

CHOICE LITERATURE.

FROM TEST TO EARNEST.

BY REV. E. F. ROE

CHAPTER VII.—ANOTHER SPELL THAN BEAUTY'S.

De Forrest tried to laugh at his discomfiture when he appeared at the dinner-table, but he was evidently annoyed and vexed with its author.

"It was very nice of you, Mr. Hemstead," said Lottie, "to permit yourself to be pelted by us. You evidently did not think us worthy of your steel. But I fear you gave Julian a strong compliment."

"I only returned one of his."

"But he did not hit you."

"He meant to. We form our most correct judgment of people sometimes from what they intend, rather than what they do."

"Well, I thank you for my share of the sport."

"And I thank you for mine."

"What occasion have you to thank me, when I almost put your eyes out with snow?"

"You did not so blind them but that I could see a face aglow with exercise; that made a pleasing contrast to the cold white snow."

"Frank, Frank, you will make Lottie vain," said Mrs. Marchmont. "I did not know that complimenting was permitted to you."

"That is all right, sister," said Mr. Dimmerly. "That's where he shows his good blood and connection with an old family. He is gallant to the ladies. They can't get that out of him, even at a theological seminary."

Hemstead's blushing confusion increased the laugh at this speech.

"Oh, mother," exclaimed Addie, "we are all going on a frolic to-night. You know that poor, forlorn, little minister at Scrub Oaks, who has six children, and gets but six hundred a year? Well, they are going to give him a donation to-night, so a dilapidated pillar of the church told us. We were invited to come, and Lottie wants to go."

"Very well, my dear, since you and our guests wish it," said Lottie. "Now, auntie, that's very sweet of you to answer so," said Lottie. "I want to see the queer, awkward country people who go to such places. They amuse me vastly; don't they you, Mr. Hemstead?"

"They interest me."

"Oh, it wouldn't be proper for you to say 'amuse.'"

"Nor would it be exactly true."

"Why, Lottie," said Addie, "you know that ministers only think of people as a sad lot that must be saved."

"We'll help make a jolly lot there, to-night," said Lottie, with a swift glance at Hemstead's contracting brows.

"Moreover, auntie, I want to see what a minister that lives on six hundred a year looks like. We give our pastor ten thousand."

"You need not go so far for that purpose, Mrs. Marsden," said Hemstead, quietly: "that is all I shall get."

"What!" she exclaimed, dropping her knife and fork.

"That, in all probability, will be my salary at first. It may be but five hundred."

"Is that all they pay you for going out among the border ruffians?"

"That is the average."

"I wouldn't go," she said, indignantly.

"You may rest assured I would not, for the money."

"Frank will change his mind before spring," said his aunt;

"or a year at least among the 'border ruffians,' as you call them, will cure him, and he will be glad to take a nice church at the East."

"What do you say to that, Mr. Hemstead?"

"Perhaps I had better answer by my actions," he replied.

"But I can see from the expression of your eyes and mouth, a very plain answer to the contrary. Mr. Hemstead, you could be a very stubborn man if you chose."

"I hope I could be a very resolute one."

"Yes, so we explain ourselves when we will have our own way. I think Addie Marchmont's suggestion a very good one."

"If we go to the donation we shall have to take something," said Bel.

"Oh, yes," exclaimed Addie, "I am told all sorts of queer things are brought. Let us take the oddest and most outlandish we can think of. Uncle, there is your old blue dress-coat; we will take that for the minister. Wouldn't he look comical preaching in it? And mother, there is your funny low-necked satin dress that you wore when a young lady. I will take that for his wife."

"I understand everybody brings pies to a donation," said Harcourt. "I shall be more pious than any of them, and bring over fifty from town this afternoon. I will buy all the bake-shops out, in my zeal, enough to give the parson and all his people the dyspepsia for a month."

"If he lives on six hundred, nothing could give him the dyspepsia save his own sermons, I imagine," said De Forrest. "My young lady friends have half filled one of my bureau drawers with smoking-caps. I have one with me, and will give it to the minister."

"You vain fellow," laughed Lottie. "I never gave you one."

"Rest assured, no minister—even were he a minister to the Court of St. James—should get it, if you had."

"What will you take, Mr. Hemstead?" asked Lottie, noting his grave face.

"I shall not go."

"Why not? You spoke as if you would, this morning."

"I can't go under the circumstances."

"Why not?" asked Addie, rather sharply.

"Could we take such gifts to a gentleman and lady, Cousin Addie?"

"Well, I suppose not," she answered, reddening.

"I see no proof that this clergyman and his wife are not, in the fact that they are compelled to live on six hundred a year. Besides, I have too much respect for the calling."

"Don't you see," said De Forrest to Addie, in a loud whisper, "our craft is in danger?"

"Your explanation is more crafty than true, Mr. De Forrest," said Hemstead, looking him straight in the eyes.

"Come," cried Lottie, "my party is not to be broken up. Mr. Hemstead, you need not look so serious or take the matter so much to heart. As you declared once before to-day, we were only 'talking in jest.' You cannot think we would willingly hurt the feelings of your brother clergyman. Surely, if you thought they were serious, it was good of you to stand up for him. We will all give money; that must be the thing the poor man needs most sorely."

"I will give twenty-five dollars if you will, Mr. Hemstead," said De Forrest, with a malicious twinkle in his eye.

"That's liberal of you, Julian. That's action in the right direction," said Lottie; and she turned to Hemstead, expecting a prompt response. But the moment she saw his face, she surmised the truth and De Forrest's motive in making the offer, and what had appeared generous, was now seen to be the reverse. But she determined that Julian should give the money, nevertheless. Still she did not at once interfere, but watched with no little curiosity, to see how Hemstead would extricate himself.

The young man was much embarrassed. He had an innate horror of seeming niggardly, and the course he had taken made his position more delicate. But his simplicity and truthfulness came to his aid, and he said firmly, although with a crimson face:

"I am sorry I cannot accept your generous proposition, but I will give in accordance with my ability. I can give only five dollars."

Mr. Dimmerly and Mrs. Marchmont looked annoyed, while Addie gave utterance to an audible titter, Bel laughed, and then looked as if she had done wrong.

But Lottie, with graceful tact, which was still only good acting, said:

"And that, I am sure, is all that can be asked of Mr. Hemstead or of any one. But the poor man shall not lose the money, Julian, for I will supply Mr. Hemstead with what is lacking."

"Pardon me, Miss Marsden, I cannot take it."

"Not even for this needy minister with his six children?"

"I cannot sacrifice my self-respect for any one," he said.

"Why cannot Mr. De Forrest give what he wishes, without imposing a condition which leaves it doubtful whether he is to give at all?"

"Oh, yes; he is to give," said Lottie, promptly. "I take your offer, Julian. It's delightful to have such a genuine object of charity as a minister living on six hundred a year."

This was spoken very innocently, but was in reality a keen thrust at Hemstead, who had so recently stated his prospective income at that sum. That the others understood it as such, was shown by their significant glances, as they rose from the table.

Hemstead could not discover from Lottie's face whether she meant a covert allusion to himself or not.

Harcourt drove over to town, promising to be back in time. The other young people said that the long drive had made them drowsy, and retired to their rooms for a nap. Hemstead went to the parlor and tried to read but his thoughts wandered strangely. The beautiful face of Lottie Marsden haunted him, and the puzzling contradictions of her words and manner, kept rising in his mind for solution. After a prolonged reverie, he came to the conclusion:

"I have left nothing ambiguous about myself. If she is friendly after this, she knows just who and what I am. It's plain the others think me no addition to their company, and I'm almost sorry I accepted Aunt's invitation. However, I can shorten the visit if I choose;" and he turned resolutely to his book.

Instead of donning her wrapper, as did Bel, Lottie sat down before the fire, and, as was often her custom, commenced half-talking to her friend and familiar, and half-thinking aloud to herself.

"Well, he is the frankest and most transparent man I ever saw. I have been acquainted with him but a few hours, and I feel that I know him better than Julian, with whom I have been intimate so many years."

"He's sincerely, honestly good, too," said Bel. "I think it's too bad, Lottie, that you all treat him so. It's really wicked."

"Yes," said Lottie, meditatively. "It's a good deal more wicked than I thought it would be."

"Then you will give it up?"

"No indeed. I haven't said that."

"How can you do it, Lottie, when you know it is wrong?"

"I knew it was wrong when I commenced. I really know now that it is a little more wrong. Why should I give up my fun on that account? I might as well die for an old black sheep, as a speckled lamb."

Bel yawned at the rather peculiar and tragic ending that Lottie suggested for herself, and was soon dozing on a lounge. But either a restless spirit of mischief, or a disturbed conscience, prevented Lottie from following her example.

It would at times seem true that, when engaged in something that conscience forbids, the very opposition incites and leads to the evil. The conflict between inclination and the sense of right creates a feverish unrest, in which one cannot settle down to ordinary pursuits and duties. If principle holds the reins, and the voice of conscience is clear and authoritative, the disturbed mental and moral state will end in the firm choice of duty, and consequent peace and rest. But if, as in the case of Lottie Marsden, impulse rules in the place of principle, and conscience is merely like a half-dreaded, reproachful face, this unrest is the very hour and opportunity for temptation. Some escape from self and solitude must be found—some immediate excitement must engross the thoughts, and the very phase of evil, against which conscience is vainly protesting, has at the same time the most dangerous fascination.

So Lottie ran away from her own self-reproaches as a naughty child might from a scolding and was soon at the parlor entrance with a noiseless tread, a grace of motion, and a motive that suggested the lithe panther stealing on its prey. The door was ajar, and a hasty glance revealed that the object of her designs was alone. Her stealthy manner

changed instantly, and she sauntered into the room with quiet indifference, humming an air from Faust.

"Oh, you are here," she exclaimed, as if suddenly becoming aware of his presence. "Why do you not take a nap like the others? I hope you are not troubled by a bad conscience."

"What suggested a bad conscience, Miss Marsden?"

"Your sleeplessness."

"I am glad it was not your own. Why are you not taking a nap? I thought you started for one."

"So I did, but found I did not want it. But you are not a Yankee that you must answer my question with another. What are you reading? Won't you read it to me?"

"I would rather not read this book to you; but I will any other that you wish."

"You must learn human nature better, Mr. Hemstead. Don't you know that you have said just enough to make me wish that book and no other? What is it about?"

"I feel sure that it will have no interest for you. It is one of the latest infidel attacks upon the Bible."

"Oh, you are afraid to have me read it."

"Yes; but not for the reasons implied in your tone."

"Don't you see that you are taking the very course to awaken my curiosity, and to make me wish to hear just that book? If you had said, 'Certainly I'll read it to you, but you won't like it, for it's only a dry, heavy book upon a heavy subject,' I would never have looked into it, but would have asked for something else."

"That would hardly be true, Miss Marsden. Though I regard it as an evil and dangerous book, it is exceedingly clever and well written, and it is quite popular in some circles. I suppose it has been sent up to Aunt Marchmont with other new books of note."

"I must certainly read it, since you won't read it to me. Forbid a child to do a thing, you know, and you have given the strongest motive for doing just that thing."

"You are not a child, Miss Marsden."

"What am I, then?"

"I hardly know; but you are capable of realizing one's best ideal, almost."

"Almost! thank you."

"Perhaps my language is stronger than you realize. The woman who could answer to my ideal would be nearly perfect."

"And do you think such a paragon would go out among the border ruffians with you?"

"No, nor anywhere else with me. I was speaking of my ideal."

"You do not expect to marry your ideal, then?"

"I suppose love transfigures the one we love, and that this is the only way we can ever meet our ideal in this life. But sometimes we see one who it seems might approach even the ideal of our unbiased fancy."

"It is well that you admire these exquisite creatures at a distance," she said, dryly. "I can't see why men will always be so foolish as to think pretty women are good women. But if I am not a child why may I not read that book? You intimate that it will not shake my belief."

"I do not think it would—at least I hope it would not."

"You are not sure."

"I'm sure it will not shake the Bible. Every age has teemed with infidel books. Yet God's Word stands to-day as strong and serene as that mountain yonder to which the setting sun has given a crown of light."

"Your figure is pretty, but unfortunate. The sun is indeed 'setting,' and soon the mountain will lose its crown of light and vanish in darkness."

"But does it vanish," he asked quickly, "in the transient darkness like a cloud tipped with light? Such a cloud is a fit emblem of this brilliant book, and of multitudes like it that have preceded, but which, like lurid vapors, have vanished from men's thought and memory. Even with my immature mind I can detect that this clever work is but an airy castle, soon to fall. What infidel book has ever gained or kept a lasting hold upon the popular heart? Let the darkness swallow up the mountain there. If we go where it is at midnight, we shall find it intact, and just as firm as when the sun is shining upon it. The searching light of every day, from year to year and age to age, will find it there just the same. The long night of moral darkness which culminated in the fifteenth century, though it hid the Bible, did not destroy it. Luther at last found and brought it out into the broad light of general study and criticism. For generations, it has been assailed on every side, but it stands in the calm unchanging strength that yonder mountain would, were it surrounded by children shooting against it with arrows. Believe me—I do not fear for the Bible. If all the light of human knowledge were turned upon it in one burning focus, it would only reveal more clearly its intrinsic truth; and if superstition, as it has in the past, or infidelity, as was the case in France, creates temporary darkness, the moment that, in the light of returning reason, men look for the Bible, they find it like a great solemn mountain, that cannot be moved while the world lasts, just where God has placed it."

"Mr. Hemstead, don't you know that young gentlemen do not talk to young ladies as you do to me?"

"You know very well that I am not a society man."

"Oh, I'm not complaining. I rather like to be talked to as if I had some brains, and was not a doll. If you are so sure about the Bible, why do you fear to have me read arguments against it?"

"I am not so sure about you. If I should listen to a plausible story against you, without knowing you or giving you a fair hearing, I might come to be prejudiced—to believe you very unworthy, when the reverse would be true. So the minds of many, from reading books of this nature, and not giving the Bible a fair hearing, become poisoned and prejudiced."

"Then why do you read it?"

"For the same reason that a physician would study a disease, not that he may catch it, but understand and know how to treat it. This book is a mental and moral disease, and I do not wish you to run the risk of catching it, though I do not think it would prove fatal, if you did. Your own heart and experience would probably correct the error of your