

CHOICE LITERATURE.

THE LAST O' THE LUSCOMBS.

BY HELEN PRARSON HARNARD.

XXVII.—CALVIN'S CHOICE.

Miss Bilkins was in the store. She wanted a quarter of a pound of good black tea,—the best Mr. Watkins had—for the least money. Then she bought half an ounce of peppermints.

"Seems as though I couldn't set through service without one," she observed, plaintively, "Parson Willoughby is pretty lengthy sometimes."

Mr. Watkins had heard folks say so, but not being a meeting-goer, could not speak from experience. This suggested to Miss Bilkins an opening for missionary work.

"I really wish you would make one of us," she said; "seems a pity you couldn't help fill up the old church."

"I alluz calc'lated to, sometime," said Mr. Watkins; "but someway when Sunday comes round, there's suthin' or nuther to hinder; we alluz keep open late Saturday nights, and I'm too tired to shave up, or it's too cold or it's too hot; I expect I'll get round to it by-and-by. Calvin, he's after me every Sunday, now."

"There's ben a sight o' change in our young folks," observed Miss Bilkins, adding plaintively, "I hope it'll last; I hope they aint self-deceived."

Mr. Watkins said nothing, but waited for further orders. Miss Bilkins moved towards a pile of prints. As she tossed them over, testing the quality of several by rubbing vigorously between thumb and forefinger, or moistening an edge between her lips, to see if the colour would run, she pursued her conversation.

"I s'pose you've signed the new petition, Mr. Watkins?" He had heard of none.

"Well, I never, 'n' you postmaster 'n' storeman!" exclaimed Miss Bilkins. "Why, I s'posed they come to you fast thing."

"I aint alluz in; mebbe they called when I was out," Mr. Watkins suggested, with an apologetic air, adding humbly, "then again, mebbe they didn't want my name."

"More like they thought you'd be opposed," said Miss Bilkins, "bein' as your Calvin was just as capable, as far as years go, to take the Light."

"Oh, that's it," said Mr. Watkins, flushing. "So there's a talk o' that boy taking old Luscomb's place?"

"Talk! they've got it pretty nigh fixed,—Master Graham, and the parson, and some others,—they was at my house jest afore I come. And sech a list o' names!"

"It's ridic'ulous, putting in a boy o' that age," observed Mr. Watkins, ignoring the fact that he had himself foreseen this event for Calvin. "Seems as if this 'ere coast ought to be better guarded than that. It's a responsible place over 't the Light!"

"Well, I s'pose they know what they're a doin' of, or think they do," said Miss Bilkins, and hastened away to tell somebody in confidence that Mr. Watkins was "taking it mighty hard." It cut him up dreadfully, bein' as Calvin's last chance was gone."

Meanwhile Calvin entered the store. Of late he had, of his own accord, assisted his father much when out of school. The country grocery was not, on account of his father's irascible disposition, a very desirable place; but Calvin was toiling to curb himself, and this was an excellent school for self-discipline.

There was a certain text in the Bible that Calvin liked and put vigorously into practice:

"Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might."

"Did you hear anything about the petition, Cal?" asked his father, the moment they were alone.

"Yes, sir; Master Graham started it. He says it is no experiment, for Winfred Campbell has kept the Light for a long time; he's strong, active, and reliable, and ought to retain the position, both for his own sake and Mrs. Luscomb's. They're going to canvass the town for names,—began to-day. Have they ben here?"

"No; and it's jest as well," said Mr. Watkins, crossly. "I ain't no more in for his havin' on't than I was years ago. I hed that job picked out for you, Cal!"

Calvin had often heard this plan dwelt upon, Mr. Watkins having the unpleasant faculty of never letting such a subject drop. The lad generally said nothing, but now he suddenly spoke in his old, decisive way.

"We might as well put that aside forever, father, it was n't to be, or I'd been there now. I don't believe I should have liked the job anyway. Winfred's different; he's one of the petical sort that like to be alone with the sky and water. He has n't any mother, so Mrs. Luscomb is all the world to him. I've got a good mother, and I would n't leave her for all the Mrs. Luscombs in the world."

Calvin's dark eyes glowed, and there was a wonderful tenderness in his voice. Of late years he had appreciated his mother as never before; he was her champion at all times,—woe to the young Watkins who dared disobey her when the elder brother was about! And somehow this had modified Mr. Watkins; he did not so often indulge in harsh criticism; there was a gentler atmosphere in the house. Mrs. Watkins found her pathway greatly smoothed by 'he new thoughtfulness of this elder son."

There was a pause after Calvin had spoken. Then Mr. Watkins assented.

"Well, yes; she aint no or'nary women, yer marm," adding with his usual egotism: "or else she would n't be Mis' Watkins! I calc'lated I knew what I was about when I married her."

"And then Winfred likes navigation and all that sort of thing," said Calvin; "he's been studying it with Master Graham a long time; gone deeper in than any fellow who ever went to our school."

"Oh, he has, has he?" observed the father, partly to hide the fact that he did not even know the meaning of the

word navigation; "he had a reason for it, he knowed what he was about! That chap's got a long head!"

"So he's capable of piloting any ship into the harbours near here," pursued Calvin; "and I ather think he'll take that along with the care of the Light, and so turn some money outside of that!"

"There's another chance gone," groaned Mr. Watkins; "ye might a done that, too! He beats ye every time, boy, an' the worst on't is, ye glory in 't!"

"It's a pretty good chance for Winfred," continued Calvin, still calm and respectful, although his cheeks wore an unwonted flush; "but not for me, father."

Mr. Watkins sneered. "I'd like to know what would suit ye. The fact on't is, Cal, ye hant no ambition, 'n' never had; yer all marm, 'n' precious leetle Watkins!"

Calvin's eye flashed, but he restrained himself. "Ye hant a grain o' ambition!" reiterated Mr. Watkins.

"You've often made that remark, father, and I have not disputed the matter with you," Calvin's tone was deep and steady, like that of a thoughtful man. "Perhaps you are right; some people might think so, to see me plod along day after day in this store."

"But it earns our bread and butter, boy, if it aint genteel," interrupted his father, suddenly afraid that Calvin was getting above their business.

"I've thought it over, father, many a time when I've ben working here, especially when I had some disagreeable job, like sprouting potatoes, or righting the cellar, and I've concluded that I have a chance here, and one that's not to be despised."

Mr. Watkins was secretly pleased that his son did not despise his father's calling, but his peculiar disposition forced him to hide it in a most discouraging reply:

"I don't see why; I can't pay ye a cent; should n't anyhow till ye was of age, even if ye give yer whole time, Cal. You have yer schooling, an' a chance off when there's anything going on. An' then there's the rest of the boys an' yer marm,—it takes a sight o' victuals and clothes for so many."

"I know that, father," said Calvin; "you've got a large family, and you make them all very comfortable. I don't wish or expect any pay. It is my duty to help you all I can."

This was the most affectionate speech Calvin had ever made to his father, so different from his old sarcasm, or silent stubbornness, that Mr. Watkins would have been a strange man had he not been gratified by it. He moved about uneasily in the little silence that followed, then he spoke:

"Well, that's suthin'; tha—that—sounds well, Cal."

"Do you want to know what my plan is, father?" pursued Calvin.

Mr. Watkins nodded.

"I mean to learn the business thoroughly. Then when the other boys get large enough to help you here, I'll start somewhere else."

Thrusting his hands into his pockets, he began to pace the floor, talking rapidly, as if it were a lesson that had been well learned.

"There's plenty of towns along the coast, where I could succeed even if there were stores. I would go to the city often, get goods at the lowest prices, and sell them so cheap that the old settlers would gasp. I shall be content with small profits, so I shall have large sales. On a bright morning you'll see the square in front of my store just black with country wagons, bringing fresh eggs and butter in exchange for my rare bargains. They'll find me honourable in all my dealings. When I say an article is pure, they'll find it so every time. My word will be as good as my bond."

There was a fine, generous glow in Calvin's face, as he thus laid out a future of honourable dealing.

"So I shall gain their confidence, and not be a failure, even in the grocery business. Do you call that a bad chance, father?" asked Calvin, adding, playfully, "And who knows, even if I lack ambition, my fellow-townsmen, respecting my worth and enterprise, may be moved to name me for some office,—town clerk, county sheriff, or representative?"

His father was silent, and the entrance of a customer closed the conversation. But the old man sat for a long time with his eyes fixed upon the youth, who was again absorbed in the details of a business that he had accepted because it seemed marked out for him. Dimly his father recognized the brave spirit that was bound to make a successful future out of a disagreeable present. As he told Mrs. Watkins that night, in an unusual burst of confidence:

"I did n't s'pose our Cal had so much grit. The boy'll make suthin' big yet, I really believe, or else—he is n't a Watkins!"

XXVIII.—ABOARD THE WATER QUEEN.

All this time Joe was still among the uplands of New Hampshire, making warm friends, and doing all possible to forward his Master's cause. But he did not feel at home, even in his native place,—he was ever longing for the sea.

It was naught to him that his cheek was fanned by the purest breezes of the continent, or that he could roam amid the noblest forests,—his nostrils longed for the salt flavour of the sea; his eyes for forests of masts. So he told Mrs. Patch:

"My eyes jest ache for the sight of a mast, or some sailin' vessel. These 'ere leetle spindlin' fresh-water boats on these small ponds is gettin' dreadful tame,—more like playin' with them leetle boats I make for the youngsters to sail in their marm's washtubs."

And later, he told Mr. Patch:

"Well, Jerry, I guess it's about time you 'n' me hitched into single teams,—I'm thinkin' I'd orter go east a spell."

"I was afraid you could not be content here," said Mr. Patch.

"T aint nobody's fault but mine," said Joe, as he saw his friend's regret; "it's hard to anchor an old salt up here,

ye'll all agree; but I don't begrudge the time I've spent on the old place, I aint sorry I came."

Indeed he was not; he knew that he had been a rich gainer by this home visit. Here he had entered upon the better way; here he had tasted the pure joy of helping others upward. Believing himself to be the last of the Luscombs, and redeemed from sin, he had accomplished a marvellous work for the fallen.

It was only this that had kept Joe so long away from the coast. Now there were so many to carry the work on that Joe's peculiar mission seemed accomplished. His kind friends felt they ought not to detain him, perhaps he was needed elsewhere.

So, impelled by unseen influences, that he took to be only hunger for the sea, Joe decided to leave his native town. Afterward, he knew that Providence had led him on, to meet the deepest joy of his life; to find that his mother was not dead, but ready to forgive, and rejoice unspeakably in her son.

Joe told no one that he was going, except the Patch family. Mr. Patch, being one of the selectman, could place another person on duty at the town house,—Joe had one already initiated,—the reformed man, whom he and the children had helped home one afternoon. He was no longer the terror of his family, but their comfort and support.

"Everybody will think you are perfectly horrid to run away without saying good-by!" said Miss Patch. "Why don't you let your friends know you are going and have some sort of a farewell?"

Her father laughed at Joe's look of dismay.

"That's jest the sort o' show I don't like! These 'ere good-byes is dreadful rilin' if you hev any feelin'. Some folks jest glories in them, I s'pose," added Joe, with his habit of moralizing; "specially if it calls out victuals. Reminds me how they got up a farewell for Melissa Harris, she that went missionary to the Choke-taws. There was an old marm Saunders, that wouldn't care a snap if the Injins had scalped Melissa,—never hed no missionary spirit,—would n't give a red cent to send 'em the Gospel, she said she would n't miss that 'ere farewell for nothin'! Come to find out 't was the victuals she come for."

In the laugh that followed, Joe swung himself upon the stage-top.

"Come again soon, and bring somebody else," said Mrs. Patch, "we want to see her."

"Thank ye, she'd be delighted, mebbe," stammered Joe, his bronzed cheek turning a deeper hue at this public allusion to Maggie, "can't sometimes see so far into the futur', you know."

"T won't be your fault, I reckon," chimed in the stage-driver as they rolled away. "In common with everybody in the village he had heard of Joe's fair correspondent. He added, "They say you are going to be married, Mr. Luscomb?"

"Well, 'they' must know, I s'pose," said Joe, not pleased at being interviewed; "they aint got nothin' else to do but to tend to somebody else's business. They'll hev me married, 'n' dead, 'n' buried afore I get to Bos'on!"

Joe spoke with unnecessary heat, considering the fact that no one was forcing him to be married. To tell the truth Joe was tormented because these friendly jests put his own wishes too plainly before him. He was like one mocked by a blessed reality that could not be his. Marry! what home had he to offer the tidy little housewife, Maggie? He, whose clothes and the few dollars saved from his wages were all his worldly possessions!

"I'm doomed to be without a home," were Joe's sad thoughts, "and good enough for me for leaving the best o' homes years ago. O mother, mother!"

The old grief of that night when he had returned to find her gone, came upon the man. Forgetting the years of separation, and the unknown grave that held her clay, his soul cried out for his mother, as if he were a child again, and she only in the next room.

Then he remembered that she was beyond earthly call; a great sense of desolation came over him. As the stage descended the long hills, and the universe stretched out, he seemed but a miserable atom.

Presently the stage drew up at a railway station. Joe bade the driver good-bye, and was soon aboard the Boston train. But still his mind was full of sad thoughts that would not be shaken off.

The hills gradually disappeared, melting into the clear atmosphere like cloud-tops, and the train sped through valleys whose outer edge touched the sea. Joe threw up his window,—a slight tinge of salt was in the air. He inhaled it eagerly, with brightening gaze.

As they neared the coast his meditations became less absorbing; distant glimpses of the ocean, or masts of vessels woke all his old love for these things. As the train passed the wharves near the city, Joe's excitement increased.

With his head thrust clear out of the window, he hailed the sailors, asking their freight and destination in his own characteristic style, greatly to the amusement of his neighbours.

"If there haint the old Sary Jane Hardin' agin," exclaimed Joe, surveying an ancient schooner that lay at anchor. "I never thought she'd stan' it so long. Beats all how them old tubs 'll hold out," he observed, confidentially, to his seat-mate; "for all the world like some old folks,—alluz threat 'nin' to die, 'n' don't. It's jest the same with an old harness; there's a powerful sight o' wear in 'em sometimes."

"But it don't do to depend upon worn-out ships or harnesses," returned his companion.

"They will go back on ye, sometime," said Joe. "There'll be a last trip for the Sary Jane Hardin' yet!"

Suddenly Joe started for the platform. His keen glance had read a familiar name on a craft,—the Water Queen. On her deck were the well-known figures of the Grumbler, Johnson and the Mate. Joe hailed them in his most resonant fashion, bewildering several old ladies as it blended with the brakeman's call of the station.

"Had n't you better move on? You're blockin' the way," he said, touching Joe.