DREADED DEATH!"

Haldane found time in the enforced pauses of his journey to write a long and affectionate letter to his mother, explaining all, and asking her forgiveness again, as he often had before. He also wrote to Mrs. Arnot a cheerful note, in which he tried to put his course in the most ordinary and matter-of-fact light possible, saying that as a medical student it was the most natural thing in the world for him to do.

As he approached the infected city he had the train chiefly to himself, and he saw that the outgoing trains were full, and when at last he walked its streets it reminded him of a household of which some member is very ill, or dead, and the few who were moving about walked as if under a sad constraint and gloom. On most faces were seen evidences of anxiety and trouble, while a few were reckless.

Having obtained a carriage, he was driven to Mr. Poland's residence in a suburb. He dismissed the carriage at the gate, preferring to quietly announce himself. The sultry day was drawing to a close as he walked up the gravelled drive that led to the house. Not even the faintest zephyr stirred the luxuriant tropical foliage that here and there shadowed his path, and yet the stillness and quiet nature did not suggest peace and repose so much as it did death. The motionless air, heavily laden with a certain dead sweetness of flowers from the neighbouring garden, might well bring to mind the breathless silence and the heavy atmosphere of the chamber in which the lifeless form and the fading funeral wreath are perishing together.

So oppressed was Haldane, he found himself walking softly and mounting the steps of the piazza with a silent tread, as if he were in truth approaching the majesty of death. Before he could ring the bell there came from the parlour a low, sad prelude, played on a small reed organ that had been built in the room, and then a contralto voice of peculiar sweetness sang the following words with such depth of feeling that one felt that they revealed the innermost emotions of the heart:

O priceless life, warm, throbbing life,
With thought and love and passion rife,
I cling to thee.