

CHOICE LITERATURE.

FROM JEST TO EARNEST.

BY REV. E. P. ROE.

CHAPTER XXXI.—UNDER THE MISTLETOE.

Instead of applause, there was the truer and more appropriate tribute of silence when Hemstead finished the mosaic of a story which, by the various narratives, had been developed so differently and yet characteristically. The eyes of more than one were moist, and Lottie hastily left the room.

Mr. Dimmerly was the first to recover himself, and, after blowing his nose most vociferously, managed to say:

"Well, Nephew, it was hardly the thing to get a sermon off on us before Sunday, but, since it was rather well done, I don't think we will complain. I now suggest that you young people have some games that will set your blood in motion. The last hours of Christmas eve should ever be the merriest. I will send Lottie back—the tender-hearted little minx, who must take everything in earnest."

His advice was followed, and Lottie soon returned, becoming, as usual, the life of the company. A breezy sound of voices and many a ringing laugh took the place of the former hush, as games and jests followed in quick succession.

Harcourt was good-naturedly on the alert to serve Hemstead, and, in a game that required the absence of two of the company from the room a few moments, suggested the names of the Student and Lottie Marsden. They, nothing loth, went out together into the empty hall.

"Do you know," said Hemstead, "I think it a little strange I have not had a chance to speak to you alone, since we were at the fallen tree in the clump of hemlocks."

"I did not know," said Lottie, laughing and blushing, "that the 'fallen tree' was a trysting place."

"Well," said he, eagerly, "I met a young lady there once, whom I would gladly meet there or anywhere else again."

"To see whether she had taken your advice?"

"That depends. I doubt whether she can 'make a man' of a certain individual, and I fear she will not take the other alternative."

"She will probably do as Ninon did—follow her heart."

"If one could only know whether your heart would lead you!" he said, blushing deeply, and looking at her so wistfully that she, seeing through his thin disguise, had it on her tongue to tell him. But, instead, she took a few dancing steps away, and, with no intention whatever, stood just under the mistletoe as she laughingly said:

"That reminds me of what father often says: How nice it would be to speculate, if one only knew every time how it would turn out."

"Miss Marsden!" he exclaimed, hurriedly, "you are right under the mistletoe."

She tried to spring away, but he snatched her hand and detained her, while he stood hesitatingly at her side, looking at her lips as if they were the gates of Paradise.

"Well," said she, laughing and blushing, "I have nothing to do in the matter."

"But I dare not take it unless you give it."

"And I dare not give it unless you take it."

If Hemstead did not emulate Mr. Dimmerly's "explosion," the ancient rite was nevertheless honoured in a way that Lottie would not soon forget. Never did a kiss mean more, express more, or impart more, upon any occasion that the ceremony had been solemnized by her ancestors, back to the times of the Druids.

But this moment of bliss was of short duration, for Mrs. Marchmont unexpectedly entered the hall, exclaiming, in unfeigned astonishment:

"Well, well! what does this mean?"

Of course, Lottie was the first to recover herself, and managed to falter:

"You see, Auntie, by some accident—I assure you it was an accident; I didn't mean to do it at all—I got under that pesky mistletoe of uncle's, and Mr. Hemstead, it would seem, had taken to heart uncle's homily on the duty of keeping up old customs. Mr. Hemstead, you know, is so conscientious, and I suppose he felt that he must, poor man; and so—and thus—"

At this moment Harcourt's expedients of delay failed, and they were loudly summoned back to the dining-room.

"I hope there will be no more such nonsense," said Mrs. Marchmont, severely.

"Oh, no, indeed, Auntie; it will never happen again. Only the strongest sense of duty could have impelled Mr. Hemstead to do such a thing;" and they escaped to the dining-room only to be subjected to a fire from another quarter. Their colour was so high, and they had such an air of general confusion, that Harcourt cried laughingly:

"I more than half believe that you have been under the mistletoe."

"Nonsense," said Lottie; "with auntie in the hall? If you think Mr. Hemstead is brave enough for that, you greatly misjudge him."

But De Forrest was wofully suspicious, and had many uneasy thoughts about the "jest" which Lottie must be carrying out; for surely it could not be possible she was becoming in earnest.

Hemstead and Lottie made wretched work in guessing the word required of them from the nature of the game; for Mr. Dimmerly's prolonged, chuckling laugh, which could be heard from the parlour, did not tend to allay their confusion.

When Mrs. Marchmont entered that apartment, she found her brother apparently in a convulsion; but he was only vainly endeavouring to prevent his merriment from developing into an outrageous chuckle, for he too had seen Lottie under the mistletoe.

"This thing must be stopped," said Mrs. Marchmont, most emphatically; at which her brother chuckled louder than ever, and said:

"Stopped, indeed! As if it could be, or ever had been

'stopped,' since Adam and Eve first cast sheep's eyes at each other in the Garden of Eden."

His sister left the room with a gesture of annoyance.

Suddenly the little man's queer, cackling laugh ceased, and his wrinkled face grew sad and thoughtful as he sighed:

"I'm the only Dimmerly who was ever 'stopped'—fool that I was. His mother, sister Celia, would marry a poor man, and her life, in spite of all her toil and privation, has been happier than mine," and he shook his head pathetically over "what might have been."

The marble clock on the mantel chimed out the hour of twelve, and the young people came flocking in from the dining-room, their noisy mirth hushed as they remembered that the sacred hours of the Christmas Sabbath had commenced.

"I have induced Miss Martell to give us a Christmas hymn before parting," said Harcourt; and he led Alice to the piano, as if there had been some preconcerted arrangement.

Lottie went to her uncle's side, and took his arm in a sort of wheedling, affectionate way. She was beginning to instinctively recognize that she had an ally and sympathizer in him. As he looked down upon her fair face in its dewy freshness and bloom, he vowed that, as far as it was in his power, she should have her own way. Time and the inevitable ills of our lot might dim that face, but it should not become withered by a life-time of vain regret.

"What were you laughing at so, uncle?" she whispered.

"At my nephew's painful conscientiousness and stern performance of duty. What a martyr he made of himself, to be sure!"

"Now, uncle, I half believe you think I stepped under your mistletoe on purpose. It's no such thing."

"Oh, no, my dear. The mistletoe is haunted, and has been for a thousand years or more, and viewless elves draw under it those who are to receive kisses—prophetic of many others from the same lips."

But here he found Lottie's hand upon his lips, for a second, and then she stood at Miss Martell's side who was now playing a prelude. In some surprise, Lottie noticed that, instead of there being a printed sheet upon the piano-rack, both the words and music were written by hand. As Miss Martell sang, in a sweet but unfamiliar air, the following words, her surprise and interest deepened:

At midnight, in Judean skies,
There dawned a light whose holy rays
Not only cheered the shepherds' eyes,
But filled with hope all coming days.

At midnight, o'er Judea's plain
Was heard a song unknown before;
The echoes of that sweet refrain
Are reaching earth's remotest shore.

'Twas not the sun o'er Eastern hills,
That shed a transient radiance round;
Nor a feeble heir of earthly ills
The shepherds in the manger found.

Upon the darker midnight sky
Of human sorrow, care, and sin—
A night that broods at noontide high;
A dreary gloom all hearts within—

There rose a gentle, human face,
Whose light was love and sympathy—
The God of heaven yet of our race—
The humblest of humanity.

The night of sorrow, sin, and care
Still shadows many hapless hearts;
But all who will, this light may share—
This hope which Christmas morn imparts.

Lottie's eyes were suffused with tears when the simple hymn was finished, but they did not prevent her from following Miss Martell's finger as she turned to the title-page and pointed to the inscription:

"Music by Miss Martell.

"Words by Frank Hemstead.

"Dedicated to Miss Lottie Marsden.

"We wish you more than a 'merry'—the happy Christmas, rather, of the Christian."

Her first response was an impulsive kiss to Alice. But when she looked around to thank Hemstead, he had gone.

A little later, as he came stamping up the piazza out of the snow, after assisting Harcourt and Miss Martell away, the hall-door opened, and some one darted out, and took his hand in a quick thrilling pressure. A voice that had grown as dear as familiar said:

"Before we parted to-night I wanted to tell you that I think Lottie Marsden, like Ninon, has become more than a woman—a Christian."

And she vanished, but left the night so luminous about him that he could not, for a long time enter the house.

He felt, like the shepherds who kept watch centuries ago, that an angel had brought him "tidings of great joy."

CHAPTER XXXII.—THE CHRISTMAS SUNDAY.

This Christmas Sabbath, though marked by no unusual event, was destined to be a memorable day in the lives of Frank Hemstead and Charlotte Marsden. A chain of unforeseen circumstances and experiences, and a sequence of emotions still less understood, had lifted them higher and higher, until this culminating day was scarcely one of earthly existence.

Lottie, in her previous life, had been frivolous and selfish; but her evil resulted from thoughtlessness rather than the deliberate purpose to do wrong. She was the type of multitudes of her fair sisters, who, with sparkling eyes, look out upon life in its morning to see only what it offers to them, and not the tasks it furnishes them for others. Only by experience—only by God's logic of events do they find that

their happiness is in these tasks—in unselfish giving and doing.

The world had been at Lottie's feet. It had offered her all that it could to a girl in her station; but when, withdrawn from it by a day of suffering, she had summed up her treasures, she found she had nothing but remorse. She had been receiving all her life, and yet had nothing. She would then gladly have remembered that she had given even one impulse toward a truer and happier life. But she could not. Apart from natural impulses of affection toward kindred and friends, her only thought in regard to all had been,—How can I make them minister to me and my pleasure? With tact and skill, enhanced by exceeding beauty, she had exacted an unstinted revenue of flattery, attention, and even love; and yet, when, in weakness and pain, she wished the solace of some consoling memory, she found only an accusing conscience.

This experience conveyed to the practical girl a startling lesson. With all her faults, she did not belong to the class that is hopeless, because so weak and shallow. Though her handsome face might often express much that was unlovely and unwomanly, it ever expressed mind.

When she, in her turn, like hosts of others, came to realize the limitation of her being, her weakness and need, she looked around, instinctively, for help and support. Human teaching presented a God from whom she shrank in fear and dislike. The Bible revealed Jesus. When feeling most her need, the Bible presented One whose eyes overflowed with sympathy, and whose hand was omnipotent. She instinctively felt, like Mary of old, that, at "His feet," there was rest and hope.

This feeling was not reached as a mathematician solves an equation, or a theologian comes to a conclusion, but more after the manner in which some women and most children will look at a person, and say, "I like him; I'll trust him."

There was nothing incongruous or unnatural in the contemporary love growing up in her heart for Hemstead at the same time, though it is possible some may so think. In some minds the ideas of love and passion seem inseparable, and they regard religion as something far removed. These are but the right wing of that sinister class who jumble their passions and religion together, and, in pious jargon and spiritual *double entendre*, half conceal and half convey the base meaning of their hearts. In others, love, or what with them goes by the name, is equally inseparable from management and match-making, trousseaus and settlements—concerns pertaining to earth, and very earthly it must be admitted. No doubt many excellent, solid people would regard Lottie's spiritual condition with grave suspicions, and ask, disapprovingly, "What business have two such *different* loves to be originating in her heart at the same time?" But, in the term "different," they beg the question. Where is the antagonism? Where is even the dissimilarity? Are not these two impulses of the heart near akin, rather; and does not a truer and deeper philosophy of life teach that love for a human object may be as certainly God's will as love towards himself? Have these solid, excellent people ought to say against the faithful devotion of a wife, or the patient tenderness of a mother, which are corner-stones of the family, as the family is the corner-stone of all true civilization? But what is the origin of the wife's devotion and mother's tenderness? These people, surely, are as wise as they are solid. They would have the day without the dawn.

At any rate, it would appear, that heaven was making the match between Hemstead and Lottie—making it as the spring comes on in the northern latitudes, subtly, imperceptibly, and yet speedily. Just how or when it came about, they did not know; but when they met that Christmas morning, the peace and gladness of an assured and reciprocal love smiled from each other's eyes. They needed no explanations. Frank Hemstead's face had ever been as easily interpreted as his honest words; and he now had taught Lottie's face to tell the truth. A blessed truth it revealed to him that Christmas day.

As he entered the pulpit that morning his face was radiant with the purest human love, as well as love to God. So far from being incongruous, the one seemed to kindle and intensify the other. Though his sermon was simplicity itself, he spoke as one inspired. His message now was a gospel, and came to his hearers as the angel's announcement (which was his text) to the shepherds.

But his closing words were searching, and sent many of his hearers home thoughtful and conscience-smitten, as well as cheered by the great hope which Christmas day should ever bring to the world.

"I would gladly correct," he said, "the impression which I fear was made on some minds last Sabbath. Christ is the embodiment of Christianity, and His coming to the world was 'tidings of great joy.' His coming to every sinful heart should be 'tidings of great joy.' But I fear I led some to dread His coming, as they would purgatorial fires. How did the All-powerful One come? As a little, helpless child, that He might disarm our fears and enlist our sympathy. How did He live? The humblest among the humble, that no one on earth should be too lowly to go straight to His side with his griefs. How did He act? He took little children in His arms and blessed them. He laid His hand on the loathsome leper from whom all shrank. He looked into the glare of the demoniac's eyes—the demons fled. Then, in meekness, He would offer to enter the poor wretch's heart, and dwell in what had been the foul abode of the foulest fiends. When men wept, He, from sympathy, wept with them, though His next breath turned their mourning into joy. When man dishonoured God, or wronged his fellow-men, as did the Pharisees, with their unhallowed traffic in the Temple, their robbery of the widow and fatherless, their blocking up the way of life with their senseless ceremonies, puerile traditions, no knight in all the heroic past ever breathed out a more fiery indignation. How did He die? In a way that even the thief might be redeemed and live eternally. He was an ideal man, as well as perfect God. He was the servant of all, as well as King of Kings. Not from His throne did He stoop to us. He stood at our side, and sustained fainting humanity with His encircling arms, as a brother. Little wonder, then, that the angel called