

CHOICE LITERATURE.

FROM JEST TO EARNEST.

BY REV. E. F. ROE.

CHAPTER X.—HUMAN NATURE.

The dismal tidings from the lower regions, that the larder had been stripped and that scarcely even a pie remained, soon became an open secret, about which everybody was whispering and commenting. The supperless were a defrauded and injured set. The eyes of many who had not left so important a duty to the uncertainties of the future, but, like Auntie Lammier, had availed themselves of the first opportunity, now twinkled shrewdly and complacently. They had the comfortable consciousness of taking care of themselves. But the greater number were honestly indignant and ashamed that such a thing should have happened. This feeling of mortification was increased when the committee reported but a small sum of money handed in as yet. The majority were provoked at others, and a few at themselves, for having brought so little. As the situation became clearer, all began to act characteristically, some preparing to slink away and escape a disagreeable state of things, and others putting their heads together in the wish to remedy matters. Some giggled, and others looked solemn. Some tried to appear resigned, as if it were a dispensation of Providence, and others snarled about "them mean Joneses and Rhamms."

Lottie hastily summoned her party together, and told them of the dire emergency, as Mrs. Gubling had stated it.

"Now," said she, "if you gentlemen have got any wit worth the name, you must hit on some way of helping the parson out of this scrape, for I have taken a great interest in him, or rather his wife. She is the queerest little woman I ever saw. I shouldn't wonder if she were an angel in disguise."

"As you are undisguised," whispered De Forrest.

"Oh, be still," Julian. That compliment is as delicate as Auntie Lammier's appetite. But see, some of these mean 'locusts of Egypt,' after eating their minister out of house and home, are preparing to go. We must get a collection before a soul leaves the house. Julian, you lock the back door, and Mr. Hemstead, you stand by the front door; and now Mr. Harcourt, you are a lawyer, and know how to talk sharply to people: you give these cormorants to understand what we expect them to do, before they leave."

Hemstead obeyed with alacrity; for the effort to help the overburdened pastor of Scrub Oaks to meet the rigours of winter seemed about to end in disastrous failure. He had noticed, with satisfaction, that many of the people shared his regret, and wished to do something, but through lack of leadership the gathering was about to break up, each one blaming some one else, and all secretly mortified at the result.

Harcourt thought a moment, and then stepping to a position where he could be seen through open doors and heard from the upper story, clapped his hands loudly to secure silence, and draw attention to himself.

"Do you know where your pastor has gone?" he asked. "He is out now buying provisions with his own money to feed a crowd who came here under the false pretence to give a donation, but in truth, to eat him out of house and home."

Flushes of shame and anger flashed into nearly every face at these stinging words, but Harcourt continued remorselessly:

"You know who I am, and I thought I knew something about you. I had heard that the people back in the country were large-handed, large-hearted, and liberal, but we must be mistaken. I think this is the quintessence of meanness, and if you break up to-night without a big collection, I will publish you through the land. I want you to understand that your minister has nothing to do with what I say. I speak on my own responsibility."

"Capital!" whispered Lottie. "That was red-hot shot, and they deserved it. If that don't drain their pockets, nothing will."

But she was not a little surprised and disgusted, when a stalwart young farmer stepped out, and with a face inflamed with anger, said in harsh emphasis:

"I was sorry and ashamed to have this affair end as it promised to, and was going to come down handsomely myself, and try to get some others to, but since that sprig of the law has tried to bully and whip us into doing something, I won't give one cent. I want you to understand, Tom Harcourt, that whatever may be true of the people back in the country, you or no other man, can drive us with a horse-whip."

The young man's words seemed to meet with general approval, and there were many confirmatory nods and responses. They were eager to find some one to blame, and upon whom they could vent their vexation; and this aristocratic young lawyer, whose words had cut like knives, was like a spark in powder. Many could go away and half persuade themselves that if it had not been for him they might have done something handsome, and even the best-disposed present were indignant. It would seem that the party would break up, before the minister returned, in a general tumult.

The young farmer walked to the front door, and said threateningly to Hemstead:

"Open that door."

"No, don't you do it," whispered Lottie.

He threw the door open wide.

"Oh, for shame!" she said aloud; "I did not think that of you, Mr. Hemstead."

Without heeding her he confronted the young farmer and asked:

"Do you believe in fair play?"

"Yes, and fair words, too."

"All right, sir. I listened quietly and politely to you. Will you now listen to me? I have not spoken yet."

"Oh, certainly," said the young farmer, squaring himself

and folding his arms on his ample chest. "Let every dog have his day."

Hemstead then raised his powerful voice, so that it could be heard all through the house, and yet he spoke quietly and calmly.

"The gentleman who last addressed you, now in the spirit of fair play offers to listen to me. I ask all present, with the same spirit of candor and politeness, to hear me for a few moments. But the door is open wide, and if there are any who don't believe in fair play and a fair hearing all around, they are at liberty to depart at once."

No one moved. And the young farmer said, with the sternness of his square face greatly relaxing:

"You may shut the door, sir. We will all listen when spoken to in that style. But we don't want to be driven like cattle." Then yielding farther to the influence of Hemstead's courtesy, he stepped forward and shut the door himself.

"Thank you, sir," said Hemstead heartily, and then continued:

"I am a stranger among you, and am here to-night very unexpectedly. My home is in the West, and like yourselves, I belong to that class who, when they give, give not from their abundance, but out of their poverty. There has been a mistake here to-night. I think I understand you better than my friend Mr. Harcourt. From the pleasantness of the evening more are present than you looked for. There are many young people here whom I suspect have come from a distance, unexpectedly, for the sake of a ride and frolic, and were not as well prepared as if their households had known of it before. Long drives and the cold night have caused keen appetites. When the result became known a few moments ago, I saw that many felt that it was too bad, and that something ought to be done, and no one was more decided in the expression of this feeling than the gentleman who last spoke. All that was needed then, and all that is needed now, is to consider the matter a moment and then act unitedly. I ask you as Christian men and women, as humane, kind-hearted people, to dismiss from your minds all considerations, save one—your pastor's need. I understand that he has six little children. A long, cold winter is before him and his. He is dependent upon you for the comforts of life. In return, he is serving the deepest and most sacred needs of your natures, and in his poverty is leading you to a faith that will enrich you for ever. It is not charity that is asked. A church is a family, and you are only providing for your own. How could any of you be comfortable this winter if you knew your minister was pinched and lacking? The Bible says that the laborer is worthy of his hire. You have only to follow the impulse of your consciences, your own better natures, and I have no fears. A few moments ago your pastor had a painful surprise. You can have a very agreeable one awaiting him by the time he returns. You can make his heart glad for months to come, and so make your own glad. Though I am a stranger, as I said, and a poor man, yet I am willing to give double what I proposed at first, and if some one will take up a collection, will hand in ten dollars."

"Give me your hand on that," said the young farmer heartily. "And there's ten dollars more to keep it company. When a man talks like that, I am with him, shoulder to shoulder. Will some one bring me the dominie's hat?"

One was soon forthcoming.

"And now," said the young man, stepping up to Lottie, "you seem to take a sight of interest in this matter, miss. I think you can look five dollars out of most of the young chaps down. I'll go around with you, and see that each one comes down as he or she ought. If any body ain't got what they'd like to give, I'll lend it to 'em, and collect it, too," he added, raising his strong hearty voice.

Thus, through Hemstead's words and action the aspect of the skies changed, and where a desolating storm had threatened, there came a refreshing shower.

What he had said commended itself to so many that the mean and crochety found it politic to fall in with the prevailing spirit.

Amid approving nods, whispered consultations, and the hauling out of all sorts of queer receptacles of money, the graceful city belle and the blunt, broad-shouldered farmer started on an expedition that, to the six little Dlimms, would be more important than one for the discovery of the North Pole.

"No coppers, now!" shouted the young man.

Lottie, fairly bubbling over with fun and enjoyment of the whole thing, was all graciousness, and with smiles long remembered by some of the rustic youth, certainly did beguile them into generosity at which they wondered ever after.

The result was marvellous, and the crown of the old hat was becoming a crown of joy indeed to the impoverished owner, who now had the promise of some royal good times.

That fast filling hat meant nourishing beef occasionally, a few books for the minister's famishing mind, a new dress or two for the wife, and a warm suit for the children all round.

No one was permitted to escape, and in justice it could now be said that few wished to, for all began to enjoy the luxury of doing a good and generous deed.

When, having been to nearly all, Lottie said to her now beaming companion:

"Go and get Mrs. Dlimm, and seat her in the large rocker in the parlor."

The poor little woman having witnessed all the earlier scenes from the stairs with strong and varying feelings, had, during the last few moments, seen Lottie pass with such a profusion of greenbacks in her husband's hat, that in a bewildering sense of joy and gratitude she had fled to the little nursery sanctuary, and when found by some of the ladies was crying over the baby in the odd contradictoriness of feminine action. She was hardly given time to wipe her eyes, before she was escorted on the arm of the now gallant farmer, to the chair of state in the parlor.

Then Lottie advanced to make a little speech, but could think of nothing but the old school-day formula; and so the stately introduction ended abruptly but most effectively, as follows:

"As a token of our esteem and kindly feeling, and as an expression of—of—I—we hereby present you with—with the reward of merit;" and she emptied the hat in the lady's lap.

Instead of graceful acknowledgement, and a neatly worded speech in reply, Mrs. Dlimm burst into tears, and springing up, threw her arms around Lottie's neck and kissed her, while the greenbacks were scattered round their feet like an emerald shower. Indeed the grateful little woman, in her impulse, had stepped forward and upon the money.

The city belle, to her great surprise and vexation, found that some spring of her own nature had been touched, and that her eyes also were overflowing. As she looked around deprecatingly, and half-ashamed, she saw that there was a prospect of a general shower, and that many of the women were sniffing audibly, and the brusque young farmer stood near, looking as if he could more easily hold a span of runaway horses than he could hold in himself.

At this moment Hemstead stepped forward, and said:

"My friends, we can learn a lesson from this scene, for it is true to our best nature, and very suggestive. Your pastor's wife standing there upon your gift that she may kiss the giver (for in this instance Miss Marsden but represents you and your feeling and action), is a beautiful proof that we value more and are more blessed by the spirit of kindness which prompts the gift, than by the gift itself. See, she puts her foot on the gift, but takes the giver to her heart. The needs of the heart—the soul, are ever greater than those of the body, therefore she acknowledges your kindness first, because with that you have supplied her chief need. She does not undervalue your gift, but values your kindness more. Hereafter, as you supply the temporal need of your pastor, as I believe you ever will, let all be provided with the same honest kindness and sympathy. Let us also all learn from this lady's action, to think of the Divine Giver of all good, before His best earthly gifts."

Mrs. Dlimm had recovered herself sufficiently by this time to turn to the people around her and say, with a gentle dignity that would scarcely have been expected from her:

"The gentleman has truly interpreted to you my very heart. I do value the kindness more even than the money which we needed so sorely. Our Christian work among you will be more full of hope and faith because of this scene, and therefore more successful."

Then, as from a sudden impulse, she turned and spoke to Hemstead with quaint earnestness:

"You are a stranger, sir, but I perceive from your noble courtesy and bearing—your power to appreciate and bring out the best there is in us, that you belong to the royal family of the Great King. Your Master will reward you."

Poor Hemstead, who thus far had forgotten himself in his thought for others, was suddenly and painfully made conscious of his own existence, and at once became the most helpless and awkward of mortals, as he found all eyes turned toward him. He was trying to escape from the room without stepping on two or three people, to Lottie's infinite amusement, though the tears stood in her eyes as she laughed, when Mrs. Gubling, ignorant of all that had happened, appeared from the kitchen, and created a diversion in his favor.

The good woman looked as if pickles were the only part of the donation supper, in which she had indulged, and in a tone of ancient vinegar, said:

"Them as hasn't eaten, had better come and take what they can get now."

A roar of laughter greeted this rather forbidding invitation. But before any one could reply, Mr. Dlimm, red and breathless from his exertions, also entered, and with a faint smile and with the best courtesy he could muster under the trying circumstances, added:

"I am sorry any of our friends should have been kept waiting for supper. If they now will be so kind as to step down, we will do the best we can for them."

The good man was as puzzled as Mrs. Gubling had been by a louder explosion of mirth. The stout farmer whispered something to Lottie, and then he, with an extravagant flourish, offered his arm to Mrs. Gubling.

"Go 'long with you," she said, giving him a push, but he took her along with him, while Lottie brought the parson to where his wife stood surrounded by greenbacks like fallen leaves, which in the hurry of events had not been picked up. The good man stared at his wife with her tearful eyes, and Mrs. Gubling stared at the money, and the people laughed and clapped their hands as only hearty country people can. Lottie caught the contagion, and laughed with them till she was ashamed of herself, while the rest of her party, except Hemstead, laughed at them and the "whole absurd thing" as they styled it, though Harcourt had a few better thoughts of his own.

Mrs. Rhamm's lank figure and curious face now appeared from the kitchen in the desire to solve the mystery of the strange sounds she heard, and the unheard of delay in coming to supper. Lottie's coadjutor at once pounced upon her, and escorted, or rather dragged her to where she could see the money. She stared a moment, and then, being near-sighted, got down on her knees that she might look more closely.

"She is going to pray to it," cried the farmer; and the simple people, aware of Mrs. Rhamm's devotion to this ancient god, laughed as if Sidney Smith had launched his wittiest gally.

"Mrs. Gubling," continued the young man, "if you are not chairman of the committee, you ought to be, for you are the best man of the lot."

"I'd have you know I'm no man at all. It's no compliment to tell a woman she's sumpen like a man," interrupted Mrs. Gubling, sharply.

"Well, you've been a ministering angel to us all, this evening; you can't deny it, and I now move that you and the dominie be appointed a committee to count this money and report."

It was carried by acclamation.

"Now, while the iron is hot, I'm going to strike again. I move that we raise the dominie's salary to a thousand a year. We all know, who know anything, that he can't support his family decently on six hundred."