

## CHOICE LITERATURE.

## A DAY OF FATE.

BY REV. E. P. ROE.

BOOK SECOND.—CHAPTER I.—THE DAY AFTER.

The epochs of one's life are not divided according to the calendar, nor are they measured by the lapse of time. Within a few brief hours I had reached a conclusion that left no shadow of doubt on my mind. As I sat there in the beautiful June dawn I turned a page in my history. The record of future joys and ills would have to be kept in double entry, for I felt with absolute conviction that I could entertain no project and decide no question without instinctively and naturally consulting the maiden who had quietly and as if by divine right obtained the mastery of my soul. But a day since I would have said that my present attitude was impossible, but now it seemed both right and inevitable. The doubt, the sense of strangeness and remoteness that we justly associate with a comparative stranger, had utterly passed away, and in their place was a feeling of absolute trust and rest. I could place in her hands the best treasures of my life, without a shadow of hesitancy, so strongly had I been impressed with her truth.

And yet it all was a beautiful mystery, over which I could have dreamed for hours.

I had not shunned society in the past, and had greatly admired other ladies. Their voices had been sweet and low, as a woman's tones should be, and their glances gentle and kind, but not one of them had possessed the power to quicken my pulse or to disturb the quiet slumber of my heart; but this woman spoke to me as with authority from heaven. "My whole being," I murmured, "bows down to her by a constraint that I could scarcely resist, and no queen in the despotic past ever had a more loyal subject than I have become. To serve her, even to suffer for her and to stand between her and all evils the world could inflict, are privileges that I covet supremely. My regard is not a sudden passion, for passion is selfish and inconsiderate. My love is already united with honour and reverence, and my strongest impulse is to promote her happiness before my own. The thought of her is an inspiration toward a purer, better manhood than I have yet known. Her truth and innate nobility produce an intense desire to become like her, so that she may look into my eyes and trust also."

I scarcely know how long my bright-hued dream would have lasted, but at length the door of Mrs. Yocomb's room opened, and steps were on the stairs. A moment later the physician came out, and Miss Warren stood in the doorway.

"They are all sleeping quietly," he said, in answer to my inquiry. "Yes; all danger in Zillah's case is now passed, I think; but she's had a serious time of it, poor little thing!"

"There's no need of your walking home to-night," protested Miss Warren. "We can make you comfortable here, and Reuben will gladly drive you over in the morning."

"It's morning now," he said, smiling, "and I'll enjoy the walk in the fresh air. I'll call again before very long. Good-day!" and he walked lightly down the path, as if all was very satisfactory to him.

"What are you doing here, Mr. Morton?" Miss Warren asked, assuming an expression of strong surprise.

"Helping to watch."

"What a waste! You haven't done Zillah a bit of good."

"Didn't you know I was here?"

"Yes; but I hope you don't think that I need watching?"

"I was within call."

"So you would have been if sleeping. I could have blown the great tin horn if it had been necessary to waken you, and you had remained undisturbed by other means."

"Oh, well, 'hen, if it made no difference to you, I'll merely say I'm a night editor, and kept awake from habit."

"I didn't say it made no difference to me," she answered. "You ought to have known better than to have made that speech."

"Miss Warren," I urged anxiously, "you look white as a ghost in this mingling of moonlight and morning. When will you rest?"

"When the mind and heart are at rest a tired body counts for little. So you're not afraid of ghosts?"

I looked at her intently as I replied, "No; I would like to be haunted all my life."

It was not wholly the reflection of the dawn that tinged the pallor of her face as I spoke these words.

After a moment's hesitation she apparently dismissed a thought, and maintained her old frank manner.

"Oh, how beautiful, how welcome the morning is!" she exclaimed, coming out on the piazza. "To think that this is the same world that we saw last night—it's almost impossible."

"Mr. Yocomb's words will yet prove true," I said, "and clearer skies and better grain will be the result of the storm."

"Oh, I'm so glad, I'm so very glad," she murmured. "This morning is like a benediction;" and its brightness and beauty glowed in her face.

"I can tell you something that will please you greatly," I continued. "I have visited the little home in the garden that was open to last night's sky. The father and mother robins are well, and I'm sure all the little ones are too, for the mother robin had her head under her wing—a thing impossible, I suppose, if anything was amiss with the children."

"Oh, I'm so glad!" she again repeated, and there was a rousing, exquisite thrill in her tones.

At that moment there came a burst of song from the top of the pear-tree in the garden, and we saw the head of the little household greeting the day.

Almost as sweetly and musically my companion's laugh trilled out,

"So it wasn't the day of fate after all."

Impelled by an impulse that for the moment seemed irresistible, I took her hand as I said earnestly,

"Yes, Miss Warren, for me it was, whether for a lifetime of happiness or of disappointment."

At first she appeared startled, and gave me a swift, searching glance; then a strong expression of pain passed over her face. She understood me well, for my look and manner would have been unmistakable to any woman.

She withdrew her hand as she said gently,

"You are overwrought from watching—from all that's happened; let us both forget that such rash words were spoken."

"Do not think it," I replied, slowly and deliberately. "I have learned to know you better since we have met than I could in months or years amid the conventionalities of society. In you I recognize my fate as vividly and distinctly as I saw you in the lightning's gleam last night. Please hear and understand me," I urged, as she tried to check my words by a strong gesture of dissent. "If you had parents or guardians, I would ask them for the privilege of seeking your hand. Since you have not, I ask you. At least give me a chance. I can never prove worthy of you, but by years of devotion I can prove that I appreciate you."

"Oh, I'm so sorry, so very sorry you feel so," she said, and there was deep distress in her tones; "I was in hopes we would be life-long friends."

"We shall be," I replied quietly. She looked at me hesitatingly a moment, then said impulsively,

"Mr. Morton, you are too honourable a man to seek that which belongs to another. There," she added, flushing deeply, "I've told you what I've acknowledged to no one—scarcely to myself."

I know that the light of hope faded out of my face utterly, for I felt ill and faint. If in truth she belonged to another, her absolute truth would make her so loyal to him that further hope would be not only vain but an insult, which she would be the first to resent.

"I understand you too well," I began despondently, "to say another word, Miss Warren. I—I wish—it seems rather odd I should have felt so toward you when it was no use. It was as inevitable as our meeting. The world and all that's in it is an awful muddle to me. But God bless you, and if there's any good God, you will be blessed." I shivered as I spoke, and was about to leave the piazza hastily, when her eager and entreating tones detained me.

"Mr. Morton, you said that in spite of all we should be friends; let me claim my privilege at once. I'm sure I'm right in believing that you're overwrought and morbid, from the strange experiences you have just passed through. Do not add to your exhaustion by starting off on another aimless walk to-day; though you may think it might lead you to a better fate, it cannot bring you to those who care so deeply for you. We'll be merry, true-hearted friends after we've had time to rest and think it all over."

"True-hearted, anyway," I said emphatically. "What's more, I'll be sane when we meet again—entirely matter of fact, indeed, since I already foresee that I shall be troubled by no more days of fate. Good-by now; go and sleep the sleep of the just; I'll rest quietly here;" and I held out my hand.

She took it in both of hers, and said gently, "Mr. Morton, I believe you saved my—our lives last night."

"I had some hand in it—yes, that should be happiness enough. I'll make it answer; but never speak of it again."

"When I cease to think of it I shall cease to think at all," she said, in strong emphasis; and with a lingering, wistful glance she passed slowly in and up the winding stairway.

I watched her as I would a ship that had left me on a desolate rock.

"She is one that could not change if she would," I thought. "It's all over. No matter; possibly I saved her life."

I sat down again in a rustic chair on the piazza, too miserable and disheartened to do more than endure the pain of my disappointment. Indeed there was nothing else to do, for seemingly I had set my heart on the impossible. Her words and manner had made but one impression—that she had given her love and faith to an earlier and more fortunate suitor.

"It would be strange if it were otherwise," I muttered. "I was the 'idiot,' in thinking that her gentlemen friends were blind; but I protest against a world in which men are left to blunder so fatally. The other day I felt broken down physically; I now know that I'm broken and disabled in all respects. The zest and colour have wholly gone out of life. If I ever go back to my work I shall find my counterpart in the most jaded and dispirited stage-horse in the city. Miss Warren will have no more occasion to criticize light, smart paragraphs. Indeed, I imagine that I shall soon be restricted to the obituary notices, and I now feel like writing my own. Confound these birds! What makes them sing so? Nature's a heartless jade anyway. Last night she would have burned us up with lightning, and this morning there would have been not a whit less of song and sunshine. Oh, well, it's far better that my hopes are in ashes than that this house should be. I, and all there is of me, is a small price to pay for this home and its inmates; and if I saved her little finger from being scorched, I should be well content. But why did I feel so toward her when it was of no use! That fact irritates me. Is my whole nature a lie, and are its deepest intuitions and most sacred impulses false guides that lead one out into the desert to perish? In the crisis of my life, when I had been made to see that past tendencies were wrong, and I was ready for any change for the better, my random, aimless steps led to this woman, and, as I said to her, the result was inevitable. All nature seemed in league to give emphasis to the verdict of my own heart, but the moment I reached the conviction that she was created for me and I for her, I am informed that she was created for another. I must therefore be one of the odd ones, for whom there is no mate. Hang it all! I rather feel as if another man were going to marry my wife, and I must admit that I have a consuming curiosity to see him."

"But this can't be. Her heart must have recognized the true kinship in this other man—blame him! no, bless him,

if she marries him—for she's the last one in the world to enter into merely legal relations, unsanctioned by the best and purest instincts of her womanly nature.

"It's all a precious muddle."

And no better conclusion did I reach that dismal morning—the most dismal I can remember, although the hour abounded in beauty, and the glad, exuberant life that follows a summer rain. I once heard a preacher say that hell could be in heaven and heaven in hell. I thought him a trifle irreverent at the time, but now half believed him right.

My waking train of thought ended in a stupor in which I do not think I lost for a moment the dull consciousness of pain. I was aroused by a step upon the gravel-path, and, starting up, saw the woman who served Mrs. Yocomb in the domestic labours of the farmhouse. She stopped and stared at me a moment, and then was about to continue around the house to the kitchen entrance.

"Wait a moment, my good woman," I said; "and you'll now have a chance to prove yourself a good woman, and a very helpful and considerate one, too. The house was struck by lightning last night."

"Lord a massy!" she ejaculated, and she struck an attitude with her hands on her hips, and stared at me again, with her small eyes and capacious mouth opened to their utmost extent.

"Yes," I continued, "and all were hurt except Reuben. The doctor has been here, and all are now better and sleeping, so please keep the house quiet, and let us sleep till the doctor comes again. Then have a good fire, so that you can get ready at once whatever he orders for the patients."

"Lord a massy!" she again remarked very emphatically, and scuttled off to her kitchen domains in great excitement.

I now felt that my watch had ended, and that I could give the old farmhouse into the hands of one accustomed to its care. Therefore I wearily climbed the stairs to my room, and threw myself, dressed, on the lounge.

After a moment or two Miss Warren's door opened, and her light step passed down to the kitchen. She, too, had been on the watch for the coming of the domestic, and, if aware that I had seen the woman, did not regard me as competent to enlighten her as to her duties for the day. The kitchen divinity began at once.

"Lord a massy, Miss Em'ly, what a time yer's all had! The strange man told me. There hain't no danger now, is there?"

In response to some remark from Miss Warren she continued, in shrill volubility,

"Yes, he told me yer's all struck but Reuben. I found him a-sittin' on the stoop, and a-lookin' all struck of a heap himself. Is that the way lightning 'fects folks? He looked white as a ghost, and as ef he didn't keer ef he was one afore night. 'Twas amazin'—and here Miss Warren evidently silenced her."

I heard the murmur of her voice as she gave a few brief directions, and then her steps returned swiftly to her room.

"She can be depended upon," I sighed, "to do all she thinks right. She must have been wearied beyond mortal endurance, and worried by my rash and unlooked-for words, and yet she keeps up till all need is past. Every little act shews that I might as well try to win an angel of heaven as sue against her conscience, she is so absolutely true. You're right, old woman; I was 'struck,' and I wish it had been by lightning only."

Just when I exchanged waking thoughts for hateful dreams I do not remember. At last I started to my feet, exclaiming,

"It's all wrong; he shall not marry my wife!" and then I sat down on the lounge and tried to extricate myself from the shadows of sleep, and thus become able to recognize the facts of the real world that I must now face. Slowly the events of the previous day and night came back, and with them a sense of immeasurable loss. The sun was low in the west, thus proving that my unrefreshing stupor had lasted many hours. The clatter of knives and forks indicated preparations for supper in the dining-room below. I dreaded meeting the family and all words of thanks, as one would the touching of a diseased nerve. More than all, I dreaded meeting Miss Warren again, feeling that we both would be under a wretched constraint. My evil mood undoubtedly had physical causes, for my mouth was parched, my head throbbled and ached, and I felt so ill in body and mind, so morbid and depressed, that I was ready to escape to New York, without seeing a soul, were the thing possible.

The door opened softly, and I saw Reuben's ruddy, happy face.

"Oh, I'm so glad thee's awake," he said. "They're all doing well. Adah's got well so fast that she actually looks better than Emily Warren. Even Zillah's quite bright this evening, only she's so weak she can't sit up much, but the doctor says it'll wear away. Thee doesn't look very extra, and no wonder, thee did so much. Father, mother, and Emily Warren, have been talking about thee for the last two hours, and Adah can't ask questions enough about thee, and how thee found her. She says the last thing she saw was thee on the lawn, and thee was the first thing she saw when she came to, and now she says she can't help seeing thee all the time. Emily Warren said we must let thee sleep as long as thee would, for that, she said, was what thee needed most of all."

"She's mistaken," I muttered, starting up. "Reuben," I continued aloud, "you're a good, brave fellow. I'll come down to supper as soon as I can fairly wake up. I feel as stupid as an owl at midday, but I'm exceedingly glad that all are doing well."

When he left me I thought, "Well, I will keep up for two or three hours, and then can excuse myself. To-morrow I can return to New York, since clearly this will be no place for me. Miss Warren thinks that a little sleep would cure me, and that I will be sane and sensible now that I am awake. She will find me matter-of-fact indeed, for I feel like a bottle of champagne that has stood uncorked for a month; but may the fiend fly away with me if I play the forlorn, lackadaisical lover, and shew my wounds."

I bathed my face again and again, and made as careful a toilette as circumstances permitted.

(To be continued.)