

Choice Literature.

BOB AND HIS TEACHERS.

A GLASGOW STORY.

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CHAPTER XXI.

BOB'S GREAT SORROW—HIS MOTHER'S DEATH—HER LAST WORDS.

Some years ago an English nobleman made a gift to his daughter of a remarkably rich riding habit, but she had only worn it for a short time when she was laid low with typhoid fever. How came she, in that splendid mansion where the drainage was perfect and everything a ministry to health and happiness, to be stricken down with this fatal disease that lingers chiefly in the dwellings of the poor and the less favoured parts of the city and the country? The answer is that that rich robe over which she rejoiced was made by a poor seamstress in a garret, and that one cold night she took it and covered her husband, who was dying on a couch by her side, little thinking of the contagious element it would gather and carry to this home of health and refinement. God has ordained that men should live in bundles—in cities and communities, and that all are members one of another—that one part of the body politic cannot suffer without the whole, to some extent, suffering. He would have us to take warning that when the laws pertaining to health are set at naught in a country or neighbourhood, they have their revenge, and often strike most severely in places where you would not expect them.

The neighbourhood in which Bob and his mother resided was not the best that could be desired. There was a want of proper drainage, and every now and then Typhoid was raising his head and slaying his victims. To make matters worse, the proper treatment of this disease was not so well understood in those days of which I am speaking as now, and when it did appear every one fled the tainted house, and such a thing as a nurse could hardly be found.

For some time the health of Mrs. Armstrong had been failing. She was no longer able to take the chores she used to do in days past—that is, to do a day's work here and there in the neighbourhood, but she had been taking in sewing, and so closely did she sit at her needlework that she had all but lost her sight as well as her appetite. What she had long needed was more ease by day and more sleep by night—fresher air and a more generous diet. And now that better times had come for her boy—now that he came home to her with better wages, making all over to her with a cheerful heart as he had always done, she felt as if in sight of the promised land. But this prosperity she was not to enjoy. Weary and wayworn, she laid herself down to die. Smitten with typhoid, she gradually sank into a state of unconsciousness, and closed her senses forever upon the busy, bustling world around her, but not before giving utterance to many a precious word as to her experience—her hope full of immortality. Her one earthly concern was Bob. For him she had never ceased to pray and throw around him memories—truths—illustrations that would cleave to him through life and help him in his upward and onward way. Those are the chains of gold of which Tennyson writes when he says—

More things are wrought by prayer,
Than this world dreams of, Wherefore let
Thy voice

Rise like a fountain for me night and day;
For what are men better than goats or sheep
That nourish a blind life within the brain
If, knowing God, they lift not up the hands of prayer
Both for themselves and those who call them friend?
For so the whole round world is every way
Bound by gold chains about the feet of God.

Such were the chains of gold she threw around the neck of her fatherless boy; such was the invisible power—the power of an endless life that she had all along been bringing to bear upon him—and now amid the decayings of nature and the pains of dissolution he felt their strength and feels their strength till the present day.

Mrs. Armstrong was not a scholar; she could not even write her own name; but she could read, and did read much in her time, and to the edification of her soul. She knew little of the world beyond her own humble sphere. I may say of her as the poet said of another who was placed in similar circumstances:—

Just knows, and knows no more, her Bible true—
A truth the brilliant Frenchman never knew;
And in that charter reads with sparkling eye
Her title to a mansion in the skies
O happy peasant, O unhappy bard!
His the mere tinsel, hers the rich reward;
He praised, perhaps, for ages yet to come;
She never heard of half-a-mile from home;
He lost in errors his vain heart prefers,
She safe in the simplicity of hers.

And yet, though she had read but little except her Bible, her knowledge of its great truths was wonderful. It was a pleasure to hear her speak in her own way of such mysteries as the sovereignty of God, the providence of God, predestination and the kindred doctrines of grace. She had her own way of stating those doctrines and defending them that any student in divinity would prize. As an illustration I may mention how that one day I called upon her and found that she had been reading "Boston's Fourfold State" with her little table drawn up beside her bed, on which was lying this book, together with her spectacles and her well-thumbed Bible. I was much younger then than I am now, and often spoke foolishly; and the question that I put to her on this occasion was an instance of my folly:—

"But," said I, "What, if after all your prayers and watchings and meditations, God should suffer your soul to be lost eternally?"

The pious woman raised herself on her elbow, and turned to me a wistful look, laid her hand on her Bible, which lay before her, and quietly said:—

"Oh dearie me, is that a the length ye hae got yet, man! And then continuing, her eyes (not yet dim), sparkling with

heavenly brightness, said: "God would hae the greatest loss. Your Nanny (her maiden name) would but lose her soul, and that would be a great loss indeed; but God would lose His glory—His honour—His truthfulness. 'Nay, in all things we are more than conquerors; and I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities nor powers . . . nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Jesus Christ our Lord.'"

It was under such a mother that Bob spent his early days and began to open up in all the graces of a noble manhood. It was from her that he learned his best and holiest lessons, and though by some his instruction might be regarded as commonplace, it was thorough so far as it went, and proved itself to be ten times better than the tinsel which is often all that many get from the fashionable schools and colleges of the day. His purse was light, but his blood was as blue as the best, and his ideal of manhood was one of stainless honour. No one had a right to carry a higher head than he, yet no one could be more humble in his walk and gentle in his spirit. But this amiable youth, who had already by his industry and application won for himself such a name, was now called upon to pass under the rod. His first and best teacher was now to be removed from his sight. Her mission was over, her warfare accomplished, and she longed to depart to be with Christ, which is far better.

Hear how Bob speaks of her in a letter to a friend, after all pertaining to the funeral was over. "I did not go to the office that last sad day—the day she died. I saw, what I had feared before, that there was death in the cup, and that the sad event was not far off. I did not leave her, I wanted to be near her—to hear all she had to say. There was no excitement with me. I was perfectly calm and self-possessed—rather stupid and dazed than distressed. The contagion had frightened away every neighbour except Mrs. Chubb, the wife of my old friend. With her I waited on my mother in her last hours with something like a deep awe upon my soul, and for the first time I looked upon the face of the dead. And when I heard that strange sound in the throat which precedes the total separation between body and soul, growing fainter and fainter till all was over, I could not help thinking of a stately vessel, well appointed in all respects, leaving the harbour for a distant shore, gradually disappearing in the distance. I looked on for a while at the sight, so strange and new to me, till at length, overcome with heavy and conflicting thoughts, I sat down with a throbbing head, with my hands on my face, and realized the stroke. My mother is dead. It was not, however, till I rose and looked on the face of my mother, so calm and beautiful in death, that the tears came to me in abundance; and that the words she had spoken to me but a few hours before were felt in their power and grand significance. Do you ask what words? 'Bob, my son, my only child, I am dying, and you are to live with Chubb. He has always been a good friend to you, and he'll be a good friend to you still; and you will be kind and good to him as you have been to me. You were only a year old when your father died—died at sea beneath a wild storm; but the Good Shepherd has been kind to us and raised up a friend for you in Chubb. You mine hoo he stood by you in the day of your distress? My only sorrow in leaving this world is leaving you. I am going home to be with Christ, which is far better. The sun is gawin' doon, and it will soon be dark, and there is no candle in the house, for the last one was burned out last night. It does not matter to me that it is dark, for I cannot see; but it matters to you; but oh, Bob! in that fair land there is no need of any candle, for Christ is the light thereof. He dwells among His people and walks with them and they with Him, and they shall hunger no more and thirst no more; for the Lamb that is in the midst of the throne shall feed them and lead them by fountains of living waters, and He shall wipe away all tears from their eyes. You'll not forget your chapter every day, my son, and your prayers every night, and that God's great bright eye is always upon you by night and day. Oh think of Him, my son, think of Him, and think of me, and lay up a good foundation for the time to come, and every day will bring a brighter light to your soul and a richer experience of the power of the Gospel to your heart till we meet again.'"

"These were something like the last words she uttered to me—uttered slowly—in little bits, now and then, as she had strength; and I love to think of them still. She died that night and she was buried next day—buried, I may say, without a shroud and without a prayer, for Mrs. Chubb did not understand shroud-making, and a minister could not be had that day. It was a sad time. Then when the few neighbours that attended the funeral had retired from the grave, I remained alone, and felt the weight of my desolation. How poor and small the earth was to me then, with all its honours and its joys! Sweeter to me would one hour be with her—one word from her lips—than a the kingdoms of this world and the glory of them. Instinctively I bowed down on the sand beside the new-made grave, and consecrated myself to the God of my mother—the God of my fathers, and prayed Him to take charge of the orphan boy before him, and ever since heaven has been more homelike and Christ more precious to me."

CHAPTER XXII.

BOB'S NEW HOME—OLD CHUBB'S POOR CONSOLATION.

Bob's new home was the house of his old friend, Chubb, the cobbler, and a better house for the time being there could not be. How did he get on? Very poorly at first. This is what he said to me concerning his first days and nights in his new home, as near as I can remember. "I did not sleep the first night, and next day I broke down once or twice in spite of myself. Everything looked so bleak and insipid that I sometimes wished I had died along with my mother. Very kind were the words of old Chubb, but very cheerless. He told me that crying was no use—that we must all die—that all the tears in the world would not bring her back. The words were kind, but the consolation was poor, and I could not help saying: It is because of this that I do cry."

"I did not sleep the first night except a little towards morning. Every now and then I fancied I heard her calling me, and sometimes speaking softly to me as of old when she was in a serious mood. Then I would start, sit up and listen.

Then say: No, no! She'll never come back—never, never, never. At length, wearied out, I fell asleep, but still my thoughts ran upon her, and they took the shape of dreams—dreams, however, which have always appeared to me rather like visions than the reveries of a restless spirit. I thought I was wandering on the banks of a magnificent river, clear as crystal, on either side of which grew trees of great height and beauty, such as I had never seen before, bearing all manner of precious fruit. Then beyond those trees I saw lovely fields lying with eternal light—fields never darkened by smoke, never desolated by the storm. And through those amaranthine fields I saw troops of shining spirits—the glorious forms of the just men made perfect, and one of these—the Chief—whose face shone as the sun in His strength. I felt sure that my mother was among them, and I looked long and earnestly to find her, but in vain. So great had been the change that death had wrought—so radiant were those celestial forms that it was impossible for me to recognize the once pale, loving face that beamed on me. I looked upon their faces, but to me they all seemed very much alike, though doubtless all different—all glorious; no trace of former sorrow; no tears now—all wiped away.

"But though I had failed to distinguish my mother amid the white-robed throng, she had not failed to distinguish me. Leaving the blessed choir behind her millions of miles in the distance, she was hastening to me with the speed of the morning light, holding out those loving hands once rough with hard toil, calling on me and saying: 'Oh, my son, my son! Weep not for me, but weep for yourself. My battle is over; my days of mourning are ended; but you have still the great enemy to face in a thousand forms. But think of the blessed life and its pure companionships and its holy joys. Think of Christ the Author and Finisher of your faith. Think of your everlasting Father at whose right hand there are pleasures forevermore. If you only knew their sweetness, their purity and the beauty of holiness as I now do, and the rewards in store for those that overcome, you would count it all joy to face temptation and delight to follow the Master in good report and in bad.'"

"Hearing her speak in these terms I could not refrain myself. I ran hither and thither, up and down along the stream, seeking some bridge or boat to carry me over safely, but in vain. I could find no boat or bridge or mode of conveyance across the great river. And then, perplexed and discouraged, I heard a voice, sweeter than an angel's voice, saying: 'I am the Way, the Truth and the Life; no man cometh unto the Father but by Me.'"

"I awoke and felt greatly comforted, but, as I have said, the dream has always appeared to me more like a vision than the reverie of a disordered mind."

This was something like what Bob told me as to his experience on that memorable night, and I must say that the visions, or dreams, or whatever they were, did him good, for he was quite himself again in a few days. The dreams were only shadows of great truths—the very truths that were fitted to give him strength and consolation. I don't wonder that Chubb failed to comfort him by saying: "Stop crying. It will do no good." That was the very advice Queen Elizabeth gave to a nobleman that had lost a daughter. "Crying will do no good. It will not bring back your child. We must all die." That is stoicism, not Christianity. There is very poor cheer in such a prescription. How different the words of the Lord Jesus to a bereaved circle weeping at the grave's mouth: "Thy brother shall rise again. I am the Resurrection and the Life. I have the keys of death and the grave!" Or His words to the apostle Paul when about to leave them: "Let not your heart be troubled; ye believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many mansions. I go to prepare a place for you, and if I go to prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am there you may be also."

I saw Bob oftener than usual at this time, for in my rounds among the poor I was expected to give special attention to those in distress. I saw him often, and it seems to me that a great mental change had taken place; for though he had lost nothing of his natural vivacity he had gained in depth of feeling and earnestness of purpose. I gave him the best counsels I could and encouraged him to speak to me about his mother, and I really liked to hear him speak about her, for on this theme he was truly eloquent. It would seem to me listening to him that she was transfigured before his eyes, standing before him clothed with the shining robes of immortality; although to us who had known her for years she was a very homely woman, earning her bread by the sweat of her face, and taking very little to do with the great outside world. We all much admired her character, but did not see much to admire in her appearance, but Bob thought far otherwise. His estimate of her worth—her character, appearance, everything, had risen immensely since death had intervened; and I have often thought that in the light of such an experience as Bob had of his mother we can better understand the language of our Lord when He says concerning His approaching death: "It is expedient for you that I go away, for if I go not away the Comforter will not come, but if I go I will send Him unto you." The true reason of the expediency was the coming of the Holy Spirit to apply Christ's great work to the souls of men. The visible prop was to be removed in order to make way for the spiritual presence—the spiritual dispensation. But above and beyond this truth is the consideration that death makes a great change in the moral estimate that we make of our friends—the friends that have preceded us to glory. So long as they are with us we see their infirmities and forget their excellencies; but the infirmities are temporal while their excellencies are eternal. The former are transient and will ultimately vanish, and the latter are every day rising in sharper lines and in more glorious forms. But so long as our friends are with us we are apt to become oblivious of their real worth. It is when they are removed we think of it and form the true estimate. It would seem as if nearness, familiarity tended to lower rather than elevate our conceptions, and that the illusion an only be swept away by death. Even in the case of the disciples of the Lord Jesus there was this feeling working against Him—that which comes from nearness and familiarity. "Is not this the Carpenter's Son?" etc., was the exclamation of some of those who had known Him from childhood; and this same feeling was shared to some extent by the apostles.

In that familiar figure with whom they were conversant from day to day—that made long journeys on foot, that cooked his own breakfast on the shore, that ate brown bread and was clothed with the common serge of the people—in that