

PUNCH: A TRUE STORY.

BY DR. BARNARD.

A few years ago there stood in a narrow court not far from Holborn a common lodging-house, in the care of a deputy named Michael, and rendered notorious by the fact that it gave shelter for the most part to criminals.

During previous midnight rambles in the West central district I had frequently attempted to gain a footing in the court near Holborn where stood this thieves' kitchen, but for a long time without success. Once or twice when I ventured into the house, the "deputy," Michael, met me with a sharp inquiry as to the nature of my business, intimating, with much plainness of speech, that he "didn't want no loafers here," and also "you'd better make yourself scarce," advice which at the time I conceived it to be wise to accept with as little delay as possible. Yet I none the less earnestly desired to become better acquainted with the boys who frequented that particular house, and to save some of them if possible. No immediate prospect presented itself of realizing my wish until one night, in the winter of 1877, when, as I was passing down the court to visit an adjoining lodging-house, I observed the "deputy" standing at the door with an anxious look which seemed to give place to an expression of satisfaction as I approached.

The explanation was soon found. Something entreatingly he accosted me with "I've a sick feller in 'ere, I wish you'd see him, sir. I'm 'fraid he's got the fever." A very serious contingency for even such a lodging-house keeper as he, for a bad case of fever has been known to scare away the lodgers for a week or ten days, besides which the sanitary officer has a very awkward manner of insisting upon complete disinfection.

Delighted with the long-sought opportunity this opened to me, I readily acquiesced, and proceeded upstairs to one of the large sleeping rooms, in which there were beds for fifty or sixty lads. In a distant corner I found a poor boy, fifteen years of age, lying ill with all the symptoms of a sharp attack of rheumatic fever. When I assured Michael that there was no danger of contagion, from the lad's state, and added that I would willingly attend him, and supply medicine without charge, the deputy seemed pleased, and my offer was very gratefully accepted.

From this incident began a series of regular visits, my usual plan being to call about 8.30 in the evening, and remain chatting with my patient until ten o'clock, when a few of the other lads generally arrived. Then I went down to the kitchen and sat by the fire talking to the "deputy." Thus I soon became acquainted with the lads frequenting the house; so much so, that after a while they came in and out without taking much notice of me, and I was quickly initiated into the peculiar methods of their life. I found that they were all young thieves, and prosecuted their nefarious pursuits under the leadership of one lad, said to be very much the superior of the others. This lad I did not at first see, but I heard extraordinary stories of his adroitness, and the boys all seemed proud of their leader.

These lads were for the most part robbers of stalls or cheap shops outside of which goods were exposed for sale. Others were pickpockets, and these were more frequently in danger of being caught. The goods obtained in these ways were disposed of without much difficulty, but the boys generally held a kind of Dutch auction for the disposal of edible spoil in an adjacent lodging-house, the occupants of which were only too glad to buy food at a greatly reduced price. I have seen chops, steaks, fowl, oranges, vegetables, and other eatables put up for auction, and sold for perhaps one-tenth of their real value.

It may be imagined how, during my visits to this house, I took many occasions of remonstrating privately and quietly as opportunity offered with the lads upon their evil life, and I know that permanent impressions were made in some minds. Most of the boys began also to look with eagerness, when I came, for the usual reading aloud of some pleasant book. This became a regular feature of my visit, and especially after my young patient was convalescent, and able to receive me seated at the fire in the kitchen. My visits were gradually delayed until 11 or 12 o'clock, when I was always sure of having a larger audience. It was a curious sight to behold the lads on

such occasions grouped in various attitudes around the fire, some lying on the floor, but all with their faces turned to me with marked interest as I read aloud such stories as *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and afterwards Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*.

One night when I arrived somewhat later than usual I observed in front of the fire, toasting a herring on a wire fork, a lad very unlike the other denizens of the place. Singularly good-looking, with a bright, full eye, the boy had a countenance on which candor and honesty seemed impressed. A fearless, or perhaps I ought to have written audacious, expression swept at times over his face, and gave him a spirited appearance, the attraction of which few could resist.

That which seemed to me the most noticeable thing about the lad was the entire absence of a peculiar expression which was so manifest in the faces of all the other boys. I refer to the furtive glance of the eye and nervous twitching of the corner of the mouth, which is symptomatic of the young professional thief. I have called this "the thief-look," as I have seldom found any case in which young persons give way to habits of deliberate and long-continued dishonesty without acquiring this expression. In other persons the nervous twitching of the mouth disappears, and gives place to another and firmer cast of countenance which is equally expressive in its way, but the furtive glances of the eye remain.

I was therefore much surprised to observe that this particular lad, so perfectly at home in this thieves' kitchen, and on such manifestly intimate terms with its occupants, was not only destitute of anything approaching "the thief-look," but was really a very fine open-faced young fellow. My surprise was increased when I noticed that his conversation was rather more than that of the others, and plainly revealed him to be, like them, an experienced thief.

"Who is he?" I asked my young convalescent in an undertone.

"Don't you know?" was the amused rejoinder, "why that's Punch."

"What, that boy Punch? He the leader of you all? He the lad who plans most of the robberies here? Impossible!"

"Yes," he answered with a pronounced nod of the head, while a look of something like pride in his leader passed over the boy's face, "that's Punch, sure enough, and there ain't a cleverer than 'im anywhere in London."

I confessed myself utterly baffled. Here was a boy having as frank and open a countenance as one could wish to meet among young lads of any class in life, innocence apparently beaming in his countenance, and his whole manner indeed being, until he began to talk, that of the most virtuous person imaginable. I need hardly add that this information, while it surprised me, made me intensely anxious to learn all I could about this ring-leader boy, but my patient could or would tell me nothing, except that "Punch had always been there, long before he came," that "he hadn't never been caught," and that he "didn't think there was a 'Bobby' in London clever enough to catch 'im." It was evident that if I wanted further information I must apply to headquarters, so, joining in the conversation, I gradually learned from his own lips a good deal of the recent doings of the invincible "Punch."

From the moment I first saw him the project was formed in my mind to do what lay in my power to save so fine-looking a fellow from the evil life he had entered upon, but how to begin I knew not. I could only feel that I must be very wary, and wait patiently until a fitting opportunity arose to make the attempt; but I was singularly assisted that very first evening by Punch himself. I was reading for the second or third time the story of *Uncle Tom*, and had come to that part where Eliza's escape with her child over the semi-frozen River Ohio is described. None listened with deeper interest than Punch, and when I closed the book he looked at it with a sigh, and made a remark to the effect that, "Who'd think there was such splendid stuff in a little bit of a book like that?"

This led to my telling my audience something about books, their wonderful smallness, and the stores of information and interest that they opened to all who could read them. To my delight I found that Punch, who could not read, had a very strong desire to learn. He had picked up a letter or two in the streets from posters, or from the names over the doors of shops,

and could spell a few simple words, but failed to advance beyond this. Looking at the lad's intelligent and expressive countenance, I suggested that it would be easy enough for him to learn to read if he but applied his mind to it. To this he replied he could not afford it, being unable to spare the time.

"Why not?" I asked.

"Ow am I to live, I wants to know? What'll become of my work? Eh!"

"Oh!" I said: "that need be no difficulty. I can easily get you admission to a Home where you will be given food and lodging free of charge while you are learning—that is if you care to go."

But this proposition was not relished, so the subject for a time was dropped, as I was far too experienced in such cases to appear eager to press it. As, however, I found that Punch always returned at night later than any one else, I contrived that my visits were in future made at a later hour. By this means we became better acquainted, and I ever found him anxious that I should begin reading as soon as I arrived. Punch generally wound up by renewing his former expressions of desire to learn to read, and by lamenting the difficulties in his way. I think he wanted me to propose that I would give him a few lessons during my visits, but I had no intention of doing this. My object was to get Punch away from that house, and from his present evil ways, if I could, and to elucidate some of the mystery that seemed to be hanging about the lad. At length one night he said,

"I say, mister, how long d'ye think it'd take a chap to learn to read *fast-rate*?"

"If you were to throw your whole mind into it as you do now into other things," I answered, "I have no doubt, Punch, you could learn to read in ten months or a year."

His countenance fell.

"That's a long time to wait," he rejoined. "But you know, my lad, we cannot learn anything, or attain success in any direction, without an effort, and most things require prolonged effort before we are successful."

Punch mused for a bit, and then looking round the kitchen hastily, he said to me, in a lower tone,

"I suppose if I went to that 'ere 'ome o' yours it'd be most as bad as a reformatory prison."

"Whatever put such an idea into your head?" I asked.

"Oh," he replied, "I know in them kind o' places yer can't do as yer like, or go in and out; they locks the doors on yer, and there y'are stuck fast."

"Even that would be no very great hardship," I answered, "if they are kind to you while you remain, and only keep you sufficiently long to teach you to read and perhaps also a good trade. You cannot be in two places at once; and it cannot matter much, if you are well employed, whether you have your liberty to roam the streets or not."

Yet Punch seemed unconvinced.

"What I want to know is," he suddenly exclaimed, while his clear eyes revealed the suspicion he felt, "can a feller go when he likes? I mean at the end o' the time that he says he'll stop for? I don't want none o' yer 'reformatory dodges."

"Certainly," I rejoined; "if you say you will come to my Home for a year, at the end of the year I will let you go; or if you say you will come until you have learned to read, well, I will let you go as soon as ever you can read; but," I added in a firm voice, "I could not take you at all unless you promised on your honor to remain faithfully during the whole time agreed upon."

"Oh, that's all right," he said. "I'd stop if I once promised it. I am a lad 'im, I knows; I'll no feller about 'ere can say as I don't stick to my word."

Punch said no more then, but a few nights after, being alone with him, he announced somewhat suddenly during a short pause his intention.

"Look 'ere, guv'nor, I don't mind what they says about a chap; I'll go if yer'll promise me fair that I may leave in a year's time, whether I've learned to read or not. I've made up my mind to go with yer straight off if yer promises."

It may be imagined with what pleasure I closed with this offer. Punch and I shook hands over the bargain. I stipulated further that during the year he was to be with me, he would not visit the lodging house or communicate with any of his old companions. To this Punch assented after a little hesitation.

Accordingly he promised to "look me up" the next morning.

With not a little fear and trembling I awaited his visit in my room at Stepney. Realizing on one hand my own inability to effect any permanent change in this poor lad, who had been a thief so long, I felt on the other hand deeply persuaded that unless by God's grace the result of his stay in our house was to *change his heart*, Punch would perhaps be really the worse for the education which I had now pledged myself to give him,—for I had long since found by experience that, all other things being equal, an *educated* thief is more dangerous than an ignorant one. However, having first earnestly besought the Lord's help, I laid myself out to arrange plans for Punch's welfare. No one in the Home had, or would have, the least knowledge of his past history. If he knew that others were acquainted with his career, it would probably become a subject of common conversation between him and them. His own mind would thus be directed to things which it was desirable he should forget. By constantly talking and bragging about his sinful life he might even become hardened in evil. On the other hand, if his *conscience* became aroused, there would be a risk, if others knew his story, of his being reproached with his past misdoings, and in a moment of despair he might give up attempts after amendment. The sequel of this lad's story will show what grounds I had for such fears.

I made Punch himself promise positively that, from the moment he entered our Home he would never speak to any one except me of his past life. In a surprised kind of way he acquiesced in this.

It may be imagined that I contrived to have Punch about me as much as possible. At first he went to school for half the day, spending the other half-day at work in one of the tradesmen's shops. He chose the boot-shop. There he found a lad with whom he quickly struck up an acquaintance. They became inseparable companions, and were continually to be seen together. Sometimes, when I was alone, and had work to do in my private room, I summoned Punch to help me in little jobs of lifting or putting things away, generally contriving to turn the conversation upon himself and his future prospects. It was in this way that his sad story, to be presently told, was elicited, and thus I found how a poor homeless boy in London, without any previous vicious training, may be made a thief by the influence and example of others, to which are added the stern teachings of cold and hunger.

As to his conduct in the Home, I was informed that at first Punch was very restless at morning and evening prayer, but soon began to show interest in the Bible stories which were read. One day, while he was in my room, he was boasting of his skill in robbery, how he had never once been caught and how cleverly he had evaded several attempts which had been made to capture him. Much of what he said seemed to me incredible. Wishing to discourage his tendency to exaggeration, I expressed in a strong way my disbelief of a particular statement he made. Punch looked at me with a curious expression in his face, and the subject dropped for a time. In about twenty minutes afterwards he asked me if I would tell him what o'clock it was. As a clock was in the room, I thought the request odd.

"Can't you see the clock?" I said.

"Yes, sir," was his reply; "but I want yer to tell me by yer own watch."

Putting my hand in my pocket, I found to my astonishment my watch was not there. I looked at Punch, over whose face a laugh crept.

"Try yer other pockets, sir," he said. I found that my keys, my purse, my handkerchief, and knife had disappeared—everything was gone, my pockets were literally turned inside out. Yet I had never felt the young scamp near me, nor do I to this day know how he contrived to clear me out. I looked at him somewhat sternly, fearing that all this showed a tendency to return to his old ways.

"All right, sir," he replied, in a conciliatory tone, "I ain't done you no 'arm, there they are," and he pointed to the writing-table where I had been sitting, on the corner of which, covered by a large sheet of blotting paper, were all my possessions, which he had quietly eased me of without my being conscious of the operation, merely to show me that his statements which I had