

CHOICE LITERATURE.

THE LAST O' THE LUSCOMBS.

BY HELEN PEARSON BARNARD.

XXIV.—LOST.

Early one evening Winfred sat upon the brow of the cliff behind the lighthouse. He had been there for some time, motionless as a statue, only his eyes held some glowing eyes set in such a rapt, thoughtful face.

A little apart was Aaron, lying at full length on the ledge, gazing seaward. When Aaron had satisfied himself on some point, he put aside his glass, and took out his pipe. He talked a little with Winfred about certain work for the morrow and then relapsed into long, unbroken silence.

Winfred found the quiet very pleasant, a refreshing change from Aaron's late fashion of making disagreeable speeches. The glory of the sunset melting into the soft, drooping shadows of evening, the stars as they came out one by one in the blue vault above the tranquil sea,—all this awoke delightful thoughts in the mind of the boy.

At length Aaron turned his moody gaze that way. His dull eye rested for a moment upon the young face.

"Pears to me ye aint over 'n' above social to-night, lad!"

Winfred started as if from sleep. Before he could reply, Aaron continued,—

"When I was a boy I'd rather take a whippin' than set 'n' ponder a whole mortal hour as ye hev?"

"Would you?" said Winfred, scarcely knowing what to say.

A sudden suspicion darkened Aaron's face, one of those swift, unaccountable changes that were ever coming over him, born of a conscience ill at ease.

"Mebbe," said he, harshly, "ye mistrust I wa'n't much when I was a boy; wa'n't so"—sarcastically,—"*dreadful takin' 'n' bright as ye be!*"

"Indeed, I thought no such thing!" replied Winn, so warmly that Aaron's sudden heat died as quickly as it came.

"Well, well, mebbe ye did n't; don't ye mind me, lad."

After a moment, he added,—

"I get out o' my bias dreadful easy, nowadays; it comes o' growin' old, I s'pose."

Winfred looked at him wistfully, but said nothing. He could have told him that his age was not the chief cause of his unhappiness. He longed to say something of the kind, but feared it would be worse than useless. Both Mrs. Luscomb and he were careful not to rouse the sleeping lion in Aaron's nature. If it slept, they had peace, and he was like himself; when it awoke, the household was in misery.

"What were ye thinkin' o', lad?" asked Aaron.

Winfred hesitated.

"A little while ago? When you first spoke to me?"

"Yes, I never see ye look so, but once," said Aaron, "that war the night ye come from prayer-meetin', 'n' said ye'd started in the new way. Remember it, lad?"

"I shall never forget it, Mr. Luscomb," was the low, earnest reply.

"Well, what war in yer fancy just now?" pursued Aaron, with unwonted interest.

This was a hard question to answer. It is not always that one can give voice to thought, even to a dear friend. Winfred could not put into words much that had passed through his mind; and Aaron would not have understood if he had, so differently did the two minds work; but, yearning after the aged man, Winn recalled a portion of his musings. Perhaps Aaron's question was sent to draw it out.

"I was thinking of heaven, Mr. Luscomb. Something in the sunset made me, I think. I remembered that mother was there, that Jesus had pardoned my sins, and that if I was faithful I would meet her by and by. Then I thought of all my friends that might be too, dear Mrs. Luscomb, Jack, and Minnie, and Elsie."

"Ye'd want her there, I'll be bound!" interrupted Aaron, with an attempt at a laugh.

"When I thought of dear Mrs. Luscomb I could not forget you," pursued Winfred, in a tremulous voice; "there must be a final change sometime, you know. We can't go on forever, Mr. Luscomb."

Aaron being silent, the boy added,—

"Just then I looked at the stars and this text came into my mind, as if somebody had spoken it,—*'They that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament; and they that turn many to righteousness as the stars forever and ever.'*"

It had been one of Winfred's Sabbath-school texts. After he had recited it slowly and distinctly, that Aaron might hear every word, he was silent again.

Aaron moved about uneasily, took out his pipe and knocked it against the ledge to rid it of the ashes. A bitter expression was on his face; his heart was bitterer still.

"There's older than you had a hack at me, lad," he said, with another forced laugh; "but it wa'n't no use. Ye may earn the right to shine as the stars; but 't won't be long o' convertin' Aaron Luscomb."

"I did n't expect I could do you good," said Winn, "unless He helped! Then it would n't be me; but He blesses us just the same. He put it in my heart to serve Him, and then blessed me as if it had been my own doing! Is n't that wonderful?"

The joy of it flashed into the boy's face again. He looked at the man as if to sympathize with him; but Aaron could not. He turned his face away.

Presently Winfred added, gently, and with a modesty that could have offended no one,—

"I did n't think I could do you good, Mr. Luscomb. I am only a beginner, you know. But I did long to have you be happy, for your sake and Mrs. Luscomb's. How many years she has prayed for you!"

To his surprise Aaron groaned.

"If these prayers could be answered, if you could make up your mind to love our Saviour," pursued the young disciple, his voice growing clearer and stronger until it held a note of triumph that thrilled even Aaron with a dim per-

ception of what might be if he could surrender, "then by and by when we all went home, I'd take you both to mother and say, 'Here they are, mother darling, the two who cared for me when I was alone in the world.'"

Then another thought entered the boy's fertile brain, he added, softly,—

"And Jesus will say, 'Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.' What high honor to have that said before all heaven!"

Aaron shuddered; then suddenly lifted his head, and threw both hands outward with a gesture of putting something far from him, discovering a face of unutterable woe, blanched like the dead.

"Stop! Stop! I lad," he whispered, hoarsely; "I'll hear no more o' this! It's too late, too late!"

He rose, turned his back upon the boy, and entered the path that led by the Lighthouse to the beach. Winfred thought he appeared strangely. It seemed as if he could not pass the house. He would come to a standstill as abruptly as if somebody stood in his way. Then, with clenched hands, he would start again, only to stop and combat an unseen influence. Once he turned aside and looked in at the kitchen window.

Winfred knew just what he would see at that hour,—his wife, seated at the table, knitting, with the open Bible before her. And if, as was often the case, she should drop her knitting and close her eyes a moment, while her lips moved softly, would Mr. Luscomb know that she was even then praying for him? If that, and the sight of her pale, sad face, lined with the sorrow he had brought, failed to move him, what would?

Apparently, the tableau was as Winfred imagined, for Aaron again made the same gesture of despair, and thrusting all these things away—Winn could see it plainly as he stood before the lighted casement—and hastened into the path again. Soon his tall figure was lost in the gloom of the woods that bordered it on either side.

It seemed to Winfred, as he afterwards recalled this scene, that it was symbolic,—his deliberately turning from light, comfort, and love into the desolate night.

Not long after, the wind changed. A cold mist swept up from the sea. Sudden clouds covered the sky, hiding the very stars that had suggested to Winfred a text for his first discourse.

"Mr. Luscomb has predicted a storm for some days," Winfred murmured, as he rose, shivering, from his seat; "I guess it has come."

He glanced towards the tower. The beacon was burning brightly.

"Aaron's storm is coming," said Mrs. Luscomb, as he entered the house. She glanced behind the lad, as if she expected to see her husband.

"Where is Aaron?" she asked.

Winfred told her something of what had passed between them, in answer to her questions; how he had started to come in, lingered at the door, and then gone down the path. Mrs. Luscomb was instantly alarmed.

"It has overcome him again. I can always tell when the appetite battles with him! If he has left the island, he is after drink."

Hastily covering her head with a shawl, she started out of the house.

"Dear Mrs. Luscomb, do not go!" cried Winfred, rushing after. "I'll go with the lantern. It is growing very dark. Do stay in the house. It is my place to search, if any one must. I am no little boy to fear the dark."

She slackened her pace, glancing irresolutely at the tall lad beside her.

"I suppose I am not fit to walk down there," she said; "but, oh, Winfred, what if he would not listen to you?"

"He will. I'll coax him back," said Winfred; "I'll bring him home,—trust me."

"Then you must have the lantern."

It hung behind the cellar door. Mrs. Luscomb lit it with trembling fingers; then thrust it into the boy's outstretched hand.

"Go quickly, dear child. I'll watch, and wait, and pray that you may not be too late! Oh, my dear, dear husband, will you always be tempted thus?"

She was wringing her hands when Winfred entered.

"Dear Mrs. Luscomb, do not worry so," he said, surprised at her unwonted agitation; "he has left us, but this is not the first time, and he has always returned safely. It is nothing new for him to leave in this way."

"I know it," Mrs. Luscomb answered, "but there will be a last time, and something tells me this is. I never felt so."

She shuddered as the wind howled past the easterly windows of the kitchen.

"The storm is gathering, he will be bewildered and lost! And do you know what that means to me, child?" she said, intensely. "Perhaps eternal separation from my husband. Just as surely as He will admit me to heaven if I am faithful, will He punish Aaron for this life long disobedience."

It was a solemn thought, and one that inspired the boy with deep longings to save the sinning man from sudden death.

"I do not like to leave you here alone, he said, "but if you will feel easier, I could row over to Muurstown and see if I could find Mr. Luscomb. But if I am detained, what about the Lamp? We cannot neglect that."

"Surely not," said Mrs. Luscomb. "I can see to it. I know how. If I take my time I can mount the tower stairs. Oh, if you would go!"

She clasped her hands entreatingly, but as Winfred began to prepare for the trip another thought came.

"Dear child!" she almost took his coat from him in her agitation; "I ought not to let you go. There may be a squall, and your little boat be upset. I must not sacrifice you because he is tempted; the innocent must not suffer for the guilty,—stay at home!"

But even as she spoke her hand left his coat with a motion of despair. Winfred had never seen her so moved by her husband's absence. Something of her dire foreboding entered his own heart, and nerved him to say firmly:—

"I must go, Mrs. Luscomb. God will take care of me." Hastily putting on his long rubber boots and settling his

cap firmly over his fair hair, Winfred was ready to go, and to say cheerfully:—

"Good-by; lock the doors and windows; I'll be back soon; for if he isn't at the lower village, he has gone further, and will stay all night. In that case he will be all right. Keep up your courage."

His face was full of a fine calm as he left the Lighthouse and entered the path that led to the landing. The water was booming on the further rocks, sending forth storm signals that the boy knew; already a few drops of rain had touched his cheeks. Out in the bay the waves were putting on white caps that gleamed in the darkness like the tablets of a cemetery, but the brave young heart did not fall. This Scripture kept running through his mind, chanted in solemn measure to the sound of the waters:—

"The voice of the Lord is upon the waters; the God of glory thundereth; the Lord is upon many waters. The Lord sitteth upon the flood; yea, the Lord sitteth King forever."

XXV.—THE EMPTY BOAT.

Aaron was not to be found. Winfred searched for him through the storm and darkness, amid the gloom of places where such as he were given the poison that led them down. At one of these dens they admitted that he had been there, but had gone home. Winfred was obliged to turn away, not knowing whether what they said was true. Aaron might be there hidden away,—it seemed more likely, judging by the past.

If he had gone home, where was he? Although Winn knew it would be useless, he walked along the shore for some distance, searching for him. It was all darkness—except where the white spray dashed high like clouds. Far out beyond the island the breakers thundered an assault upon the rocky ramparts. The night was certainly dismal.

Winfred turned from the gloomy waters towards the town. He had an errand at the store.

Just as he came out, somebody brushed swiftly by. It was Elsie Moor!

"Why, Elsie, alone? and in this storm?" asked Winfred. She quickly explained that her father had an acute attack of neuralgia, and had sent her for some remedy.

"And do you expect to go back through the dark woods alone?" persisted Winfred.

Elsie said "Yes;" adding, in her own vivacious way,—*"It is all the safer in the dark,—nobody will know who it is. Besides, there is no danger of meeting any one, such a night. But I must go, good-by."*

Winfred would not say good-by. He followed her in, borrowed a lantern of Calvin Watkins, and insisted upon returning with her.

"Why, how the breakers roar!" said Elsie, as they left the store. "I think my way is much safer than yours. Ar'n't you afraid to cross the bay such a night?"

"I might be, if I wasn't used to it," said Winfred. "Besides, it is generally pretty calm in the harbour. That noise you hear is at the Point, beyond our Light. The surf is rolling in there grandly."

"I pity the poor sailor such nights as these," added Elsie.

"Yes, or anybody who is out wi'out knowing their course," said Winfred, thinking of Aaron.

They now entered a narrow path that led through John Moor's estate to the river. Winfred went ahead with the lantern, alternately talking and listening to the patter of Elsie's light feet behind him.

"Parson Willoughby called the other day," she said; "he said some very kind, comforting things. Then somebody else,—you cannot guess!"

"Lady or gentleman?"

"It wasn't a gentleman;" Elsie hesitated as if she scarcely knew whether to class her caller with ladies; "it was Miss Bilkins!"

"What brought her there?" asked Winfred. "Do you know her well?"

"I never spoke with her before," said Elsie; "she said she felt it to be her duty. Folks were talking about me;" Elsie's voice trembled a little; "they feared I was back-sliding, because I did not come to church, and she asked me if I didn't think I was doing a deal of harm by not taking up my cross."

"What did you say?"

"I told her it would be no cross for me to make a public profession, and I should do so at the proper time."

"You gave her a splendid answer," remarked Winfred, pleased with its womanly dignity.

"Just then father came in. He must have overheard a part of it, for he was quite vexed."

"Did she extend her labours to him?" asked Winfred, with a touch of sarcasm. He believed Miss Bilkins's call was wholly out of curiosity.

Elsie laughed—a little ripple that kept time to the patter of her feet.

"No, she left right away."

Elsie was silent a moment; then Winfred heard her sigh. "I do not think her call made it any easier for me. It annoyed father. He called her a specimen of church members."

"I do not believe he really thinks so," said Winfred.

"Perhaps not," Elsie sighed again, then added, more cheerfully, "but I have Parson Willoughby's words to think of. He says I am doing right, and believes with me that father will yet give his consent, yea, and himself join with me the Church of God!"

With these words she bade him good night, for they had reached the hut. Winfred carried away another picture of the brown-eyed maid, as she looked hopefully at him out of the storm.

It was well, perhaps, that this little pleasant episode occurred; for terrible events came after. All that night it stormed, and Mrs. Luscomb did not close her eyes. She wept and prayed for Aaron until the early dawn; then, apparently exhausted, or like one stunned by a blow, she moved about her household tasks.

(To be continued.)