

CHOICE LITERATURE.

THE LAST O' THE LUSCOMBS.

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VI.—THE HOME AT MOOR'S ISLAND.

"You are not fit to climb those steep stairs to-night, father."

So said the wife of the old Lighthouse-keeper of Moor's Island—the place towards which Winn was rapidly being carried by the *Water Queen*. She had a sweet, motherly face, framed with silvery hair; but it was very troubled as she lighted a lantern for her husband.

"Why not, Bessie?"

The tone was querulous almost to harshness.

His wife sighed as she said:—

"You don't seem quite yourself to-night, Aaron."

"Why don't I?" the old man faced her almost fiercely.

"What notion has taken you now?"

Mrs. Bessie sank into a chair and covered her face with her apron.

"Surely if you were yourself you wouldn't speak so to me, or as you often have of late!"

This seemed to touch Aaron's better nature. He came towards her and laid his horny hand upon her hair, saying, with sudden feeling:—

"Don't cry, Bessie, I aint wuth your tears. I'm a poor broken creature, under a spell I can't break. It'll go with me to the grave, just as it did with our poor boy."

His wife wiped her eyes, and dropped the apron, but the sadness did not leave her lovely face. Some painful memory seemed to silence them both.

Finally Mrs. Luscomb rose, took a lamp and went into the next apartment. It was the ancient "company room" arranged after the prim fashion of the common folk along the coast, where shell frames and moss baskets, "hooked in" rag mats and intricate patchwork took the place of gilt and upholstery.

Here, framed by the faint pink of some foreign shells, was the face of a child, bright and laughing. Mrs. Luscomb paused before this. Her husband followed, slowly. The picture had been painted by an artist many years before, on a summer vacation, in their old home, far away from their present abode. It had doubtless been drawn by a master hand, for it looked down upon them with the freshness of life.

Aaron's temporary depression seemed to lighten as he gazed upon the portrait, with his hands in his pockets, stepping back, then a little forward, to obtain a better view. At length he said:—

"That 'ere artist fellow knew his business; father allus' loved I'd be took in by him; but I knowed he'd suit me the fust' time I clapped eyes onto him."

"To think he was ours," said Mrs. Luscomb, brokenly, speaking of the child, "and we had such plans for him. We little thought!"

She broke down, and her husband, his self-congratulations suddenly leaving, finished the sentence.

"He'd get a taste for drink on the old place, that 'ud spile him forever! I wish 'e'd never been born," said the father, bitterly, "or me neither."

Like one of old, Aaron would curse the day of his birth. Some sudden appeal was on his wife's lips, he read it in her speaking face. As if to avoid it, he hastened into the kitchen, and caught up the lantern that she had lighted at the beginning of their talk. He opened and noisily closed after him a door that led into a long, narrow stone passage. This connected the house with the tower that held the beacon-light of Moor's Island.

The old Lighthouse-keeper groaned at intervals as he walked along the stone passage. It was a weird picture in the dim place—that figure bowed with age, and the shifting expression of his wretched face as revealed by the light he carried.

Everybody on the coast knew Aaron Luscomb who tended the Light on Moor's Island. He had been there for many years, and although Bessie and he were unusually grave and reticent, they were much respected by their neighbours in Moorstown, across the bay. They used to go regularly to church in the village, Aaron rowing across the bay every pleasant Sabbath, but of late he had kept aloof.

"Bessie and I are growing old," he said, when asked why they were so often absent. But that was not the reason, as we shall see presently.

The childless couple could not have chosen a lovelier spot for their home, in the summer time Moor's Island was a height of several acres, crowned with verdure, and protected from the ever aggressive ocean by massive ledges of rock on three sides. Here the waters forever beat in vain; the rocky ramparts held their own in the worst storm. On the fourth side the waters formed a little bay, whose calm bosom was often the retreat for the storm-petted vessel. The massive tower of the Lighthouse rises from the summit of the island, from the solid rock, itself stone, as is also the house connected with it.

It was a wild, romantic spot, and one that suited the couple that dwelt there. Aaron did not wish for neighbours; he was glad that no other family inhabited the island.

But of late he often gazed about him with foreboding, for age and a certain infirmity were fast claiming him. Where would he and Bessie go when they were too old to perform the work of the place? And what should he do if some time when he had given way to that infirmity the government officials should discover him unfit for his position of trust? Bessie had saved him so far; but he knew it could not always be concealed. There had been many ways for the small salary that Aaron received from the government; there was nothing ahead for the future.

Aaron brooded upon this as he ascended the steep stairs of the tower. He breathed more freely after leaving the gloomy passage and getting into the Light at the top. It was with almost a loving touch that he polished the spot-

less reflector of the great Light. He never let a breath or touch dim its surface; one added ray upon the midnight waters might decide the fate of some distant ship.

Before "lighting up" he looked out; a glorious prospect was on every side. The setting sun left a thousand inimitable hues on the sea, and gave weird shadows in the rocks. The bay that separated the island from the town was so calm that the pines on the shore were reflected in its depths. Just beyond the white spire of Moorstown church pointed heavenward, while about it were clustered the dwellings. Other houses dotted neighbouring hillsides.

A schooner was entering the bay. Aaron examined it with his glass. If it had been light enough he would have read in black letters on her prow the name that the boy Winn saw a few days before as she lay at the almshouse wharf, *The Water Queen*. Little did Aaron imagine that she was bringing a third person to the lonely stone house! But he did say:—

"She's bound for Bos'on, I reckon. She's got a head wind. That's why they turn out of their course now!"

The craft entered the bay, anchored, and lowered a boat. A sailor sprang in, then the Captain lifted a boy into it,—our Winfred.

"What keeps you so long, father?" now called Mrs. Luscomb from the foot of the stairs. "It is high time the lamp was lit."

Aaron had indeed lingered too long. The weird shadows in the rock caverns were now stretching out long arms upon the sea.

"Are you all right, Aaron?" continued the anxious voice.

"Yes, yes, right down!" said he, lighting the mammoth lamp, adding, after another survey: "Massy on us, mother, the boat's putting back, 'n' the sailor he's alone in 't. What have they done with the child? There's foul play on our island, mother!"

Mrs. Luscomb caught disconnected bits of his excited talk with growing anxiety.

The old man screamed from the tower to the schooner that was sailing away:—

"I see ye! I'll report ye!"

Mrs. Luscomb clasped her hands, murmuring:—

"I thought he was not quite right to-night. O dear; and he away up there, where a steady brain is needed! What if he should attempt to walk the outside platform? He would surely fall!"

This latter fear was soon dispelled; Aaron's figure darkened the small opening far above her, and Aaron's big boots clattered excitedly down the stairs. He dashed by her, calling for his hat and stout cane.

"I must look into this, Bessie!"

Still labouring under her suspicions, which, alas! had often proved too true, Mrs. Luscomb resolved to keep him in the house if possible. Aaron could not find his hat, so he seized his cane and rushed out of the door bareheaded.

Mrs. Luscomb threw her apron over her head as a shield from the night air, and followed him.

Aaron's old enemy, rheumatism, attacked him before he had gone two rods. He began to groan, and his interest abated.

"Mebbe I didn't see right, but I thought it was a dreadful pity!"

He groaned again, and turned towards the house, so suddenly that he trod on Bessie's toes, for she was close behind him. She winced, but only peered into his face anxiously.

"Dear husband, are you yourself?"

They were just beginning to understand each other when a footstep on the ledge at the corner of the house made them listen with beating hearts. There was something appalling about the sudden mystery of their lonely island. The aged couple who often had rough visitors, were not usually so flustered. The footfall grew more distinct, then some one stepped into the light, the child, Winfred Campbell.

"Why, here you be now!" ejaculated Mr. Luscomb.

"Poor child, come right into the house!" said Mrs. Luscomb.

Somewhat surprised at this unexpected welcome, and a little bewildered by all that had happened since he left the almshouse, Winn obeyed.

The darkness was fast settling over the sea, and covering the stone tower, as Winfred Campbell entered the light-house. It had begun to look dreary and lonely outside, so the cheery hearth, where a fire took off the evening chill, the singing tea-kettle, the hot biscuit, cold meat and sauce were very inviting. While Winn warmed himself he delivered a message from Captain Marsh.

"Well, I hope he's sassy 'nough to dump ye ashore 'thout askin' on us!" grumbled Aaron.

Winn flushed painfully.

"Of course you can stay and welcome," said Mrs. Luscomb, whose benevolent heart went out to the winning boy.

And even Aaron said at last, in his slow fashion:—

"I d-d-n-know but we'll keep ye a spell, ef yer a good boy."

After supper Aaron proceeded to ply Winn with all manner of questions concerning himself and the almshouse. He seemed to enjoy Winn's story quite as much as had Joe.

Mrs. Luscomb, having "cleared away," and put everything in its place, sewed and listened and occasionally smiled gently at Winn over her glasses. The boy thought he had never seen such a kind and lovely old lady.

Mr. Luscomb was greatly amused at the manner of Winn's leaving the institution.

"Now that chap that got him off, that Joe; he's prob'ly got himself in 'o trouble afore now," he said to Mrs. Luscomb. "The State won't stan' no such doin's as that, ye know. The 'thorities 'll find it out 'n' he'll get his discharge papers in a hurry!"

"I hope they won't find it out, then," responded Mrs. Luscomb. "I'd be the last to tell of him, for it was a kind deed."

"It's 'ordin' to how the story ends!" said Mr. Luscomb. "Taint much 'o a kindness to send such a child as he into a city to make his way. He might have got handled dread-

ful rough. But he came to the right quarter when he got under your wing, mother!"

"My mother said she thought I'd be taken care of some-way," said Winn, gravely.

Mrs. Luscomb's eyes suddenly filled with tears.

"See what a reward the faithful parent has! The mother's good teachings drop from the lad's lips whenever he speaks!" Then in a sad voice she added: "Oh, that we had that reward, Aaron! If we could bring back the years and begin life again with our child!"

She seemed to forget the presence of a stranger. Mr. Luscomb rose, and saying something about "finishing the chores," went out of the house.

Mrs. Luscomb was silent for a long time. Winn thought she was weeping, but with his own rare politeness would not look at her to see. He wondered what could trouble these old people, as he enjoyed the cheery hearth. Was there really trouble everywhere? Some old and solemn thoughts came into the boy's head, born of his sad lot and early orphanage. At length, however, tired nature asserted itself; he forgot life's troubles and nodded like any sleepy, careless boy.

Mrs. Luscomb hastened to prepare a bed for him in a little room across the entry from hers, and sent him to rest. She pressed a motherly kiss upon his forehead. It brought back all his orphanage, and her whose lips were motionless.

"That is the way my mother used to do," he said.

"Poor lad, but that is better than for you to grow up naughty and perhaps leave her despairing and broken-hearted."

She spoke almost inaudibly and as if she were thinking aloud and not talking with the child.

"Hav'n't you any little children?" ventured Winn.

"I had one once, my boy. But I have been alone many years. We are left desolate in our old age."

She hastened away.

"Seems as if folks have more trouble than we did when mother was around!" was Winn's comment as he laid his tired body upon the softest of beds. The delicate odour of some sweet plant from the dear old lady's garden perfumed the linen. Winn was asleep almost as soon as his head touched the snowy pillow, lulled by the monotonous washing of the ocean on the rocky ramparts beneath the old stone Lighthouse.

VII.—THE MESSAGE AT DAYBREAK.

One evening shortly after Winn's departure, Joe, who slept above the stable, was aroused by the night-bell. He raised the window and thrust his head out growling:—

"There they be agin, arter that 'ere boss. What on airth do ye want at this 'me o' night?"

"The superintendent wants the bay horse put into the Concord wagon. He's heard something about Winfred Campbell, and I've got to go down and see about it."

Joe slowly obeyed the order; he could not do otherwise, although he knew the search would be useless.

"They're in an awful takin' about 'he child, now he's missin'! Why didn't they do suthin' fur him afore? But I reckon nobody's bothered so much as Joe, ef he is to the bottom o' this pickle! Taint no airthly use a spilin' yer rest!" he said, when the messenger appeared ready for the ride.

"The superintendent will leave no means untried before he gives him up," was the grave reply. "He thinks the boy would not run away, and says he has doubtless been decoyed away by some rascal whom he knew before he came. A child answering to his description has been seen at the Lower Falls in the company of a rough-looking man."

Thus in detached sentences as Joe assisted him. When he had gone, Joe seated himself on the threshold of the stable. A great change had come over him since the departure of Winn, and his interview with the evangelist. Father Gwynn's words dropped like seed into the waiting soil. Poor wretched Joe was almost persuaded to turn about and try to live a life that was worth living. But something held him back—his deception in regard to Winn.

"Ef 'twasn't fur that 'ere, mebbe I might sot up fur a patty decent chap; but I dew feel dreadful mean!"

It was true enough, Joe's feeling "mean!"

He had not dreamed that the disappearance of the orphan would cause so much trouble. He thought there might be considerable surprise and searching at first; then the matter would be dropped.

"This 'ere town farm's too well stocked with deadheads fur them to fret 'cause one pauper's took to his heels!" Joe had reasoned.

But the small pauper, Winn, had found favour with the officials from the first. His strict obedience and serious, gentlemanly deportment had impressed them so favourably that they were privately negotiating for a situation for the orphan. Among the inmates he had only made friends, so there was universal mourning for him. Like the superintendent no one believed that Winn would run away. The officials had the woods searched, and even the river, but of course, no Winn was found.

Joe called himself many hard names as he waited in the stable that night. He forgot that he had erred through pity for his young friend.

"I wish 'I war man 'nough to up'n tell 'em I sent the lad off! Sometimes I think I'd order, 'n' then agin I'm afraid it'll spile his chances. It's a dreadful pity I hadn't somebody to talk it over with, mebbe it 'ud make it more clear whether or no Joe 'd order or 'd order not tell the sup.!"

Joe looked much perplexed. He felt very lonely as he faced the question. As he sat there in the stable entrance, his mind went back to his childhood days, and the sweet-faced mother whose pride he was. He thought of the old farm among the hills. He could recall a winding path through its green fields, many a merry nook beside the brook, many a tree where grew the earliest fruit. His father's orchards had been the best in the region. "Apple and peach tree" were "fruited deep," but alas! there had been a way for most of these blooming beauties—as the