

CHOICE LITERATURE.

FROM JEST TO EARNEST.

BY REV. E. F. ROE.

CHAPTER V.—PLAIN TALK.

At last the sound of mirth and laughter ceased, and the house became quiet.

Lottie sat warming her feet at the glowing coals in her room, before retiring. A dreamy smile played upon her face, coming and going with passing thoughts, even as the firelight flickered upon it.

She was in an unusually amiable mood, for this affair with Hemstead promised richly. If he had been an ordinary and polished society man, the flirtation would have been humdrum—like a score of others. But he was so delightfully fresh and honest, and yet so clever withal, that her eyes sparkled with anticipating mirth as she saw him in various attitudes of awkward love-making, and then dropping helplessly into the abyss of his own great, but empty heart, on learning the vainness of his passion.

"He finds me 'more interesting than some doctrines,' indeed! I'll put all his dry doctrines to rout in less than a week. I'll drive text-books and professors out of his head, and everything else (save myself) out of his heart, for a little while. But after he gets back to Michigan, the doctrines will come creeping back into their old place, and he will get comfortably over it like the rest. In the meanwhile, as substantial and useful results, I will have my rare bit of sport, and he will know more about the wicked world against which he is to preach. By-and-by he will marry a pious Western giantess, whose worst dissipation is a Sunday-school picnic, and will often petrify her soul with horror and wonder by describing that awful little pagan, Lottie Marsden."

"And a heathen I am in very truth. Where are missionaries needed more than in Fifth Avenue? They had better not come though; for if we would not eat them, we would freeze them."

"What are you thinking about, Lottie, that you are smiling so sweetly?" asked her room-mate, Bel Parson.

"In truth, it was a sweet thought," said Lottie, her laugh awakening sudden echoes in the still house, and sounding as oddly as a bird's song at night. "I'm glad Frank Hemstead doesn't know. If he did, I would appall instead of fascinating him."

"I think your plot against him is very wrong—wicked, indeed. He is such a sincere, good young man, that I like it less and less. I couldn't do such a thing."

"Still you can look on and enjoy the fun, and that is all you have to do. Poor Bel, you are always in need of an M.D.'s or a D.D.'s care. I have forsworn both."

So spoke Lottie in the arrogance of her perfect health and bounding beauty, and then (such are the seeming contradictions of character) she knelt, and appeared as a white-robed saint at her devotions. But the parrot-like prayer that she hastily mumbled was of no possible value to any one. She had continued the habit from childhood, and it was mainly habit. The other motive was something like the feeling of a careless Catholic, who crosses himself, though he cannot explain what good it does him.

A moment later she might have been taken as a model of sleeping innocence.

This world is evidently sadly out of joint. We all know of the most gentle, lovely, unselfish spirits, beautiful to Heaven's eye, that are ensconced in painfully plain caskets. In the instance of Lottie Marsden, the casket was of nature's most exquisite workmanship, but it held a tarnished jewel.

It was with some misgivings that Hemstead looked forward to meeting his "cousin" on the following morning. Would she be as radiantly beautiful, as piquant, and withal as kindly and frank as on the previous evening? Even his limited experience of the world had shown him that in the matter-of-fact and searching light of the morning, many of the illusions of the night vanished. He had noted with no little surprise that ladies seemingly young and blooming had come down to breakfast looking ten years older; so he had said to himself:

"She dazzled me last night. I shall see her as she is to-day."

Being an early riser he entered the cheerful breakfast-room considerably before the others, and in a moment was entranced by the view from the windows.

The severe north-east storm had expended itself during the night, and its fine, sharp crystals had changed into snow-flakes. As an angry man after many hard cutting words relents somewhat and speaks calmly if still coldly, so nature, that had been stingingly severe the evening before, was now quietly letting fall a few final hints of the harsh mood that was passing away. Even while he looked, the sun broke through a rift over the eastern mountains and lighted up the landscape as with genial smiles. It shone, not on an ordinary and prosaic world, but rather one that had been touched by magic during the night and transformed into the wonderland of dreams.

The trees that in the dusk of the previous night had withered and groaned and struck their frozen branches together as despairing anguish might gesticulate, now stood serene, and decked more faintly than June could robe them. Whiter even than the pink-tinged blossoms of May, was the soft wet snow that encased every twig, limb, and spray. The more he looked, the more the beauty and the wonder of the scene grew upon him. The sun was dispersing the clouds and adding the element of splendor to that of beauty. It became one of the supreme moments of his life when in the vanishing beauty of an earthly scene he received an earnest of the more perfect world beyond.

"With the exception of the broad dark river," he thought, "this might be the Millennium morn, and nature standing decked in her spotless ascension robes, waiting in breathless expectancy."

But his musings were unexpectedly interrupted, for just

at this moment Lottie Marsden put her hand lightly on his arm and said:

"Cousin Frank—pardon me—Mr. Hemstead, what is the matter? You look as rapt as if you saw a vision."

He turned and seemed as startled as if he had, for standing by him and looking inquiringly into his face was a being that, with her brilliant eyes and exquisitely clear and delicate complexion, seemed as beautiful, and at the same time as frail and ready to vanish, as the snow-wreaths with-out.

She saw the strong admiration and almost wonder depicted on his open face, though she seemed so innocently oblivious of it, and for a moment left him under the spell, then said:

"Are you so resentful at my desertion last evening that you won't speak to me?"

"Look there," he replied, and he pointed to the fairy-land without.

Lottie's wonder and delight were almost equal to his own, for she had never witnessed such a scene before.

"I am so glad I came," she said, "we see nothing like this in the city. Look at those snowy mountains. How vast and white they are!"

"And look at that little tree with its red berries gleaming against the snowy foil. They look like those ruby ear-rings against the whiteness of your neck."

She looked at him quickly and humorously, asking, "Where did you learn the art of complimenting?"

"I had no thought of trivial compliment in the presence of a scene like this," he answered, gravely; "I was awed by the beauty I saw, and it seemed as if the Great Artist must be near. I wished to call your attention to the truth that, like all His work, the least thing is perfect. That little tree with its red berries is beautiful as well as the mountain. I now am glad too that you came, though I dreaded any one's coming before, and the necessity of returning to common-place life. But suddenly, and as silently as one of those snow-flakes, you appear, and I am startled to find you in keeping with the scene, instead of an intrusion."

"And do I seem to you like a snow-flake—as pure and as cold?" she asked, bending upon him her brilliant eyes.

"Not as cold, I trust, and if you were as pure you would not be human. But your beauty seemed to me as marvellous as that of the scene I had been wondering at. I am not versed in society's disguises, Miss Marsden, and can better express my thoughts than hide them. You know you are very beautiful. Why should I not say so as well as involuntarily express the fact in my face as I did a moment ago, and as every one does, I suppose, who meets you. There is nothing brought to your attention more often, and more pressed upon you. It must be so. Does not your beauty cause you much anxiety?"

"What a funny question!" laughed Lottie. Your frankness is certainly as transparent as those snow-crystals there. I cannot say that it does. Why should it, even granting that it exists independently of your disordered imagination?"

"It exposes you to a temptation very hard to resist. Such beauty as yours should be but the reflex of character. I once saw, in an art gallery of New York, a marble face so white, pure, and sweet, that it has ever remained in my memory as an emblem of spiritual beauty. Suppose every one that came in should touch that face, and some with coarse and grimy fingers, what a smutched and tawdry look it would soon have. You cannot help the admiring glances, the flattering words, and the homage that ever waits on beauty, any more than the marble face the soiling touch of any Vandal hand, but you can prevent your soul from being stained and smirched with vanity and pride."

"I never had any one to talk to me in this way," said Lottie, looking demurely down. "Perhaps I would have been better if I had. I fear you think me very vain and conceited."

"I should think it very strange if you were not somewhat vain. And yet you do not act as if you were."

"Supposing I am vain. What difference does it make, if no one knows it?" she asked abruptly.

"There are two who always will know it."

"Who?"

"God and yourself. And by-and-by all masks must be dropped and all the world see us as we are."

"Do you believe that?" she asked, a little startled at the thought.

"I know it," he replied, in a tone of quiet confidence that carries more conviction than loud assertion. "Moreover, your beauty involves a heavy burden of responsibility."

"Really, Mr. Hemstead, if you keep on you will prove beauty a great misfortune, whether I possess it or not."

"Far from it."

"Granting for sake of argument your premise, how am I burdened with responsibility?"

"Would it not almost break your heart if your honorable father were misappropriating money intrusted to his care?"

"Don't suggest such a thing."

"Only for the sake of illustration. Suppose he had the qualities and position which led a great many to place their means in his hands; would that not increase his responsibility?"

"Yes, if he accepted such trusts."

"Are there not more valuable possessions than dollars, stocks, and bonds? Every one is more or less fascinated, drawn, and won by beauty, and to the beautiful, the most sacred thoughts and feelings of the heart are continually intrusted. History and biography show that beautiful women, if true, gentle, and unselfish, have great power with their own sex, and almost unbounded influence over men. Your power, therefore, is subtle, penetrating, and reaches the inner life, the very warp and woof of character. If a beautiful statue can ennoble and refine, a beautiful woman can accomplish infinitely more. She can be a constant inspiration, a suggestion of the perfect life beyond and an earnest of it. All power brings responsibility, even that which a man achieves or buys; but surely, if one receives Heaven's most exquisite gifts, bestowed as directly as this marvellous beauty without, and so is made pre-eminent in power and

influence, she is under a double responsibility to use that power for good. That a woman can take the royal gift of her own beauty, a Divine heritage, one of the most suggestive relics of Eden still left among us, and daily sacrifice it on the poorest and meanest of altars—her own vanity, is to me hard to understand. It is scarcely respectable heathenism. But to use her beauty as a lure is far worse. Do we condemn wreckers, who place false, misleading lights upon a dangerous coast? What is every grace of a coquette, but a false light, leading often to more sad and hopeless wreck?"

No man had ever told Lottie more plainly that she was beautiful, than Hemstead, and yet she disliked his compliments woefully. Her face fairly grew pale under his words. Had he learned of her plot? Had he read her thoughts, and been informed of her past life? Was there quiet satire and denunciation under this seeming frankness? She was for the moment perplexed and troubled. Worse still, he compelled her to see these things in a new light, and her conscience echoed his words.

But her first impulse was to learn whether he was speaking generally, or pointedly at her; so she asked, in some little trepidation:

"Has any naughty girl tried to treat you so badly, that you speak so strongly?"

He laughed outright at this question. "No one has had a chance," he said; "and I do not think there are many who would take it. Moreover, I imagine that one of your proud belles would not even condescend to flirt with a poor awkward fellow like me. But I am not a croaking philosopher, and look on the bright side of the world. It has always treated me quite as well as I deserved. I often think the world is not as bad as described, and that it would be better if it had a chance."

"Have you seen much of it, Mr. Hemstead?"

"I cannot say that I have. I have read and thought about it far more than I have seen. On account of my limited means and student life, my excursions have been few and far between. I have already proved to you what an awkward stranger I am to society. But in thought and fancy I have been a great Rambler, and like to picture to myself all kinds of scenes, past and present, and to analyze all kinds of character."

"I hope you won't analyze mine," she said, looking at him rather distrustfully. "I would not like to be dissected before I was dead."

"I wish all were as able to endure analysis as yourself, Miss Marsden. In any case, you have no reason to fear a severe critic in me."

"Why not?"

"Because you have been so lenient toward me. I have received more kindness from you, a stranger, than my own kindred."

"You are very grateful."

"Shakespeare declares ingratitude a 'marble-hearted fiend.'"

"You evidently are not 'marble-hearted.'"

"Though possibly a fiend. Thank you."

"I wish there were no worse to fear."

"You need not have occasion to fear any."

"Well, I can't say that I do very much. Perhaps it would be better for me if I did."

"Why so?"

"Then I would be more afraid to do wrong. Miss Parson cannot do wrong with any comfort at all."

"Well, that would be a queer religion which consisted only of being afraid of the devil and his imps."

"What is religion? I am foolish in asking such a question, however, for I suppose it would take you a year to answer it, and they will all be down to breakfast in a few moments."

"Oh no, I can answer it in a sentence. True religion is worshipping God in love and faith, and obeying Him."

"Is that all?" exclaimed Lottie, in unfeigned astonishment.

"That is a great deal."

"Perhaps it is. You theologians have a way of preaching awfully long and difficult sermons from simple texts. But I never got as simple an idea of religion as that from our minister."

"I fear you think I have been preaching for the last half-hour. My friends often laugh at me, and say that I literally obey the Scripture, and am 'instant in season and out of season.' Perhaps I can best apologize for my long homilies this morning, by explaining. When an artist is in his best mood, he wishes to be at his easel. The same is true of every one who does something *con amore*. When I saw the transfigured world this morning, it was like a glimpse into heaven, and—"

"And a naughty little sinner came in just at that moment, and got the benefit of your mood," interrupted Lottie.

"Well, I have listened to your sermon and understand it, and that is more than I can say of many I have heard. It certainly was pointed, and seemed pointed at me, and I have heard it said that it is proof of a good sermon for each one to go away feeling that he has been distinctly preached at. But permit me as a friend, Mr. Hemstead, to suggest that this will not answer in our day. I fear from my little foretaste, that people will not be able to sit comfortably under your homilies, and unless you intend to preach out in the backwoods, you must modify your style."

"That is where I do intend to preach. At least upon the frontiers of our great West."

"Oh, how dismal!" she exclaimed; "and can you, a young, and, I suppose, ambitious man, look forward to being buried alive, as it were, in those remote regions?"

"I assure you I do not propose to be buried alive at the West, or spiritually smothered, as you hinted, in a fashionable church at the East. I think the extreme West, where States and society are forming with such marvellous rapidity, is just the place for a young, and certainly for an ambitious man. Is it nothing to have a part in founding and shaping an empire?"

"You admit that you are ambitious, then."

"Yes."

"Is that right?"