

CHOICE LITERATURE.

THE LAST O' THE LUSCOMBS.

BY HELEN PEARSON BARNARD.

XXI.—Continued.

A slight movement above them attracted Winn's eye to the belfry. Calvin leaned sideways over the top-rail, his hands making a sort of ear-trumpet, to better hear what was said. Mr. Watkins noticed the noise, and Winn's upward glance. So he loudly informed the latter that Cal was "the wust boy in town; alluz up to suthin', orshirkin' out o' suthin'!"

"I suppose he likes play, like the rest of us," ventured Winn.

"I don't wonder the old folks over t' th' Light took ye 'stead o' him!" added the parent.

Winn's eyes opened very wide. This was why Calvin waged such vigorous warfare against himself? Winnfred was not sorry to learn the reason. And Mrs. Luscomb must have known it also! Winnfred wondered why she had not told him, only half listening while the father further denounced his son. At length he said, with threatening motions of the whip:—

"I'm goin' to turn over a new leaf with him!"

He rose, and began the ascent of the stairs.

The listening figure suddenly above stood erect, looked this way and that an instant, as if at bay, then disappeared through the belfry window.

"Oh, do you see where poor Cal has gone?" cried Winnfred. "He'll fall; he'll be killed; there is no place outside where he can stay!"

They hastened up, and looked out of the window, Mr. Watkins calling anxiously to Calvin to come back, promising everything, if he would return.

But there was no turning back for the reckless boy! When the two looked out of the aperture, — a dizzy height from the street, — Calvin was sliding down the lightning-rod! Down the long perilous way went Calvin, ever downward, — O, for cool nerves and iron muscles to carry him safely to the ground!

And was not this an emblem of what Calvin might rush into, goaded on by his father's unwise training? As then, he could only stand and helplessly look on, so, now Mr. Watkins watched the boy's course with breathless anxiety. The anger died from the father's face; the whip dropped from his hand, and lay half coiled amid the dust of the ancient place, like some venomous snake.

Calvin reached the ground unharmed. The two who waited above knew it by the sounds of applause from his school-mates.

"Like's not they'll all be gallopin' down the lightning-rod, now!" observed the father, breaking the intense silence, "n' get their necks broke."

"Nobody but Cal would dare to do it," said Winnfred.

"Well, I do know as they would!" admitted the father.

"He's awful smart," continued Winn, "all the boys think so, — is he all the son you have?"

"Well, no, but he's one too many, generally."

"Especially now?" asked Winnfred, with such a droll accent, as such a look at the figure that now could be seen, still on the retreat, his long legs flying up the road, that Mr. Watkins could not help smiling.

Winn felt as if the ice was broken then, and ventured further.

"What did he do to displease you, Mr. Watkins?"

"It's wha' he haint done. That 'ere wood what haint finished!" I promised him a good whippin' if 't wa'n't done to-day, 'n' I s'pose," but he sighed as if he was not so eager now. "I've got to keep my word, or fam'ly gov'nment 'll be spoiled."

"Will you really whip Cal after all this?" queried Winnfred, respectfully, but earnestly.

"Ye would n't hev me tell a lie, would ye?" said Mr. Watkins. "I can't back out o' this, no way, as I can see. It 'ud look as though he'd got the best o' me. That 'ere wood ain't done, 'n' he's got to take the r'insinques!"

The "rinsinques" would still be serious for Calvin, despite that perilous flight! Winn felt that he could not have it so, — how could the father's stern decree be changed? A little plan had been maturing in young Campbell's active mind.

"But the day is n't over, Mr. Watkins."

For answer, Mr. Watkins pointed to the west. The sun was very near those far-off hills. It would not be many hours before it would reach them, and shortly sink behind them!

"I think it can be done before sunset," said Winnfred, eagerly. "If the wood is finished, of course you will not punish Calvin?"

"Well, no," said Mr. Watkins, slowly, "anybody'd 'low that, but it can't be done, nohow."

"We boys 'll help, Mr. Watkins; we'll do anything to get Calvin off. I hain't any father myself," added Winnfred, suddenly choking. "I'm alone in the world, and I'd rather be an orphan dependent upon others and my small earnings than to be afraid of him!"

It came out almost before Winn thought, but it was perhaps well that the boy spoke frankly. Mr. Watkins did not look angry, but suddenly thoughtful. He reached out his hand and grasped Winn's.

"I've ben down on ye, Campbell, mebbe it sot Cal on, — for the lad thinks his father knows suthin', if he does get riled. I take it back, now, ye've got the right stuff in ye, 'n' no mistake!"

Shortly after they emerged from the church, and, to the boy's surprise, came out, talking earnestly together, then Mr. Watkins walked down the street quietly, towards the store.

"Where's his whip? What's come over him?" asked several. "Is he going to let Cal off? Did n't Cal do a big thing on the lightning-rod?"

Winn felt that much of what was said in the belfry must

not be repeated to his companions, so he briefly unfolded his plan. They heartily concurred in it.

So, half an hour later, six boys, armed with six saws, marched into Mr. Watkins' back-yard, halted at the wood-pile, and began a vigorous assault.

The strange sounds drew Calvin from some covert, just as his father drove into the yard with the store waggon.

"Come along," said Mr. Watkins, "'n' see what the boys is doin' fur ye! They've bought out your whippin' this time, but look out for the futur'!"

That was how Calvin was saved a whipping, and why he suddenly stopped persecuting Winnfred.

CHAPTER XXII.—THE STRANGER'S TESTIMONY.

Three years had passed. Our boy, grown almost to man's height, was in the Lighthouse tower at the close of a Sabbath afternoon. His face was very thoughtful as it rested upon his hand. His mind was dwelling upon his island and school experience.

"Master Graham says I've made good progress," thought Winn. "Of course it has put me back in my studies, — being out so often on Mr. Luscomb's account. It's plain he's made progress the wrong way."

Winnfred sighed as he recalled many painful scenes, some on dreary winter days, when, secure from outside visitors, Aaron had, from some secret source, drawn deep draughts of the fiery poison. There had been anxious, sleepless nights when their home seemed the abode of a madman.

Often Winn thought it would be better to disclose his secret and have him taken away, relieving Mrs. Luscomb of such heart-crushing trouble. But she would not listen to such plans. She never ceased hoping that he would reform.

"Only give him time!" she would say. "My son is dead; Aaron is all I have!"

"You have me," Winnfred replied, affectionately, "I thought you said I was like your own."

"Indeed you are!" the poor lady would reply, tenderly. But Winn knew that her best affections were centred on her husband. His harshness when in drink affected her love no more than if he had been raving with fever. When he was himself again, when Aaron smiled upon her in the old way, hope entered her heart once more.

Winnfred thought there never was such a wife as Mrs. Luscomb; never such holy, self-sacrificing love.

In looking back there were some exceedingly pleasant things to remember in his school experience. Many centred around Elsie Moor. She always chose him when she was leader of the spelling match, and Winnfred invariably returned the compliment.

Then there had been a skating party by moonlight up the river. They called at the forest hut and Elsie appeared to welcome them. As she then stood beside her grim-looking parent, Winnfred had likened her to a blossom on a gnarled apple-tree.

After that night he named his boat the Elsie.

"She's a great deal like Mrs. Luscomb," said Winn, recalling the subdued brightness of the young girl's face, on that night when the merry party called. It seemed as if she feared their fun would waken sad memories for her father.

Just here Aaron's slow and slightly uncertain step interrupted Winn's reveries. He was coming up to light the Lamp, a duty he never delegated to another when in his right mind.

"Marm was askin' where ye war, lad," said Aaron. "I told her ye'd be here, I knowed ye would."

His fiery potations often showed themselves of late in a certain feebleness of intellect. Winnfred thought his remarks quite foolish, sometimes, and was secretly annoyed by his silly smile. He wondered if Mrs. Luscomb was so blinded by her affection as not to perceive this. At times it seemed to the keen-eyed lad that it did grate upon her; and that she hid these feelings with the skill of one who loved much. She treated with respect any remark of Aaron's. Doubtless this was one of the weapons she used for his salvation. She hoped by treating him courteously to awaken his own self-respect.

Winnfred rose to help Aaron. Presently a sound came across the bay. It was the bell of the village church, ringing for prayer-meeting.

Winn paused to listen.

"There's the meeting bell," he said, looking towards the town.

Aaron, being unworldly, told the lad to go.

"There's no need of us both biding at home to-night. Do you go ashore to the meeting."

So it happened that Winn went that Sabbath evening. It was a pleasant change for him to row across the water in the sunset, and join the young men in the back seat of the ancient church. He did not expect to be particularly interested. Parson Willoughby had a very quiet way in the prayer meeting, and the brethren were not gifted with eloquent speech. Winn fancied they said about the same thing every time, and often wondered if their remarks had originally been committed to memory.

The truth was, pastor and people needed to be roused. Many of the latter had fallen into listless formality.

But on the whole there was to Winn something attractive in the place of prayer. An undefinable presence was there; it made him thoughtful and reverent, and increased that yearning after something better which fills every fresh young heart.

Jack Willoughby entered with his father, and slipped into the seat beside Winn; they could see Calvin's dark, restless face just across the aisle, further on were Katy Graham and Minnie Willoughby. Presently Elsie Moor came in with an elderly lady, who now kept house for them. One by one the people assembled, young and old, and waited in silence for the meeting to open.

At last the senior deacon offered a long and laboured prayer. Then there was another pause. It seemed slightly ludicrous to the young lookers-on in the rear, who exchanged amused glances. Winn felt disposed to smile at the reluctant laymen.

"If I was a Christian I'd have something to say," he thought.

At this juncture a stranger rose, — a weather-beaten, broad-shouldered son of the sea. There was an earnest, decided air in his quick uprising, that roused all present like an electric thrill.

"My friends," said he, "I stand before you to-night as a stranger. But I trust I am not a stranger to Jesus Christ, in whose house we meet to pray and praise. I have tried to serve him for five years. His word and service grow more precious each day. Wherever I am I give my testimony for Jesus. It's humble enough, but He has said, 'Ye are my witnesses,' and all who overcome do so by the blood of the Lamb, and the word of their testimony. I trust He will bless my word to some sin-laden soul here. I came into your little harbour with the morning tide. Probably you will never see me again. If there is one in this room who does not love my Master, let me beseech you to delay no longer. You are drifting upon the rocks! Take warning by the chart, — the Bible, — the beacon-light to guide you into a safe port! the 'still, small voice' of God's Spirit is speaking to some heart in this room, — are you trying to hush its pleadings?"

His dark eyes searched each face a moment. It seemed to Winn that they lingered on him. Suddenly the stillness grew awful as he thought perhaps the pleading voice of the Spirit was speaking to him!

The stranger then recited, with deep emotion, —

"My Spirit shall not always strive with men."

For the first time there came to Winn an overwhelming sense of what it was to resist conviction.

"You hear this knocking at the door of your heart," continued the stranger. "It is Jesus standing without, the print of the nails on His sacred hands and feet, — the great Creator and Redeemer who stooped to suffer for your sins and mine."

He paused a moment, there was a thrilling silence in the vestry, — it verily seemed as if an heart-beat could be heard.

"O, will you not hear his voice? Will you not open the door, that He may bless and save you?"

It was something new, this fervent, yet simple appeal. It wondrously loosened the tongues of the brethren, they prayed and spake as never before, short, pithy, and fervent were their words. The old pastor's voice faltered as he closed the meeting by thanking God for the blessed hour they had spent in His house.

"That man was wide-awake!" whispered Jack. "I wonder who he is. He is n't one of father's parishioners, I know."

Winn did not reply. He was overwhelmed by new and awful thoughts. He hastened from the vestry without exchanging a word with his comrades. Indeed, so absorbed was he, that they all seemed like the people of a dream, passing by.

Suddenly Winn paused, — he had caught a glimpse of Elsie Moor's face, as she, too, moved silently away, attended by the housekeeper. It was no longer sparkling with mirth; but grave and troubled. The eyes that met Winn's were full of tears.

Elsie ready to weep! Surely her heart must also have heard the pleading voice at its door, knocking for admittance.

"O Elsie," the boy said, under his breath, but could get no further; emotion took away the power of speech. With an unutterable look at her he hastened away.

Down by the shore Winn's boat waited. He unmoored it, sprang in, and was soon rowing swiftly through the waves. He was like one fleeing from a pursuing foe; but it was of no avail. Leaving the church behind did not help him forget the appeal of the stranger. The arrow of conviction had entered his soul. He would find no healing for the wound till he surrendered his will to Christ.

As Winn crossed the bay, he passed the schooner that had brought the stranger, and between him and the shore he could descry a skiff approaching. It was doubtless the stranger returning from the meeting.

"If he'd kept still, I'd been happier," muttered Winn, with sudden and unwonted bitterness. "I wanted to put off being a Christian for a few years. He's stirred me all up."

The light streaming from the tower reminded him that the speaker had likened it to the Bible as a guide for mariners.

"I will read the Bible," he thought, "and see for myself!" hoping by this good resolve to quiet his awakened conscience.

He reached the island at ebb-tide, the steps to the landing were uncovered. Mounting these, he hauled up his boat, and slowly wended his way up the hill to the Lighthouse.

Aaron was alone in the kitchen. Mrs. Luscomb had retired. The boy glanced wistfully about for her. It was a growing habit of his to turn to her when anything troubled him.

"What's befallen ye, lad?" asked Aaron, fixing his eyes upon Winn's unhappy face.

"Nothing," replied the boy, "that is," he added, feeling that his first reply was untrue, "not much of anything."

"Ye don't look so peart as ye did when ye started for the shore."

Winn was silent. He seated himself beside Aaron, although it was past his usual bed-time. He dreaded to retire, for then he would be left alone with his deepening convictions.

"Any news over t' town?" Aaron asked.

"I heard none," Winn replied.

Aaron essaying other inquiries, Winn put an end to the conversation by saying that he talked with no one going or coming from church.

"But ye might 'a' had yer ear open for a bit o' news!" persisted Aaron.

He relapsed into his usual silence. Winn did not break it; but sat absorbed in thought. So an hour passed. Then Aaron rose, knocked the ashes from his pipe, laid it upon the narrow mantel, drew off his heavy boots and placed them behind the kitchen stove.

"Well, good-night to ye, lad," he said, with another glance at the young sober face.

"Good-night, Mr. Luscomb," and Winn was alone. His