

## CHOICE LITERATURE.

## THE LAST OF THE LUSCOMBS.

BY HELEN PEARSON BARNARD.

## XII.—IN CHARGE OF THE TOWN-HOUSE.—Continued.

The old town-house held many curiosities. There was the old "sounding-board" of the first church, besides a room whose ancient furnishings had been left untouched, as a memorial of the primitive simplicity of the past. Under the stairs were two mouldy cells, with ponderous doors and grating windows.

"These 'ere 'll be aired, boys," said Joe, "afore any poor creetur gets shet up here. The Lord above don't be grudge pur air to none, no matter how we've sinned agin Him! Many a year's passed sence I see this 'ere lock-up, lads. I was a little shaver like you," when they chuckled in another little fellow about my size. Poor young to go to gaol, wan't he, lads?"

There was a murmur of assent.

"He was old Deacon Smart's son Lemuel, which hed order made him a shinin' light; but he wa'n't, which was the wus for him. Don't ye never think yer parents' goodness is goin' to stan' by ye to the last, boys; ye've got to give account o' yerselves. Wall, Deacon Smart, he died, an' then Mis' Smart, she up 'n' joined him. Betwixt 'em they didn't leave nothin' fur Lem but the old form, 'n' their good name." Joe seated himself upon the lower stair, beneath which was the cell where Lemuel Smart had entered. The boys gathered close, listening eagerly. There was something about Joe's simplest narrative, something subtle and undefined, that always held his listeners spell-bound.

"Jes' afore she died, Mis' Smart, she says, 'Lemuel, it's awful to leave you alone in this wicked world. Promise me you'll be a good boy.' Lemuel, he promised, holding the hand o' his only friend. She kep' speakin' that way as long as she hed breath. 'Ask God to help ye, dear boy, she whispered at last, lookin' at him with sech fearsome eyes, as ef suthin' told her how 't would be, after she had gone! Folks laid it to that, the corpse hevin' sech a worried look, fur Mis' Smart was a genuine Christian, 'n' by good rights hed order passed off the scene o' this mortal life as smilin' as an infant."

Joe took out his jack-knife and caught up a bit of withered hemlock, left from some Christmas decoration. He whittled this absently as he moralized:—

"Folks allur said she mistrusted Lemuel. Well, Lem he did putty well quite a spell after his mother died; he went to work, they gin him a place over in the old bank—"Joe lifted his head, and looked out of the open door towards the bank building, the boys also looked that way—" 'n' folks hed great hopes o' him. Lem he talked a good deal 'bout what he was a goin' to do by 'n' by—git his marm a nice grave-stun with po'try 'n' Bible Scripture on 't, I expect it was 'nough to draw tears to see him stan' over her grave 'n' promise. That was all right, boys, ef he had lived up to it, ef he hedn't a took it out in talkin'! Nobody knowed how it came 'bout, but it wa'n't over a year after Mis' Smart died afore Lem stole money from the bank, and one cold, blasterin' night, the officers put him in there!"

It looked very dismal now "in there." The boys gazed curiously in. How dreary it must have been on that "cold, blasterin' night!"

"Yes, Lem Smart spent a night there," resumed Joe, using the hemlock splint for a toothpick, "and then he went to the Reform School. He never showed his face here again. Mis' Smart's grave haint never hed no stun, ye kin see it any time, next the old man's, a monument to Lem's broken promise, 'stead o' his puttin' on 'er up a monument!"

"Do you suppose Lemuel Smart is dead now, Mr. Luscomb?" asked a boy.

Joe shook his head.

"I-d-n-know. He drifted off somewheres. There's no knowin' what he came to. Boys as starts as he did, has a poor sight in the worl'. If he is livin', some time that 'ere forgotten grave 'll rise up in judgment agin' Lemuel. Jest you take a turn round' by the old buryin'-ground, lads, some Saturday afternoon, an' ye'll see where Mis' Smart lays under the weeds an' stuns. 'T would be a Christian deed to clear that air spot up 'n' set out a few posies."

It was a sudden thought that prompted this. Joe was thinking of his own mother. He suddenly buried his face in his hands, and was silent, only sighs and the heaving of his broad shoulders showed that he was conquering some emotion. The boys looked enquiringly at each other. At length he reached behind him after his handkerchief and wiped his eyes.

"Boys," said he, in a hoarse, deep tone. "I'm thinking there may be another grave under weeds 'n' stuns—my old mother may lie there! I forgot her for many years, and when I went to find her, she was gone, nobody knew where, most likely she went to heaven. I'd give," Joe faltered, and the tears fell over his bronzed cheek—"I'd give my right hand to see her once again, boys, to hear her say, 'I forgive ye, Joe!'"

Presently Joe rose from the stairs, shut his knife with a sharp click, put it into his pocket, brushed the whittlings from his clothes, and said,—

"Wall, boys, this aint tendin' to business. Town won't be pleased with this day's work, ef we don't pitch in."

The blinds and windows were soon opened, his young companions zealously assisting. When Joe began to sweep they ran for brooms and swept also; when Joe polished lamps and stoves they bent to the same task; when Joe washed windows the boys were seen sitting in the most inaccessible places, vigorously mopping panes; but when the final touch came, when Joe scraped the floors in the most approved sailor fashion, every boy in the region assisted. They were well paid if they could get Joe to talking about the way ships were cleaned, how they were "scraped down, dail spells," even the masts! This unusual stir, and daily

bulletins from the boys, drew many people to the town-house. There was always an audience to wonder and admire. The boys felt very proud, as they bent at some self-imposed task, if somebody said:—

"Bless me, what public-spirited folks you are! Guess town affairs 'll be looked after, now the boys have taken them in hand."

When they got through, Joe gave them a treat—a boat-ride on the pond. He had rigged a large dory with a sail; this, in his experienced hands, was perfectly safe. Among the happy crowd was the little boy from the drunkard's home. As he sat very close to Joe and looked trustfully up into his face, and as the others sang "Lightly Row," "Homeward Bound"—songs that the boys thought appropriate, and as Joe looked upon the pleased faces of his little friends, he was glad that he decided to remain in town.

"The boys likes me, 'n' mebbe a bit o' the message is fur them, to start them right in life."

By and by the sail was over, and Joe had landed them safely beneath a great pine-tree at the foot of a steep bank; the boat was made fast, and they climbed the hill and walked homeward through the woods, all singing still, except the boy whose soft fingers clasped Joe's horny palm. Joe looked down upon the slight form. The face had suddenly lost the little gleam of brightness that had lain upon it when they were on the pond. It looked old and sad.

"What ails ye?" asked Joe, adding, "aint agoin' to cry, be ye?"

"No," said the boy, "but I was wondering if everything was right at home. Would you mind going there with me, Mr. Luscomb?"

So Joe bade the others good-by, and turned aside with the boy. It was pitiful to see how stealthily the latter approached his own home. He peeped in, then bounded back.

"It's all right, Mr. Luscomb," he cried, his face suddenly clearing. "Mother says he's been here and given her every cent of his pay! She says she believes father will be himself again, Mr. Luscomb."

"We'll pray God it may be so, lad," said Joe, fervently, and went on.

Joe visited the old graveyard later in the day; he carried a spade, and a few plants that he begged of Mrs. Patch. He often went there to visit the graves of the Luscombs, and to read the inscription that his parents had placed there about little Joe, and which he had not removed. He thought perhaps he would add something to the words, and let it remain, still the text for wayward youth. Joe stood a long time before this and thought over the past. Then with a deep sigh he walked on, to pause beside a neglected grave, the last resting-place of the mother of Lemuel Smart. Joe had a curious feeling that many would not understand; one that impelled him to cut away the tall grass and weeds, dig out a little place to the head, and plant some bushes from the Luscomb place.

"Mebbe folks 'll smile," said Joe, as he caught a glimpse of a stray visitor gazing with wide eyes as he toiled over the grave, "but I do it for mother's sake. And mebbe Lem 'll come back some day, as I did, 'n' it 'll strike to his heart, that a stranger hed to keer for the grave that he was goin' to put a monument to."

## XIII.—THE "LIGHT" AS SEEN FROM MOORSTOWN.

Leaving Joe among his native hills, working out the temperance problem in his own quaint fashion, let us return to Moorstown.

One family there was deeply interested in the Lighthouse, the Watkins', wholly because Mr. Watkins wanted to get his son Calvin a chance to help Mr. Luscomb.

Mr. Watkins, who was the storekeeper, ought to have found a place for Calvin under his own eye; but it was one of those cases where father and son are best separated. Mr. Watkins was harsh and unreasonable; he always had been, and Calvin had always rebelled in spirit, if not openly, so they did not work well together.

"If our Cal could only get in over t' the Light, it would be a good thing," Mr. Watkins often told the family circle. "The old keeper's putty shaky on his pegs, 'n' when he goes, gov'ment's got to get a new man. If Cal was on the ground, we'd stan' the best chance, between us all we could run the Light, the post-office 'n' the store."

So Calvin was arrayed in his Sunday clothes and sent over to apply for the situation.

Mrs. Luscomb was not favourably impressed with him; indeed, she never had liked the Watkins' family, although she was too charitable to say so. And Aaron, having consulted her, told Calvin that they had concluded to get along alone.

"Mother she thinks there haint no need o' our keepin' a boy yit," he said. "I don't know justly what we shall do by 'n' by, when we gets too old to climb to the tower."

Aaron shook his head as he gazed up the stone sides of the massive tower that held the light.

Calvin hastened away. He did not look as if he cared much. There were some boys waiting for him on the shore. They all went in swimming, Calvin leaving his Sabbath array of "pepper 'n' salt" goods on the sand while they sported in the surf.

Mr. Watkins, who was deeply interested in Calvin's obtaining the situation, for the reasons stated, at length came to meet him and learn how he had been received by the Luscombs.

Calvin was not on the shore, but the father recognized the suit, which was "out of the store." Far out in the water several heads bobbed about in a cork-like manner. One of these was dark like Calvin's.

"Call! Call! come out o' that water quick," called Mr. Watkins.

Calvin swam ashore.

"Why aint ye over t' the Light!" queried Mr. Watkins, sharply.

"I've ben; they don't want no boy, o-o-h!"

The latter was brought out by the sudden application of a stick.

"Ye didn't half try!" roared Mr. Watkins; "ye didn't want the place!"

"O-o-h!" cried the son.

"Why didn't ye come straight back? Here I've lost half the afternoon waitin' to know! There," releasing Calvin, "dress yourself lively and go home."

"Can't I have my Saturday afternoon?" whined Calvin. "No; you git home, 'n' git at them chores," said his father; "no wonder they didn't want sech a good-fur-nothin' over t' the Light! Mis' Luscomb, she's awful per-tic'lar."

Calvin went home unwillingly.

"Pa's mad 'cause I didn't git in over t' the Light," he told his mother, "he ketches me in swimmin'."

"In your new Sunday clothes?"

"No, I didn't swim in my clothes!" snarled Calvin; "I left 'em ashore."

"I'll warrant they're all sand," said his mother, not crossly, but in a fretful way.

"Pa he just busted me with a stick," said Calvin, "right afore the fellows, too; I say it's a shame."

Calvin slammed off up-stairs to put on his every-day attire, in a very unhappy frame of mind.

Poor Mrs. Watkins sighed. What could she say? If she pitied Calvin it condemned his father. She could only soothe the boy to the best of her ability, which she tried to do, but nothing lifted the cloud from his sullen face. In silence he worked about the place until dark, then to avoid his father went to bed supperless.

"I can stand it ef he can, said Mr. Watkins, as he satisfied his appetite. "You're jest spittin' that boy. At't do him good to starve a little; mebbe he'll try harder next time I send him over to the Light."

But before that time came, a stranger appeared on Moor's Island—Winifred Campbell; who, as we know, was soon the pet and comfort of the old people.

Mr. Watkins heard of it first at the store, where all the news was talked over by the loungers.

"They say old Luscomb's took a boy to help over t' the Light," said one.

"A boy? Who?" asked Mr. Watkins.

"Wall, he's from out o' town, somewheres along the coast, as near as I can find out," said the speaker.

"I should thought he might 'a' found somebody in town," observed Mr. Watkins, with a little unnecessary heat, "there haint none too many chances for our boys here."

"That's so, but I expect they've got somebody pretty nice, leastways Mrs. Luscomb she seems to think so!"

Mr. Watkins growled out something, which was lost in the barrel of brine over which he bent with a red face, fishing for a particular bit of pork for a very particular customer, —Miss Bilkins.

"I'm awful sot on what kind o' pork I hev fur my beans, Mr. Watkins. I don't want all fat, 'n' all lean makes 'em too dry; a little of both, Mr. Watkins, please, 'n' not too much, nuther."

Which, with the ill news and the stooping posture made Mr. Watkins very red in the face.

Miss Bilkins' sharp eyes say that something was wrong. She was one of those people who must always solve such mysteries.

"Your Cal's gettin' to be a big boy, 'most as tall as you, Mr. Watkins."

"Well, yes, Cal grows, he's stretchin' right out o' his clothes, it's lucky I'm in the business and get 'em at cost!" Mr. Watkins drew out the pork.

"How'll that do, Miss Bilkins?"

That would do: Miss Bilkins invested to the extent of half a pound.

"I don't like to git much, it sorter sours 'n' spiles the beans, Mr. Watkins. Speakin' o' your Cal, I was sayin' t' other day that I s'posed you'd by settin' him to work on suthin' afore long."

"Well yes, I did calculate, at least I shall get him in somewheres, I guess."

Miss Bilkins drew nearer; she lowered her voice.

"Seems as ef they might 'a' thought o' him over t' the Light."

Mr. Watkins ran his fingers through his bushy hair, and looked at her much perplexed. He hardly knew how to reply, for it was possible that she was aware that Calvin had applied. "us Bilkins was usually informed on all such points."

"The old folks is welcome to their choice," he said, evasively.

But Miss Bilkins question did not lessen Mr. Watkins' disappointment. He was cross in the store, and cross when he went home at noon. But the cause of his ill-temper did not come out at first.

They were at dinner, all eating rapidly and unsocially. Mrs. Watkins would gladly have chatted a little, or heard the news, but any such symptoms on her part were instantly checked by Mr. Watkins. He set the example by shovelling in his food as fast as possible. All the young tribe imitated their head, until it was a wonder that somebody was not choked. But in some mysterious way they managed to bolt and gulp the rapid morsels, and if anybody had a fit of indigestion afterwards, it was laid to a cold, or biliousness.

At meals Mr. Watkins rarely spoke, except to Mrs. Watkins.

"How in time do you expect folks to eat such a mess?"

Or—

"Why don't you try 'n' cook victuals as they'd order be cooked?"

Or—

"Can't you git up suthin' new for once?"

Which was unjust, for Mrs. Watkins was an excellent cook, and as she got what she pleased from the store, they lived well.

To other people, Mr. Watkins often said:—

"I don't want no better table than my woman sets."

It was strange that Mr. Watkins could not have told her so once in a while, instead of making her life a hard bondage with his bitter speeches. This was Mr. Watkins' great fault—if affairs went wrong abroad, instead of meeting