

CHOICE LITERATURE.

FROM TEST TO EARNEST.

BY REV. E. P. KOB.

CHAPTER XXVIII.—Continued.

A beautiful colour dawned in Alice's face. She was recovering from her languor and weakness with marvellous rapidity. It was not strange, for no elixir was ever distilled so potent as that which now infused its subtle spirit into heart and brain.

But a few hours before, the wayward but good-hearted companion of her childhood, the manly friend of the present and future—she would permit herself to think of him in no other light—seemed lost to her forever; to have had in fact no real existence; for if Harcourt had been content to act De Forrest's part the evening before, Alice Martell would soon have shaken off even his acquaintance. But De Forrest's words had suggested that the Harcourt of her dreams still existed. She had seen another trace of manly, considerate feeling, in his thoughtfulness of the servants' fears, and of their comfort. And now the torn curtain and broken glass suggested the impetuous action of one who thought of her peril rather than the trifles around him.

Twice now she had been told that Harcourt was "beside himself," and yet never had madness seemed so rational; and her eyes dwelt on the marks of his phrensy before her with unmingled satisfaction. If he had been cool then, her heart now would be cold.

She could not rest, and at last thought that the frosty air would cool the fever in her cheeks, and so wrapped herself for a walk upon the broad piazza. Moreover, she felt, as Lottie had, that she would be glad to have no eyes, not even her father's witness their meeting. She felt that she could act more naturally and composedly if alone with him, and at the same time show the almost sisterly regard through which she had hoped to win him to his better self.

As she paced up and down the piazza in the early twilight, her attention was directed to a spot where some one, instead of going deliberately down the steps, had plunged off into the piled up snow, and then just opposite and beyond the broad path were tracks wide apart, as if some one had bounded rather than run toward the river.

She ceased her walk, and stood as one who had discovered a treasure. Did these foot-prints and the torn curtain belong together? She felt that it could not be otherwise. There was then, no, cold-blooded, cowardly Harcourt, and traces of the real man grew clearer.

"But how could he reach the river in that direction without risking his neck?" and she indulged in quite a panic as she remembered the intervening steps. She longed yet dreaded to see him, that she might ask an explanation of the traces she had found; for, having done him injustice, she generously meant to make him full amends.

But to her great disappointment the sleigh now returned without him.

"I left the message, miss," said the coachman, "but they told me that Mr. Harcourt had a sudden business call to New York."

Alice sought to draw the man out a little, and it was also her habit to speak kindly to those in her employ; so she said:

"I fear, Burtis, you will be a little jealous of Mrs. Marchmont's coachman. If it had not been for him we could not have escaped, I think."

"Well, thank God, I'm not much behind him. If he stopped two funerals, I stopped one."

"Why how is that Burtis?"

"Faix, miss, an' do ye see thim tracks there? They go straight to the river, and it was Mister Harcourt as made them. He was jist one second on the way after he saw the light, and by rinnin' an' rollin' an' tumblin' he was at the boat-house in a wink. When I gets there, a-puffin' an' a-blowin', he's unlocked the door by breakin' it in, and is a haulin' at the ould boat; and because I wouldn't lend a hand in gettin' out the crazy ould craft that wouldn't float a hundred foot, he swears at me in the most onchristian manner, and tries to get it out alone. But ye know, miss, how he couldn't do that, and soon he gives it up and falls to gnawin' his nails like one beside himself, an' a-mutterin' how he must either 'save her or drown with her.' Then he dashed up the bank agin' and he and his black hoss was off like a whirlwind. If the Naught Tillyus, or any other thing as would float was here, ye'd had no need of Mrs. Marchmont's coachman. But I thought he'd off wid me he'd because I wouldn't help out wid the ould boat."

Not a word or sign did Alice place in the way of the man's garrulity, but rather her breathless interest as with parted lips she bent forward encouraging him to go on. Was he not reciting an epic poem of which she was the heroine and Harcourt the hero? The true epics of the world are generally told in the baldest prose.

"There was one thing I didn't like," continued the man gathering up his reins, "and I've thought I ought to speak of it to ye or ye's father. All his talk was about saving yerself, and not a whisper of the ould gentleman, who has been so kind to him all his life. It sounded kinder onnatural like."

"All right Burtis, you have done your duty in speaking to me, and so need not say anything to Mr. Martell about it. I rather think you *have* prevented a funeral, and perhaps I owe you as many thanks as Mrs. Marchmont's coachman. At any rate you will find on Christmas that you have not been forgotten."

So the man drove to the stable with the complacent consciousness of having done his duty, and warned his mistress against a "very onnatural feelin'" in the young man.

The moment he disappeared around the corner, Alice stood undecided a moment, like a startled deer, and then sped down the path to the boat-house. The snow was tramped somewhat by the big lumbering feet of the coachman, but had it not been, Alice now had wings. The twilight was deepening, and she could not wait till the mor-

row before following up this trail that led to the khol of her heart.

She paused in the winding path when half way down the bank, that she might gloat over the mad plunges by which Harcourt had crossed it, straight to the river. She followed his steps to the brink of a precipice and saw with a thrill of mingled fear and delight where he had slid and fallen twenty feet or more.

"How cruelly I have misjudged him," she thought. "When he was here eager to risk his life for me, my false fancy pictured him at Addie Marchmont's side. And yet it was well I did not know the truth, for it would have been so much harder to have looked death in the face so long, with this knowledge of his friendship. How strangely he acted! He acted when together; but come, that is no affair of mine. Let me be thankful that I have not lost the friend of my childhood."

A little later she stood at the boat-house. The door hung by one hinge only, and the large stone lay near with which it had crashed it in. She entered the dusky place as if it were a temple. Had it not been consecrated by service of love; by the costliest offering that can be made—life? Here he said he would save or perish with her; here he had sought to make good his words.

She picked up one of the matches he had dropped, and struck it, that she might look into the neglected boat. Never was the utter unworldliness of a craft noted with such satisfaction before.

"While I vainly thought he would not venture to our aid at all, he strained every nerve to launch this old shell. Thanks to obstinate Burtis, who would not help him."

She struck another match that she might look more closely; then uttered a piteous cry.

"Merciful heaven, is this blood on this rope? It surely is. Now I think of it, he kept his right-hand gloved this morning, and offered his left to Mr. Hemstead in salutation. Father and I, in our cruel wrong, did not offer to take his hand. And yet it would seem that he tugged with bleeding hands at these ropes, that he might almost the same as throw away his life for us."

"I can scarce understand it. No brother could do more. He was braver than Mr. Hemstead, for he had a staunch boat, and experienced help, while my old playmate was eager to go alone in this wretched thing that would only have floated him out to deep water where he would drown."

"Ah, well, let the future be what it may, one cannot be utterly unhappy who has loved such a man. If he is willing to give his life up for me, I surely can get him to give up his evil wayward tendencies, and then I must be content."

She now began to experience reaction from her strong excitement, and wearily made her way back to the house.

Her father met her at the door, and exclaimed, "Why Alice, where have you been? You look ready to sink!"

"I have been to the boat-house, father," she replied, in a low, quick tone, "and I wish you to go there to-morrow, for you will there learn how cruelly we have misjudged Mr. Harcourt."

"But my child, I am troubled about you. You need quiet and rest after all you have passed through;" and he hastily brought her a glass of wine.

"I needed more the assurance that my old friend and playmate was not what we thought this morning," she said with drooping eyes.

"Well, my darling we will make amends right royally. He will be here to-morrow evening, and you shall have no occasion to find fault with me. But please take care of yourself. You do not realize what you have passed through, and I fear you have yet to suffer the consequences."

But more exhilarating than the wine which her father placed to her lips was the memory of what she had seen. Her's was one of those spiritual natures that suffer more through the mind than body. She encountered her greatest peril in the fear of Harcourt's unworthiness.

Letters in the evening mail summoned her father to the city on the morrow, and he left her with many injunctions to be very quiet. It was evident that his heart and life were bound up in her.

But as the day grew bright and mild she again found her way to the boat-house. With greater accuracy she marked his every hasty step from the house to the shore. Harcourt little thought in his wild alarm that he was leaving such mute but eloquent advocates.

Poor fellow! he was groaning over their harsh judgment, but vowing in his pride he would never undeceive them. He did not remember that he had left a trail clear to dumb eyes, and conclusive as a demonstration to the unerring instinct of a loving heart.

He had gone to the city and accomplished his business in a mechanical way. He returned with the first train, though why he scarcely knew. He felt no inclination to visit at Mrs. Marchmont's any more, for since he had come more fully under Miss Martell's influence, Addie had lost the slight hold she had upon him, and now her manner was growing unendurable. He also felt that after Mr. Martell's coldness he could not visit there again, and he doggedly purposed to give his whole time to his business till events righted him, if they ever did.

But his social philosophy was put to immediate rout by Mr. Martell's message, which he received on his return. Five minutes later he was urging his black horse toward the familiar place, at a pace but a little more decorous than when seeking Hemstead's assistance on the memorable evening of the accident.

"Miss Martell is out," stolidly said the woman who answered his summons.

As he was turning away in deep disappointment, Burtis appeared on the scene, and with a complacent grin, remarked:

"She's only down by the boat-house, a-seenin' how I saved ye from drownin'."

Harcourt slipped a bank note into his hand, and said, "There's for your good services now if not then," and was off for the water's edge with as much speed as he dare use before observant eyes.

"They must have found out from the old coachman that

I was not the coward they deemed me," he thought. If so, I'll see he has a merry Christmas."

He saw Alice standing with her back toward him, looking out upon the river, that now rippled and sparkled in the sunlight as if a dark, stormy night had never brooded over an icy, pitiless thill.

The soft snow muffled his steps, until at last he said, hesitatingly:

"Miss Martell."

She started violently, and trembled as if shaken by the wind.

"Pardon me," he said hastily. "It was very stupid in me to thus startle you, but you seemed so intent on something upon the river that I thought you would never see me."

"I—I was not expecting you," she faltered.

"Then I have done wrong—have been mistaken in coming."

"Oh, no, I did not mean that. I thought you were in New York. We expected you this evening."

"Shall I go away then, and come back this evening?"

"Yes, come back this evening, but do not go now—that is just yet. I have something to say to you. Please forgive my confusion. I fear my nerves have been shaken by what I have passed through."

And yet such "confusion" in one usually so composed did puzzle him, but he said hastily, feeling that it would be better to break the ice at once:

"I came here not to 'forgive,' but to seek your forgiveness."

"You seek my forgiveness!" she said in unfeigned surprise.

"Yes," he replied, humbly bowing his head. "Heaven knows that I am weak and faulty enough, but when I have wronged any one, I am willing to make acknowledgment and reparation. I cannot tell you how eager I have been to make such acknowledgment to you, whom I revere as my good angel. I acted like a fool in the chapel last Monday afternoon, and did you great injustice. You have never shone on me 'coldly and distantly like a star,' but again and again have stooped from the height of your heavenly character that you might lift me out of the mire. It's a mystery to me how you can do it. But believe me, when I am myself, I am grateful; and," he continued slowly, his square jaw growing firm and rigid, and a sombre, resolute light coming into his dark large eyes, "if you will have patience with me, I will yet do credit to the good advice, written in a school-girl's hand, which I keep treasured in my room. Weak and foolish as I have been, I should have been far worse were it not for those letters, and—and your kindness since. But I am offending you," he said sadly, as Alice averted her face. "However the future may separate us, I wanted you to know that I gratefully appreciate all the kindness of the past. I sincerely crave your forgiveness for my folly last Monday. For some reason I was not myself. I was blinded with—I said what I knew to be untrue. Though you might with justice have shone on me 'coldly and distantly as a star,' you have treated me almost as a sister might. Please say that I am forgiven, and I will go at once."

Imagine his surprise when, as her only response, she said abruptly:

"Mr. Harcourt, come with me."

His wonder increased as he saw that her eyes were moist with tears.

She took him to the bluff, back of the boat-house, where in the snow were the traces of one who had slid and fallen from a perilous height.

"What do these marks mean?" she asked.

"It didn't hurt me any," he replied with rising colour.

"Did you stop to think at the time whether it would or not? Have you thought what a chain of circumstantial evidence you left against you on that dreadful night? Now come with me into the boat-house, and let me tell you in the meantime that a lace curtain in my room is sadly torn, and one of my window-panes broken."

While he yet scarcely understood her, every fibre of his being was beginning to thrill with hope and gladness; but he said deprecatingly:

"Please forgive my intrusion. In my haste that night I blundered into a place where I had no right to be. No doubt I was very rough and careless, but I was thinking of another kind of pain—the pain of cold and fear which you were suffering. I would gladly have broken that to fragments."

"Oh, I am not complaining. The abundant proof that you were not deliberate delights me. But come into the boat-house, and I will convict both you and myself, and then we shall see who is the proper one to ask forgiveness. What is this upon these ropes, Mr. Harcourt, and how did it come here?"

"Oh, that is nothing; I only bruised my hand a little breaking in the door."

"Is it nothing that you tugged with bleeding hands at these ropes, that you might go alone in this wretched shell of a boat to our aid? Why Mr. Harcourt, it would not have floated you a hundred yards, and Burtis told you so. Was it mere vapouring when you said, 'If I cannot save them, I can at least drown with them'?"

"No," he said impetuously, the blood growing dark in his face, "it was not vapouring. Can you believe me capable of hollow acting on the eve, as I feared, of the most awful tragedy that ever threatened?"

"Oh, not the most 'awful'!"

"The most awful to me."

"No, I cannot. As I said before, I have too much circumstantial evidence against you. Mr. Harcourt, true justice looks at the intent of the heart. You unconsciously left abundant proof here of what you intended, and feel that I owe my life to you as truly as to Mr. Hemstead. And yet I was so cruelly unjust yesterday morning as to treat you coldly, because I thought my old friend and playmate had let strangers go to our help. With far better reason I wish to ask your forgive—"

"No, no," said Harcourt eagerly, "circumstances appeared against me that evening, and you only judged naturally. You have no forgiveness to ask, for you have made