

CHOICE LITERATURE.

A KNIGHT OF THE XIX. CENTURY.

BY REV. E. F. ROE, AUTHOR OF "FROM JEST TO EARNEST."

CHAPTER XLVIII.—MRS. ARNOT'S KNIGHT.

It will not be supposed that Haldane was either blind or indifferent during the long months in which Beaumont, like a skilful engineer, was making his regular approaches to the fair lady whom he would win. He early foresaw what appeared to him would be the inevitable result, and yet, in spite of all his fortitude, and the frequency with which he assured himself that it was natural, that it was best, that it was right, that this peerless woman should wed a man of Beaumont's position and culture, still that gentleman's assured deliberate advance was like the slow and torturing contraction of the walls of that terrible chamber in the Inquisition which, by an imperceptible movement, closed in upon and crushed the prisoner. For a time he felt that he could not endure the pain, and he grew haggard under it.

"What's a matter, my boy?" said Mr. Growther abruptly to him one evening; "you look as if something was a-gnawin' and a-eatin' your very heart out."

He satisfied his old friend by saying that he did not feel well, and surely one sick at heart as he was might justly say this.

Mr. Growther immediately suggested as remedies all the drugs he had ever heard of, and even volunteered to go after them, but Haldane said with a smile,

"I would not survive if I took a tenth part of the medicines you have named, and not one of them would do me any good. I think I'll take a walk instead."

Mr. Growther thought a few moments and muttered to himself, "What a cursed old fool I've been to think that rhubarb and jallup could touch his case! He's got something on his mind," and with a commendable uelicity, he forbore to question and pry.

Gradually, however, Haldane obtained patience and then strength to meet what seemed inevitable, and to go forward with the strong, measured tread of a resolute soldier.

While passing through his lonely and bitter conflict he learned the value and significance of that ancient prophecy, "He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and we hid, as it were, our faces from Him." How long, long ago God planned and purposed to win the sympathy and confidence of the suffering by coming so close to them in like experience that they could feel sure—yes, know—that He felt with them and for them.

Never before had the young man so fully realized how vital a privilege it was to be a disciple of Christ—to be near to Him—and enjoy what resembled a companionship akin to that possessed by those who followed Him up and down the rugged paths of Judea and Galilee.

When, at last, Laura's engagement became a recognized fact, he received the intelligence as quietly as the soldier who is ordered to take and hold a position that will long try his fortitude and courage to the utmost.

As for Laura, the weeks that followed her engagement were like a beautiful dream, but one that was created largely by the springing hopes and buoyancy of youth, and the witchery of her own vivid imagination. The springtime had come again, and the beauty and promise of her own future seemed reflected in nature. Every day she took long drives into the country with her lover, or made expeditions to picture galleries in New York; again, they would visit public parks or beautiful private grounds on which the landscape gardener had lavished his art. She lived and fairly revelled in a world of beauty, and for the time it intoxicated her with delight.

There was also such a chorus of congratulation that she could not help feeling complacent. Society endorsed her choice so emphatically and universally that she was sure she had made no mistake. She was caused to feel that she had carried off the richest prize ever known in Hillaton, and she was sufficiently human to be elated over the fact.

Nor was the congratulation all on one side. Society was quite as positive that Beaumont had been equally fortunate, and there were some that insisted that he had gained the richer prize. It was known that Laura had considerable property in her own name, and it was the general belief that she would eventually become heiress to a large part of the colossal fortune supposed to be in the possession of Mr. and Mrs. Arnot. In respect to character, beauty, accomplishments—in brief, the minor considerations in the world's estimation, it was admitted by all that Laura had few superiors. Mr. Beaumont's parents were lavish in the manifestations of their pleasure and approval. And thus it would seem that these two lives were fitly joined by the affinity of kindred tastes, by the congenial habits of equal rank, and by universal acclamation.

Gradually, however, the glamour thrown around her new relationship by its very novelty, by unnumbered congratulations, and the excitement attendant on so momentous a step in a young lady's life, began to pass away. Every fine drive in the country surrounding the city had been taken again and again; all the fine galleries had been visited, and the finer pictures admired and dwelt upon in Mr. Beaumont's refined and quiet tones, until there was little more to be said. Laura had come to know exactly why her favourite pictures were beautiful, and precisely the marks which gave them value. The pictures remained just as beautiful, but she became rather tired of hearing Mr. Beaumont analyze them. Not that she could find any fault with what he said, but it was the same thing over and over again. She became, slowly and unpleasantly, impressed with the thought that, while Mr. Beaumont would probably take the most correct view of every object that met his eye, he would always take the same view, and, having once heard him give an opinion, she could anticipate on all future occasions just what he would say. We all know, by disagreeable experience, that no man is so wearisome as he who repeats himself over and

over again without variation, no matter how approved his first utterance may have been. Beaumont was remarkably gifted with the power of forming a correct judgment of the technical work of others in all departments of art and literature, and to the perfecting of this accurate aesthetic taste he had given the energies of his maturer years. He had carefully scrutinized in every land all that the best judges considered pre-eminently great and beautiful, but his critical powers were those of an expert, a connoisseur only. His mind had no freshness or originality. He had very little imagination. Laura's spirit would kindle before a beautiful painting until her eyes suffused with tears. He would observe coolly, with an eye that measured and compared everything with the received canons of art, and if the drawing and colouring were correct he was simply—satisfied.

Again, he had a habit of forgetting that he had given his artistic views upon a subject but a brief time before, and would repeat them almost word for word, and often his polished sentences and quiet monotone were as wearisome as a thrice-told tale.

As time wore on the disagreeable thought began to suggest itself to Laura that the man himself had culminated; that he was perfected to the limit of his nature, and finished off. She foresaw with dread that she might reach a point before very long when she would know all that he knew, or, at least, all that he kept in his mind, and that thereafter every thing would be endless repetition to the end of life. He dressed very much the same every day; his habits were very uniform and methodical. In the world's estimation he was, indeed, a bright luminary, and he certainly resembled the heavenly bodies in the following respects. Laura was learning that she could calculate his orbit to a nicety, and know beforehand what he would do and say in given conditions. When she came to know him better she might be able to trace the unwelcome resemblance still further, in the fact that he did not seem to be progressing toward anything, but was going round and round in an habitual circle of thought and action, with himself as the centre of his universe.

Laura resisted the first and infrequent coming of these thoughts, as if they were suggestions of the evil one; but, in spite of all effort, all self-reproach, they would return. Sometimes as little a thing as an elegant pose—so perfect, indeed, as to suggest that it had been studied and learned by heart years ago—would occasion them, and the happy girl began to sigh over a faint foreboding of trouble.

By no word or thought did she ever shew him what was passing in her mind, and she would have to shew such thoughts plainly before he would even dream of their existence, for no man ever more thoroughly believed in himself than did Auguste Beaumont. He was satisfied he had learned the best and most approved way of doing everything, and as his action was always the same, it was, therefore, always right. Moreover, Laura eventually divined, while calling with him on his parents, that the greatest heresy and most aggravated offence that anyone could be guilty of in the Beaumont mansion would be to find fault with Auguste. It would be a crime for which neither reason nor palliation could be found.

Thus the prismatic hues which had surrounded this man began to fade, and Laura, who had hoped to escape the prose of life, was reluctantly compelled to admit to herself at times that she found her lover tiresomely prosy and "splendidly null."

In the meantime Haldane had finished the studies of his second year at the medical college, and had won the respect of his instructors by his careful attention to the lectures, and by a certain conscientious, painstaking manner, rather than by the display of any striking or brilliant qualities.

One July evening, before taking his summer vacation, he called on Mrs. Arnot. The sky in the west was so threatening, and the storm came on so rapidly, that Mr. Beaumont did not even venture down to the city, and Laura, partly to fill a vacant hour, and partly to discover wherein the man of to-day, of whom her aunt could speak in such high terms, differed from the youth that she, even as an immature girl, despised, determined to give Haldane a little close observation. When he entered she was at the piano, practising a very difficult and intricate piece of music that Beaumont had recently brought to her, and he said,

"Please do not cease playing. Music, which is a part of your daily fare, is to me a rarely tasted luxury, for you know that in Hillaton there are but few public concerts even in winter."

She gave him a glance of genuine sympathy, as she remembered that only at a public concert, where he could pay his way to an unobtrusive seat, could he find opportunity to enjoy that which was a part of her daily life. In no parlour save her aunt's, could he enjoy such refining pleasures, and for a reason that she knew well he had rarely availed himself of the privilege. Then another thought followed swiftly: "Surely a man so isolated and cut off from these æsthetic influences, which Mr. Beaumont regards as absolutely essential, must have become uncouth and angular in his development." The wish to discover how far this was true gave to her observation an increasing zest. She generously resolved, however, to give him as rich a musical banquet as it was in her power to furnish, if his eye and manner asked for it.

"Please continue what you were playing," he added; "it piques my curiosity."

As the musical intricacy, which gave the rich but tangled fancies of a master-mind, proceeded, his brow knit in perplexity, and at its close he shook his head and remarked,

"That is beyond me. Now and then I seemed to catch glimpses of meaning, and then all was obscure again."

"It is beyond me, too," said Mrs. Arnot, with a laugh. "Come, Laura, give us something simple. I have heard severely classical and intricate music so long that I am ready to welcome even 'Auld lang syne.'"

"I also shall enjoy a change to something old and simple,"

said Laura, and her fingers glided into a selection which Haldane instantly recognized as Steibelt's Storm Rondo.

As Laura glanced at him she saw his deepening colour, and then it suddenly flashed upon her when she had first played that music for him, and her own face flushed with annoyance at her forgetfulness. After playing it partly through she turned to her music-stand in search of something else, but Haldane said,

"Please finish the rondo, Miss Romeyn;" adding, with a frank laugh, "you have no doubt forgotten it; but you owe, by means of this music, gave me one of the most desirable and wholesome lessons I ever received."

"Your generous acknowledgment of a fancied mistake at that time should have kept me from blunders this evening," she replied, in a pained tone.

With a steady glance that held her eyes, he said very quietly, and almost gently,

"You have made no blunder, Miss Romeyn. I do not ignore the past, nor do I wish it to be ignored with pains-taking care. I am simply trying to face it and overcome it as I might an enemy. I may be wrong, for you know I have had little chance to become versed in the ways of good society; but it appears to me that it would be better even for those who are to spend but a social hour together that they should be free from the constraint which must exist when there is a constant effort to shun delicate or dangerous ground. Please finish the rondo; and also please remember that the ice is not thin here and there," he added with a smile.

Laura caught her aunt's glance, and the significant lighting up of her face, and, with an answering smile, she said,

"If you will permit me to change the figure, I will suggest that you have broken the ice so completely that I shall take you at your word, and play and sing just what you wish," and, bent upon giving the young man all the pleasure she could, she exerted her powers to the utmost in widely varied selections; and while she saw that his technical knowledge was limited, it was clearly evident that he possessed a nature singularly responsive to musical thoughts and effects; indeed, she found a peculiar pleasure and incentive in glancing at his face from time to time, for she saw reflected there the varied characteristics of the melody. But once, as she looked up to see how he liked an old English ballad, she caught that which instantly brought the hot blood into her face.

Haldane had forgotten himself, forgotten that she belonged to another, and, under the spell of the old love song, had dropped his mask. She saw his heart in his gaze of deep, intense affection more plainly than spoken words could have revealed it.

He started slightly as he saw her conscious blush, turned pale instead of becoming red and embarrassed, and, save a slight compression of his lips, made no other movement. She sang the concluding verse of the ballad in a rather unsympathetic manner, and, after a light instrumental piece devoid of sentiment, rose from the piano.

Haldane thanked her with frank heartiness, and then added in a playful manner that, although the concert was over, he was weather-bound on account of the shower, and would therefore try to compensate them for giving him shelter by relating a curious story which was not only founded on fact, but all fact; and he soon had both of his auditors deeply interested in one of those strange and varied experiences which occasionally occur in real life, and which he had learned through his mission class. The tale was so full of lights and shadows that it now provoked to laughter, and again almost moved the listeners to tears. While the narrator made as little reference to himself as possible, he unconsciously and of necessity revealed how practically and vitally useful he was to the class among whom he was working. Partly to draw him out, and partly to learn more about certain characters in whom she had become interested, Mrs. Arnot asked after one and another of Haldane's "difficult cases." As his replies suggested inevitably something of their dark and revolting history, Laura again forgot herself so far as to exclaim,

"How can you work among such people?"

After the words were spoken she was ready to wish that she had bitten her tongue out.

"Christ worked among them," replied he, gravely; and then he added, with a look of grateful affection toward Mrs. Arnot, "Besides, your aunt has taught me by a happy experience that there are some possibilities of a change for the better in 'such people.'"

"Mr. Haldane," said Laura, impetuously, and with a burning flush, "I sincerely beg your pardon. As you were speaking you seemed so like my aunt in refinement and character that you banished every other association from my mind."

His face lighted up with a strong expression of pleasure, and he said,

"I am glad that those words are so heartily uttered, and that there is no premeditation in them; for if in the faintest and farthest degree I can even resemble Mrs. Arnot, I shall feel that I am indeed making progress."

"I shall say what is in my mind without any constraint whatever," said Mrs. Arnot. "Years ago, Egbert, when once visiting you in prison, to which you had been sent very justly, I said in effect, that in rising above yourself and your circumstances, you would realize my ideal of knighthood. You cannot know with what deep pleasure I tell you to-night that you are realizing this ideal even beyond my hopes."

"Mrs. Arnot," replied Haldane, in a tone that trembled slightly, "I was justly sent to that prison, and to-night, no doubt, I should have been in some other prison-house of human justice—quite possibly," he added, in a low, shuddering tone, "in the prison-house of God's justice—if you had not come like an angel of mercy—if you had not borne with me, taught me, restrained me, helped me with a patience akin to heaven's own. It is the hope and prayer of my life that I may some day prove how I appreciate all that you have done for me. But see; the storm is over, as all storms will be in time. Good-night, and good-bye," and he