

CHOICE LITERATURE.

THE LAST OF THE LUSCOMBS.

BY HELEN PEARSON BARNARD

XL.—A STRANGE PROCESSION—Continued.

As Joe was hastening home with his treasure he overtook a crowd of boys, shouting and mocking at an intoxicated man, pulling his coat from behind, to see him try to turn and chase them. He could scarcely do this without swaying to and fro, almost falling. When at length he managed to face them, they ran screaming away. His bruised face, from which the blood was trickling, was to Joe only a piteous sight. He could see no fun in it, for he had once been like him, under the curse of appetite.

"Poor cretur', somebody orter ketch holt yer arm 'n' help ye hum," said Joe, passing rapidly by. "It's a shame! Where in time's the tawon 'thonties? Why aint they tendin' to business?"

As Joe denounced the officers aloud and vehemently, he was stifling voices within that denounced him for passing by the unfortunate man. It was something the generous-hearted sailor never had done, even before his sympathies were enlarged by his late wonderful experience.

It was Maggie's letter that overbore everything else just then, as it nestled in his breast pocket, inexpressibly precious to lonely Joe. So when something said—

"Here's a chance for you to help the fallen," Joe argued,—"I can't be at it all the time. One man can't allur be at the pump. 'Taint fair! One o' the other boys must take his turn."

Joe's pace slackened a little, he glanced behind. That pleading voice in his heart was seconded by what he saw—the uncertain step, the swaying form, the red face—appeals from the soul going downward, that no one could feel like himself, "the last of the Luscombs," who had once been like him.

How had he been snatched from the brink of the precipice, pulled out of the fire, as it were, "a brand plucked from the burning," by a lady's delicate hand! What if Mrs. Sheaves, when on a summer's trip aboard that brig, had thought it not worth her while to labour with sailor Joe, had left him for somebody else, while she read something that gave her pleasure? But she had paused to help him, and thus started a train of circumstances that blessed many others. Could rescued Joe now "pass by on the other side," leaving the stranger defenceless, the poor man who had "fallen among thieves?"

"God forgive me!" murmured Joe, with sudden remorse, and turned back to suddenly confront the boys.

"Leave him alone, lads," he said, with such infinite pity in his deep tones! "He's fallen among thieves, worse nor the man in the Bible; they've robbed him o' money, 'n' sense, 'n' reason."

They looked surprised, then ashamed. In silence they watched Joe, while he grasped the man's arm.

"Which is wass, boys," continued Joe, "to take a man's purse, or what thinks, in here?" tapping the forehead of the drunkard, greatly to the bewilderment of the latter, who evidently had never before been the subject of a temperance discourse.

It was a sort of object teaching that the boys understood. They answered rightly, as with one voice; and, greatly interested, followed Joe. The latter continued his talk as they walked, being, however, often interrupted by the man, who resolutely insisted that he wasn't drunk! Joe would only gaze pitifully into his face, and say soothingly—

"Hush, hush, friend, you've lost your bearings; his anchor's afloat, boys; he's drifting with wind 'n' tide, 'n' don't know it, poor thing!"

Joe's blending of the sea with moral questions completely fascinated the boys. It was well for them that their sailor friend was always on the right side, that his influence over them was for good.

When not engaged on a job Joe was always ready to inspect their rude crafts, build a boat for the pond, or whittle a mimic ship to sail in the wash-tub, or settle any dispute on nautical phrases. Many an entertaining yarn he spun, taken from life passages in his twenty-two years before the mast.

It was a picture, the odd procession headed by Joe and the staggering man, that now wended its way slowly across the village green.

"Who 'it has robbed this poor cretur'?" pursued Joe, with a side glance at his impromptu class.

"It's rum and whiskey and such, im't it, Mr. Luscomb!"

"Sartin, sartin, boys; you've hit the nail square there! But to come down to the fine p'int, to go clean down to the bottom o' it, boys—who gin our—" signs of a coming remonstrance from the subject, made the lecturer add, with delicacy, "the present company, the rum and whiskey?"

Even this delicate allusion was vigorously resented. Joe was shaken off with sudden force, and requested to attend to his own concerns, while the man strove to stand alone. At any other time such a scene would have been received with shouts of laughter by the children. But now no one smiled; gravely and silently they stood, while Joe again possessed himself of his arm.

"Don't ye see ye can't depend upon yer two pegs, friend?" queried Joe, adding aside, "It's in them, poor thing, as well as his head. An' betwixt the head bein' all wrong, an' the pegs flyin' every which way, an' the ground seemin' to rise when he steps, no wonder he can't stand."

After this explanation of the drunkard's uncertain progress, the children's eyes watched every step with intense interest.

"Who gin the drink to him, boys?"

"The rum-seller! Old Es. Prouty," several shouted.

"He keeps the tavern, Mr. Luscomb," added one eagerly; "everybody knows he sells liquor, but they can't catch him at it."

"Jes so." Joe's glance went across the green to the old

tavern, and he added: "That's 'cause they he 't got their best traps."

"Do you believe they sell drink there, Mr. Luscomb?" queried a little boy.

Joe shook his head and pursed up his lips.

"I don't know, boy; that's what they say. But ef I was to gin my opinion, I should say things look a mighty sight that way."

"This way," he lives down here, Mr. Luscomb," said the children, leading Joe up a lane just out of the village, to the drunkard's home.

What need to describe its desolation—the ravages that the father's appetite had made! There was a half-grown boy, ill clad and miserable, attending to his mother, who lay on a poor bed with a sickly, wailing infant. Joe saw it all as the door opened, heard an exclamation of horror from the sick woman as her husband stumbled in.

"Ye hedn't best come in, boys," he said, hoarsely, "there's too much misery in there for yer tender hearts. I'll jest stop a bit till he's asleep."

So they dispersed with a strong temperance sermon to deliver at their several tea-tables, and Joe, with never a thought of Maggie's enticing letter, entered the stranger's house. It was not the first time he had bound up such bruises and put the drunkard to bed, averting from the defenceless a storm of blind fury.

Then Joe turned his attention to the sick woman.

"I'll split ye up a few sticks 'n' lile ye a cup o' tea," he said.

Joe found then, what he had shrewdly guessed, that there was nothing in the house.

"He was going to bring us some money to-night; he's been farming," she said, feebly, "but I suppose he could not pass the tavern. And when once he goes in he forgets his family. You would not believe it, but he was a kind husband once, before he got this appetite."

"Sartin," said Joe. "Don't ye fret; jest hold on to hope; we'll try to save him." As Joe dashed out of the house and towards the store, he anathematized the tavern and fat old Prouty, who sat calmly smoking under the piazza.

Joe returned with a few articles of food, lighted the fire, and prepared tea and toast. It was a feast to him to see what comfort this small outlay gave. A little glow came into the sick woman's cheeks, and the boy smiled as he sat beside the table, eating bread and butter. Joe bore the baby about while they ate, humming one of the sailor songs that had often been heard above the waters as he bent to the oar. Wonderingly the baby's eyes looked up into the strange face; she forgot to cry, and finally forgot even to listen, and fell asleep.

It was dark when he left, promising to call in the morning.

"I'll run in afore I begin my work," he said. "Mebbe I can get hold o' him afore he starts out. He'll listen to me, marm, fur I've ben through it all. We'll pray and work for a change in him!"

Do you think Joe, as he walked briskly homeward with their grateful thanks ringing in his ears, was sorry that he had turned aside to help the stranger home? Something assured Joe that this sinning soul would yet repent and bring comfort and peace to his family, instead of desolation and cruelty. For that end he would labour.

They had eaten supper when he arrived at Mr. Patch's. But his food was kept hot; and now, as he ate, Jerry and he talked this new case over, planning together, as often before, how to help the fallen.

So it was quite late before Maggie's letter was opened.

It contained only a few lines about himself. She inquired if he had found his parents; said they missed him at the almshouse; nobody filled his place; and ended by asking if he was not almost tired of life among the hills.

Joe was pondering over this in the large kitchen, where he spent many an evening. Mrs. Patch's kitchen was kept as neat as wax; the windows were full of blossoming plants. After the day's work was done, a brightly tinted cover was laid over the scoured surface of the table, a shaded lamp placed in the centre, and several comfortable chairs drawn up beside it. Here Joe took solid comfort; with his head resting on his elbows he read and studied, striving to satisfy the longing after knowledge that had developed since his soul had been divinely illumined.

Joe was often joined by different members of the family, who gave him much assistance—either Mr. or Mrs. Patch, or the young daughter, or the "help,"—the latter the intelligent daughter of a farmer, who had been through school, and lived with Mrs. Patch for the sake of being self-supporting. From one and all Joe picked up some useful information.

On this particular evening the kitchen was deserted—Mr. and Mrs. Patch were in the sitting-room, the daughter had gone to a neighbour's, and the "help" was out riding with a smart young farmer—so Joe had a fine opportunity to read his letter. In truth, he needed time and quiet for such an unwanted task. Joe did not often have occasion to read hand-writing.

It took several slow translations before Joe could read Maggie's letter, without break, from beginning to end. He grew so absorbed in this agreeable task that he began to read aloud. Finally, the earnest tones reached the sitting-room and Mr. Patch's ears.

"Who is talking with Joe?" he asked of his wife.

Mrs. Patch looked much amused.

"He has received a letter from some lady, I think. It would be slightly embarrassing if she should follow her epistle and hear it thus loudly proclaimed."

Both were silent a moment, listening to the deep, sonorous tones.

"Hoping soon to hear that you are coming back, I am ever yours, Maggie Hamlin." "N' a dreadful poety letter ye've writ," added Joe. "I wish't I had such power with the pen! I'd compose ye a letter that 'ud reach from here to the ocean! But I'm afeared ye'll never know, without Joe goes clear down to the coast, what's come over him; that he's got a message for the unhappy, sartin' like good Father Gwyon!"

XII.—IN CHARGE OF THE TOWN-HOUSE.

After Maggie's letter Joe began to show symptoms of uneasiness; he talked more of the coast, and seemed to remember, almost with regret, his position at the almshouse. These reminiscences now filled his mind and talk, except when there was an opportunity for him to testify for the temperance cause. Then all else was forgotten, and he put forth every endeavour.

"Joe won't stay with us long, I fear," Mr. Patch told his wife. "We must devise some plan to keep him."

"Indeed we must; this town needs his earnest, faithful work for others," replied Mrs. Patch.

"Just as long as Joe is busy he'll stay," continued her husband; "but once let him think that he isn't needed and he will be away. Lately, it seems to me that he feels that there isn't much to keep him here. We all know about those he is trying to reform. Somebody was complimenting him yesterday on several cases that he had helped. 'It's a great thing for our town, your being here,' they said. Joe looked pretty sober as he replied: 'Wal, I-d-know, sometimes I think there wouldn't be a very big hole ef I wa'n't here!'"

"He has greatly improved our place," said Mrs. Patch. "That meadow piece—who else would have persevered until it was reclaimed from water and weeds into a valuable garden-spot! And my shed full of wood, neatly piled, that is a solid treasure!"

Mr. Patch smiled. It was one of his wife's favourite points to have plenty of wood of different degrees of fineness, for quickly lighting fires or heating the oven. So he said, mischievously:—

"I fear your solid treasure will rapidly disappear in smoke and ashes, my dear."

"While baking Jerry's favourite biscuit and pies?" retorted his wife.

"Well, they are pretty nice, that's a fact. Meanwhile, how shall we keep Joe?" said Mr. Patch, reverting to the subject. "We must think seriously of it. I will talk with those who are interested in having him stay."

So there were many private conferences among Joe's friends, unknown to him. At length they thought of the town-house. It needed a man to take care of it permanently, a regular janitor. There had been several who sporadically opened the building for lectures and concerts, but it was always done in a shiftless, ill-trained way; the lamps were dim, or dripped oil on bonnets and broadcloth, the stoves smoked, and the audience-room was half ventilated. Just the right person had never attempted to take the town-house.

"I'll guarantee that if Joe Luscomb takes the job, it'll be properly attended to," said Mr. Patch. "He is accustomed to just such work. I suppose there are no better-kept buildings than the almshouse where he has been employed for several years."

"Let us engage him by all means," said the other select-men.

So Jerry went home empowered to offer Joe the situation. The latter was evidently surprised and perplexed. He did not immediately accept.

"Thanker, thanker kindly, Jerry; I'll think it over a spell 'n' let ye know which way the tide turns."

Later he came to Mr. Patch.

"Look a here, Jerry, my takin' it won't turn no wher chap out, will it? I don't want to ship with nobody to turn out somebody as needs a job. Mebbe some family man's sot on the town-house."

Even after this point was settled Joe was irresolute. Finally it came out.

"I hed thought o' goin' back to the paupers, Jerry, I got a letter from there, a spell back."

"Which made you a little homesick, perhaps," said Mr. Patch, quickly. "Was it from one of the officials?"

"Well, no, 't wa'n't, but seems though somebody was sorter lookin' for Joe back. Somebody"—Joe hesitated—"somebody as I didn't s'pose would!"

This somebody would have been involved in mystery to Mr. Patch, only for what he heard on the night that Joe perused Maggie's epistle.

"There's one thing about it, Joe,"—Mr. Patch laid his hand upon his friend's shoulder—"the longer you stay away the more you'll be missed!"

"Do you think so? Won't she"—Joe forgot himself enough to put in the feminine pronoun—"forget me?"

"Not if she really cares for you," said Jerry. "You can write to her, or get Mrs. Patch to, and it will be very pleasant to get her answers."

"Sartin," ejaculated Joe, "she's got mighty power with the pen."

"With you, doubtless!" laughed Jerry, then sobering, he added: "And you are growing every day, Joe; you're not the same man who left that somebody at the almshouse; God is leading you up higher, dally; He is teaching you in the work you are doing here. Think seriously of this, Joe, before you decide; question earnestly whether the time has yet come for you to go to the coast; whether by waiting a little you will not have a fuller blessing and joy."

"I did indeed seem so to Joe, as he listened, deeply impressed by his good friend's earnest words. And then Mrs. Patch gained his confidence, and promised to write all particulars to Maggie, which was a great comfort to Joe. He decided to take the town-house."

When once the keys were in his hand and Joe was pledged to the trust, all his energies awoke.

"I'll do my best with these 'ere friends," said Joe; "they shan't lock up no dust; what's behind these must be ship-shape."

Shortly after Joe was seen taking long, rolling strides toward the town-house, joined on the way by his inevitable companions—boys.

"Say, Mr. Luscomb, can't we go in, too?" they asked.

"Wal, ye may, to-day, but when I gets everything in order, I'd-n-know as tawon 'ud let me receive company. This 'ere tawon property 'n' don't belong to me. When I get my home ye'd be welcome, any time, lads."

(To be continued.)