

CHOICE LITERATURE.

FROM JEST TO EARNEST.

BY REV. E. F. ROE.

CHAPTER XXVII.—THE MEETING AND GREETING.

Mr. Martell's garments were frozen upon him, and he was so stiff and numb with cold, that with difficulty he made his way up the bank with the support of De Forrest and the gallant coachman, who had suddenly blossomed out into quite a hero. Harcourt and Hemstead formed with their hands what is termed a "chair," and bore the apparently lifeless form of Miss Martell swiftly toward Mrs. Marchmont's residence. The poor carman was so glad to be on solid ground once more that he was able to hobble along at a good pace by himself.

The wind again played mad pranks with Lottie's hair as she at last stood impatiently on the piazza, and then dashed off through the snow to meet them.

"Oh, thank God, you are safely back. He has heard my prayer. But Miss Martell—she, is not—she is not—"

"Don't suggest such a thing," groaned Harcourt. "Of course she has only fainted."

Hemstead could not even speak to Lottie. With white face and set teeth he sought to keep up to the end. The effort he was now putting forth was less that of muscle than the sheer force of will. As with Miss Martell, he, too, was reacting from the tremendous strain that the last hour had brought. He trembled with almost mortal weakness as he slowly mounted the piazza steps. He staggered under his share of their burden as he crossed the hall. Lottie, puzzled by his silence, now saw his deathly pallor with alarm, and instinctively stood at his side.

"You had better take Miss Martell directly to her room," said Mrs. Marchmont.

"In here, quick," gasped Hemstead; he tottered to the nearest sofa, and, a second later, lay unconscious at Miss Martell's feet.

At this moment Alice again became conscious. Hemstead's condition did more to revive her than all restoratives; for, woman-like, she thought of him more than herself. She sat up and exclaimed faintly:

"Oh, can't something be done for him? Quick. It looks as if he had given his life for us;" and she looked around, not far enough to see the expression of Harcourt's face as he welcomed her back to consciousness, but only to see Addie clinging to his arm, repeatedly asking to be assured that he was not hurt.

"Thank heaven you are safe," he bent down and whispered.

"Don't think of me. Look at Mr. Hemstead."

Again he misunderstood her, and with bitterness thought, "After my anguish on her account, she gives me not even a thought, and her first words are 'Don't think of me';" and he felt that fate had been very cruel in sending Hemstead to her rescue instead of himself.

Mrs. Marchmont now appeared upon the confused scene, and proved that she was equal to the occasion. It was a sad pity that she had not imparted to her daughter a little of her own capability. She bade De Forrest, and the still stout and hearty ex-sailor, carry Hemstead at once to his room, while she and one of the maids assisted Miss Martell to hers. No opportunity whatever was given for any romantic and affecting scenes.

Lottie had soot for a second in dismay, after seeing her "true knight" sink on the floor, and then, like a sensible girl, instead of going off into hysterics, went like a flash to her aunt's wine closet for brandy. But before she could find it, Mrs. Marchmont had caused both the rescued and the rescuer to be conveyed to the privacy of their own rooms, where they could at once receive the prosaic treatment that their condition required.

The room which a moment before had presented a scene which she would never forget, was empty, Harcourt having gone for a physician.

She met Mr. Dimmerly on the stairs who took the brandy from her, saying:

"That's sensible. We'll rub him down with it, inside and out, and he'll be all right in the morning. Now you see how blood tells. Making a parson of him can't change the fact of his coming from an old family. He has been as brave to-night as the Dimmerlys were a thousand years ago."

But Lottie was not a bit interested in the millennial Dimmerlys, and putting her arms around her uncle's neck in a way that surprised that ancient fossil, she coaxed:

"Won't you promise me, uncle, that as soon as he is safe you will come out and let me know?"

"Safe? He is safe now. Who ever heard of even a half-blooded Dimmerly dying from a mere faint? Old age is the only disease that runs in our family, my dear. But I will let you know as soon as he is comfortably asleep." "I am going to make my proper parson nephew almost drunk, for once in his life; and you needn't expect to see him much before ten o'clock to-morrow."

Lottie, finding her services were not needed in Miss Martell's room, went down to the kitchen, where she found the half-frozen carman—now rigged out in the dress-coat and white vest of the coloured waiter—and the brave coachman who had put his old sea-craft to such good use. They were being loyally cared for by the cook and laundress. The poor fellow who out in the boat had thought that the hearts of even his neighbours were as cold and as hard as the ice that was destroying them, had now forgotten his misanthropy, and was making a supper that, considering the hour, would threaten to an ordinary mortal more peril than that from which he had escaped. She drew from him—especially the coachman—the narrative of their thrilling experience, and every moment Hemstead grew more heroic in her eyes.

"Bless you, miss," said the bluff ex-sailor, his tongue a little loosened by the whiskey he had taken as an antidote for the cold and wet, "there's stuff enough in him to make a hundred such as t'other young gentleman as wouldn't go.

Sudden spells, like that he had t'other night, is all he'll ever be 'stinguished for, I'm a-thinking. But I ax you pardon, miss."

"I can forgive you anything to-night my brave fellow," said Lottie, blushing; "though you have given Mr. Hemstead so much credit, he will give you more to-morrow. Take this and get something to remember this evening by;" and she slipped a twenty-dollar bank note into his hand.

"Now bless your sweet eyes," exclaimed the man ducking and bobbing with bewildering rapidity; "its your kindness that'll make me remember the evening to my dying day."

"How could you speak so of Mr. De Forrest, when the young leddy is engaged to him?" said the cook reproachfully, after Lottie had gone.

"No matter," said the ex-sailor stoutly, "I've had it on my conscience to give her a warnin'. I hadn't the heart to see such a trim little craft run in shallow water, and hoist no signal. If she was my darter, she'd have to mitten that lubber if he was wuth a million."

As Lottie passed through the hall with silent tread, she saw that De Forrest was in the parlour, and to escape him continued on up to her room, musing as she went:

"What a strange blending of weakness and strength Mr. Hemstead is. Well, I like that. I would like a man to be as strong as Samson generally, but often so weak that he would have to lean on me."

Whom did Lottie mean by that indefinite word "man"? It did not occur to her that there was a very definite image in her mind of one who was pale and exhausted, and whom it would now be a dear privilege to nurse back into strength and vigor.

She met her uncle and the physician in the upper hall, and the latter said:

"Mr. and Miss Martell are doing as well as could be expected, when we consider the fearful ordeal they have passed through. As far as I can foresee, a few days' rest and quiet will restore them."

"And Mr.—Mr. Hemstead?" faltered Lottie, the colour mounting into her face that anxiety had made unwontedly pale.

"The brave fellow who rescued them? Now he is the right kind of a dominie—not all white choker and starch. No fear about him, Miss Marsden. He's made of good stuff, well put together. A night's rest and a warm breakfast, and he will be himself again;" and the old doctor bustled away.

"What delightful prose," thought Lottie, and she tripped lightly to her room and kissed the sullen and offended Bel good night; and, very grateful and at peace with all the world, soon fell asleep.

But she had a disagreeable dream. Again she saw Hemstead at Miss Martell's feet; but now, instead of being pale and unconscious, his face was flushed and eager, and he was pleading for that which the king cannot buy. She awoke sobbing, called herself a "little fool," and went to sleep again.

But in the morning the dream lingered in her mind in a vague uncomfortable way.

She was early down to breakfast, for she was eager to speak to Hemstead, and tell him how she appreciated his heroism. But either his exhaustion was greater than the physician had believed, or his uncle's sedatives were very powerful, for he did not appear.

There was nothing better for her than to endure De Forrest's explanations why he had not gone, and his assurances that if he had "only known, etc.;" to which she gave an impatient hearing, quite unlike her gentleness of the two preceding days. There were little things in her manner which indicated a falling barometer, and suggested that the day might not pass serenely.

She learned from her aunt and uncle that Mr. and Miss Martell were feeling better than might have been expected, and Hemstead was still sleeping.

"Sleep was all he wanted," said Mr. Dimmerly; "and I made it my business he should get it."

Quite early in the forenoon Mr. Martell and his daughter felt equal to coming down to the parlour, and after dinner it was their intention to return home. A luxurious lounge was wheeled near the blazing wood fire, and on this Miss Martell was tenderly placed by her father, who, in joyful gratitude, could scarcely take his eyes from her pale face. Beyond the natural languor which would follow so terrible a strain, she seemed quite well.

Both father and daughter appreciated Mrs. Marchmont's courtesy greatly; and Miss Martell's effort to be cordial, even to Addie, was quite pathetic, when it is remembered she felt that her supposed rival would harm her more than could the cold river.

Lottie made frequent errands to her room, and lingered in the hall all she could without attracting notice, in the hope of seeing Hemstead a moment alone. The impulsive girl's warm heart was so full of admiration for what he had done that she longed to show him her appreciation without the chilling restraint of observant eyes and critical ears.

But he was so blind to his interests as to blunder into the parlour when she was there and every one else also.

Though it cost her great effort, Alice Martell rose instantly, and greeted him so cordially as to bring the deepest crimson into his pale face. Mr. Martell also pressed to his side, speaking words which only a grateful father could.

When, for any cause, Hemstead was the object of general attention, the occasion became the very hour and opportunity for his awkward diffidence to assert itself, and now he stood in the centre of the floor, the most angular and helpless of mortals.

De Forrest looked at him with disdain, and thought, "I would like to show him how a gentleman ought to act under the circumstances."

De Forrest would have been equal to receiving all the praise, and as it was, in view of his readiness to have saved Miss Martell if he had "only known," could have accepted, with grateful complacency, a gratitude that quite overwhelmed the man of deeds.

Hemstead's confusion was so great as even to embarrass

Miss Martell for a moment, and her face, from reminding one of a lily, suddenly suggested an exquisite pink rose.

But before he was aware, she had enconcealed him in an easy chair at her side, and with a tact peculiarly her own, had rallied his panic-stricken faculties into such order that he could again take command of them.

But as Lottie saw them grasping each other's hands and blushing, her dream recurred to her with the force of an ominous prophecy. Hemstead, in his severe attack of diffidence, had not greeted any one on his entrance, but had fallen helplessly into Miss Martell's hands, and had been led to his chair like a lamb to the slaughter. But Lottie took it as much to heart as if he had purposely neglected to speak to her. And when, a little later, Mr. Dimmerly commenced a formal eulogy, Hemstead with an expression of intense annoyance raised his hand deprecatingly, and pleaded that no one would speak of what he had done again, she feared that all the glowing words she meant to say would be unwelcome after all.

Everything had turned out so differently from what she had anticipated that she was disappointed above measure, and before he could collect his scattered wits she left the room.

"And so it all ends," she thought bitterly, as she chafed up and down the hall. "I sent him out last night as my own 'true knight,' wearing my colours, and he rescues another woman. When I see him again he brushes past me to speak to the one who, owing him so much of course will be grateful. With eyes for her alone he wears my colours in his face, and she raises the same blood-red signal. I was looking forward to the pleasure of giving him a welcome that he might value on his return, and he has not even spoken to me. After our parting last night could anything have turned out more flat and prosaic?"

Just at this moment Harcourt, who was another victim of circumstances, entered, and Lottie, too annoyed to meet any one, fled to her own room.

He had already called early in the morning, to inquire after the invalids; and now, in the hope of seeing Miss Martell, had driven over again.

But Miss Martell did not know this, and his coming now seemed a little late and dilatory considering all they had passed through. Deep in her heart there was disappointment that he had not come to her rescue instead of Hemstead. Was he one to stand safely on the shore while others took risks from which true manhood would not have shrunk? Could he have dreamt that she was in peril, and still have let Hemstead go without him to her aid? These were thoughts that had distressed her during part of a sleepless night and all the morning.

Moreover when he entered, Addie had pounced upon him in her usual style, as if she had in him certain rights of possession.

Addie's manner, together with her thoughts, gave an involuntary tinge of coldness to her greeting which he was quick to recognize, while her cordiality to Hemstead suggested to him, as to Lottie that she might be very grateful.

Mr. Martell was more than slightly distant. He was stiff and formal. As circumstances then appeared to him he thought that Harcourt had acted a very unworthy part. Mr. Martell naturally supposed that both Harcourt and De Forrest were at Mrs. Marchmont's, but that only Hemstead had been willing to venture to their assistance. To De Forrest he gave scarcely a thought, having estimated that superficial youth at his own light weight. But that Harcourt, the son of his old and dear friend, should have so failed in manly duty, was a bitter trial. As he saw him and Addie together, he thought contemptuously:

"They are well mated, after all. How strange that my peerless daughter can have such a regard for him!"

He had become aware of his daughter's preference, though, out of delicate regard for her feelings he had feigned blindness.

Even had Harcourt known how greatly they misjudged him, in his sensitive pride he would have made no explanations; and he was the last one in the world to tell them, as would De Forrest, how he meant to go to their aid, etc.

His manner puzzled Alice. She could not help noting with secret satisfaction, that while polite, he was annoyed at Addie's demonstrativeness; and at times she thought his eyes sought her face almost as if in appeal. But her own and her father's manner had evidently chilled him, and he soon took his leave. His face, in which pride and dejection contended for mastery, haunted her like a reproach.

"If Mr. Harcourt had only arrived a little earlier last evening, Miss Martell," said De Forrest complacently, "you would have three to thank instead of one. I'm sure if I had known that you and your father—"

"How is that?" asked Mr. Martell quickly. "Was not Mr. Harcourt spending the evening here?"

"Oh no. It was from him that we learned of your peril. He came tearing over like mad, a few moments after the coachman and Mr. Hemstead had gone; then he dashed off to the shore where I soon joined him. I thought at one time," continued De Forrest, glad to say anything that would dim Hemstead's laurels, "that he would start out into the river with no better support than a plank; so eager was he to go to your aid. If we could only have found another boat we would have both gone. As it was, it was well I was there to restrain him, for he seemed beside himself."

The rich colour mounted to Miss Martell's face as she gave her father a swift glance of glad intelligence, and he drew a long breath of relief, as if some heavy burden had been lifted.

"Yes," said Mrs. Marchmont quietly, but at the same time fixing an observant eye on the young lady, "I never saw Mr. Harcourt so moved before."

Conscious of Mrs. Marchmont's object, Alice mastered herself at once, and with equal quietness answered:

"It would be strange if it were otherwise. We have been acquainted from childhood."

Nevertheless the experienced matron surmised danger to the match she would gladly bring about between her daughter and Harcourt, and instead of fearing, as was the case with the latter and Lottie, she hoped that Miss Martell would be very grateful to Hemstead.