

Choice Literature.

A MODERN JACOB.

BY HESTER STUART.

CHAPTER X.—(Continued.)

Yes, the doctor had a bad case, and very near. It seemed to him one of life and death. He tried to fix the facts in orderly sequence in his mind. Here was his friend as dear as a brother, who for years had loved the woman he had known but a few months. If Arthur were bebarred, even from hope, it would be a bitter thing to see him win what he had vainly longed for. And what hope had he himself that he should dream of winning her? The more he thought of it, the more significant seemed her silence in regard to Mr. Berkeley. He could not remember that he had called him by name until that evening, but he had alluded to him hundreds of times. She had often spoken of her life in Philadelphia; why had she never mentioned Mr. Berkeley? And yet—and yet if she did or could care for himself, had he the right to sacrifice love to friendship? And here the argument had the most earnest advocacy of his own heart. But if, as Margaret's husband, he must, practically, lose his friend—why had not Arthur told him? He asked fiercely. And then his reason answered the question, and he recognized the exceeding nobility and generosity of Mr. Berkeley's course. He called to mind the letters he had sent to his friend, and what the reading of them must have cost him, and for a moment he lost sight of his own trouble in pity for that of another.

When Dr. Grant left the park that night, he had decided on his course. For the next few days he went among his patients grave and preoccupied. The old skill and gentleness remained, but the cheery laugh and quick jest were missing, and the change gave rise to endless surmises.

A few evenings later he again sought the society of Miss Lenox. It had been a hot day, and he found her in her wicker chair on a little balcony overlooking the river. A light breeze came from the water and stirred the thin, black draperies of her dress, and scattered the perfume of the yellow rose on her breast. Never had she looked fairer to the doctor, and he dropped into the big chair beside her, with a sigh of relief.

"It must have been suffocating in the city to-day. Have you had a particularly hard day?" she asked, noticing the worn look on his face.

"Life has been rather a grind the past three or four days," he answered, trying to laugh, but making a failure of it.

Her quick perceptions warned her that the doctor's visit was not an ordinary one, and she was not surprised when, after a little fragmentary conversation he turned toward her with a sudden gravity.

"Miss Lenox," he said, "I came up here this evening to ask you a most serious question, but before asking it, may I tell you a short story?"

She bowed her consent, and he repeated the story his friend had told him that winter night at Wilton Corners. Dr. Grant was a good story-teller, and, in spite of his own heavy heart, put in many unconscious touches which made very real and pathetic the short story that needed no colouring. As he talked Miss Lenox sat looking down the river, her face turned from him so that only the outline of her cheek was visible. She made no interruptions, asked no questions, but he saw the slender fingers tighten about the fan she held, and the yellow rose trembled so that some of its petals fell on her lap. When he stopped there was a moment's silence: and then she turned her face toward him. The tears were running down her cheeks, but her eyes were radiant with a light that he had never seen in them before.

"How can I thank you?" she said. "For you have given me back my faith in him, and my own self-respect. I did love him, and thought that love had been sought. But when he went away so suddenly I felt that he had gone to escape an unwelcome affection which had showed itself unawares. All these years the thought has tortured me, and now to feel that it is groundless! Knowing that he loves me, the separation is nothing. Life at the longest is short, and then—"

With a sudden gesture she held her hand out to him. He took it, held it closely for an instant, then laid it gently on her lap, and rose from his chair.

"The question I would have asked you is answered," he said, "and I will not pain you by putting it into words. But I will tell you that you have realized for me my ideal, and I am a better, if not a happier man, for having known you."

She looked up at him, her eyes still filled with tears. "I will not pretend to misunderstand you, dear friend, and I wish so much it might have been different. But you will not cast us off entirely? We should miss you greatly."

"I shall be glad to come again—sometime. Good-by!" and the doctor was gone.

That night, before he slept, Dr. Grant wrote a note to his friend. It was a short note, containing only these words: "Your memory is more to her than I can ever be."

A good many weeks went by before Miss Lenox and the doctor met again. But one rainy evening in September he came in, a little graver than formerly, but kind and genial. Mr. Lenox, who had missed the excellent game of chess which the doctor played, was unfeignedly glad to see him, and it seemed good to Miss Lenox to hear his pleasant voice again. He spoke unreservedly of his friend Mr. Berkeley, with whom he had spent a few days in August, and who was working beyond his strength. He talked quite a little on this subject to Mr. Lenox, feeling how hungrily Miss Lenox was listening; and when he said good-night to her, the low "Thank you!" showed that she understood and appreciated his thoughtful kindness. After this the old friendly intercourse was re-established, and in a thousand indirect ways Dr. Grant sought to prove that in ceasing to be her lover, he had become more firmly her friend.

CHAPTER XI.—LIGHT AFTER DARKNESS.

The summer had been a long and a hard one to Mr. Berkeley. There had been considerable sickness in the parish, and that, with his work at Slab Hollow, had taxed his strength to the utmost. A hopeless heart is a heavy drain on the life powers, and day by day he faced his duties with less courage. The brief note which the doctor sent him that June night had acted upon him at first like a strange tonic. He went about in a glow of happiness, that communicated itself to all that he said and did. But in a few days the delirium passed, and the way seemed longer and drearier than before. We call those heroes who, in sudden and great emergencies, do deeds of valour. But what of those who daily wage a losing battle? Who, gathering all their powers, slay their foes at night, only to find them risen up fresh and strong in the morning? Such a fight was Mr. Berkeley's, and Dr. Grant in his flying visit in August, had been shocked by the change in him. Is it any wonder that, lonely and sore at heart, he often found himself at the Balcome farmhouse, where, beside being cheered and soothed by the happy home life, he was sure to hear the name of the woman he loved? For Rhoda delighted to talk of her favourite cousin. She read scraps from her letters, she told of her goings and comings, the books she was reading, the work she was engaged in, so that he could follow quite closely the course of her quiet, useful life. Rhoda little guessed how much this was to her silent listener, and sometimes wondered at his patience in listening to her oft-repeated theme.

One day, as he was about to go, she spoke out suddenly, "I do wish my old minister, Mr. Cushing, would come here and preach some Sunday!"

"So you are tired of my preaching, and would like a change?" he asked pleasantly.

"O, no!" she replied, the quick blush running over cheeks and forehead, "it isn't that at all. But I do want to see him so much, and I want Father and Mother Balcome to hear him."

"I think it might be easily arranged. It certainly shall be, if a warm invitation from me can effect it." Somehow, it was very pleasant to be kind to Margaret's cousin.

So it happened a few weeks later that there were great preparations at the old farmhouse. The very finest linen and the choicest drawn rugs were brought out to do honour to the guest's room, the best bed was aired and sunned into a sweetness unknown to any city bed, and Mrs. Balcome stirred and mixed and baked until the pantry shelves overflowed.

"Why, Mother Balcome! He can't begin even to taste of them all," said Rhoda, dancing about from place to place.

"You wait and see," answered Mrs. Balcome, nodding her head sagely. "I've entertained ministers before, and they beat the world for eating. Seems as though some of them were hollow to the very heels of their boots. Not but what I love dearly to see them eat, but it does seem almost a miracle sometimes where they put it."

In the midst of these cheerful preparations Farmer Balcome alone seemed indifferent, if not slightly reluctant. He was a most hospitable man; especially glad to do honour to the ministry, but in the depth of his honest, obstinate heart the minister's letter still rankled.

"I'll have to have it out with him for bein' so severe on Rhody. I know I shall," he said to his wife on the eve of the expected visit. "If it hadn't been for that, I shouldn't have been so set against her."

"I don't know about that, father. You were about as set as you could be, before. But I do hope you'll remember that he's one of Lord's servants, and a visitor."

"I guess I'm old enough to know how to treat company," he answered loftily, "but it will be dreadful hard work not to tell him what I think of that letter."

A man even more prejudiced might have been disarmed by the guest who came on the morrow; a guest whose very presence as he crossed the threshold seemed to breathe a benediction on the house. He was a man past seventy, with the face of a thinker, and the complexion of a child. Soft white locks fell upon his collar, and his blue eyes had a clear brightness, as though while walking in this world he looked upon the glories of the next. Heaven had sent him many sorrows and bitter disappointments, but out of them he had come sweetened and deepened in character, until the happiest child and the saddest mourner alike found in him sympathy and consolation.

After the early supper he went out with Mr. Balcome to look about a little. It was a pleasant sight, the two old men, so unlike, yet both so good to look upon. Mr. Cushing paced slowly beside his host, his hands locked behind him, and the mild September breeze ruffling his white locks, while he looked with quiet appreciation from side to side. "Beautiful for situation, the joy of the whole earth," he quoted softly, as they paused on a little knoll back of the house and looked over the fair landscape spread out before them. "The land beyond cannot be much fairer."

Farmer Balcome nodded his head, without speaking. Words never came very easy to him, but his heart warmed at the praise of his home. Just then Rhoda came out to them, bringing Mr. Cushing's overcoat. She helped him on with it in a pretty, filial way, answering his thanks by a bright little smile and nod. Both men turned and looked after her as she ran lightly back to the house.

"Rhody has changed a good deal since she married, hasn't she?" said Mr. Balcome.

"I do not notice much change in her," answered Mr. Cushing. "She was always one of the Saviour's dear lambs."

Mr. Balcome looked hard at him, but the placid face showed no trace of any embarrassing recollections.

"You've known Rhody a long time, haven't you?" persisted Mr. Balcome.

Mr. Cushing looked round at his questioner in gentle surprise.

"I baptized her in her infancy, and ever since her walk and conversation have been well known to me. She is very much what I fancy our own little girl would have been if

she had stayed with us. Perhaps that is why Rhoda is so dear to me."

"I wish you'd step down to the barn with me," said the farmer. "You'd ketch cold standing here and I've got some questions to ask which I should like to have answered right off."

So saying, he led the way to the barn, where he fixed a comfortable seat for the minister, and then stationed himself before him, as though to cut off any attempt to escape.

"Now, sir," he said, "I've a great respect for the ministry, and I shouldn't like to be backward in showin' it, particularly to one who is a-visitin' me; but if you mean what you've just been sayin', why did you write us that letter about Rhody?"

The minister listened in utter amazement.

"I never wrote you any letter about Rhoda," he answered.

"I mean when you answered my letter the winter before Rhody and Joel were married. Don't you remember?"

Mr. Cushing began to think his host of unsound mind.

"I never received a letter from you," he said firmly, "and I certainly never wrote you one about Rhoda, or on any other subject."

"But I wrote to you, asking about Rhody, and I got an answer signed with your name. If you didn't write it, who did?"

"That I cannot tell. Have you the letter?"

"No; 'twas burned up at the time, for fear Joel should see it. It said some pretty hard things about Rhody—things that haven't proved true. I've sorter lain it up against you, but now I ask your pardon," and Farmer Balcome held out his horny hand in token of repentance.

Mr. Cushing gave his own, but his face was troubled. Who could have done this mischief?

When they went back to the house Mr. Balcome called his wife aside and told her of the conversation.

"O, father!" she said, "how I do wish we'd saved it; but you know Jacob thought we better destroy it."

At mention of Jacob's name, they looked at each other with the same thought.

"Seems to me as if I did save the cover to it," she continued. "I remember picking it up and tucking it away somewhere, but where I can't tell."

That night, before going to rest, Mrs. Balcome searched high and low; in all likely and unlikely places, without success. But in the morning, as Mr. Cushing opened the big Bible—the best one, brought out only on special occasions—something white fluttered from its leaves to the floor. Mrs. Balcome started, and gave her husband a quick glance; but that good man sat, with a face of Sabbath peace looking out on the pleasant landscape, and keeping time, softly, on the window-sill to some tune in his head.

"And he shewed me a pure river of water of life," read the minister's tranquil voice.

The chapter was a favourite one with Mrs. Balcome, and she tried to dismiss everything from her mind except the sacred words, but her eyes and thoughts would wander to the envelope lying so aggravatingly near. Never had the chapter seemed so longed, and when they knelt, nothing but the severest self-control kept her from stealing to her feet and snatching that bit of paper. In the prayer which arose from Mr. Cushing's lips she lost for a time the sense of everything but the nearness of God. It was no formal petition, made up of time-worn phrases, but was direct, simple, genuine. He talked with God as one acquainted; as friend might talk with friend, in full and close communion, and a deep peace and quiet fell upon them all.

A moment after they arose from their knees, the envelope was safe in the bottom of Mrs. Balcome's pocket. There was no time before morning service to discuss it, but after the early dinner was cleared away, she laid it before the minister. He took it with an exclamation of surprise.

"I know this writing," he said. "It is that of a young man who was a member of my family for a time. He was suspended from college, and his father, who is an old friend of mine, wished me to keep him with me during the term of his suspension. But what reason he could have had for doing this passes my comprehension. He was a wild, reckless young man, but he did not seem one to knowingly injure an innocent person. He is now at his home, quite low in consumption. Do not mention the subject to any one, and I will do my best to unravel this mystery."

Not long after Mr. Cushing's return, the following letter came from him:—

COVERLEY, Sept. 10—

MY DEAR FRIENDS:

In pursuance of my promise to you, I have succeeded in clearing up the mystery which has caused so much pain and perplexity. If it were possible to suppress some facts which will grieve you, I would gladly do so, but justice seems to demand the whole truth.

A few days ago I visited the home of Herbert Hardy, the young man of whom I spoke to you. I found him very feeble, and apparently near his end. He answered readily the questions put to him, and seemed relieved to unburden his mind of this sin, which, alas! is one of many. The substance of what he told me is as follows: He came to me from college, hampered with gambling debts, and being pressed to pay them, finally borrowed money of your son, Jacob. When he, in turn, demanded his money, Herbert was unable to pay it, and Jacob threatened him with exposure and prosecution, unless he aided him in a certain matter, which was the writing of the letter you received.

He said he had no ill-will against Rhoda, but did the act simply through a cowardly fear of exposure and his father's consequent anger. He is deeply penitent, and wishes me to ask forgiveness from you, which, in view of his penitence and near departure, I feel sure you will willingly grant.

With many kind regards to you and yours, I remain
Your friend and brother,

SAMUEL CUSHING.

It was a long debated question between Mr. Balcome and his wife whether they should acquaint Joel and Rhoda with the contents of this letter. It would serve to explain some of their own conduct in the past, but it would also increase the ill-will between Joe and Jacob, which seemed gradually