

Choice Literature.

ROB AND HIS TEACHERS.

A GLASGOW STORY.

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CHAPTER XXIII.

BOB'S DEPARTURE FOR LONDON.

Bob had finished his apprenticeship of seven years. He had given more than satisfaction to his employers and no little promise of future usefulness. Now what was to be done? Remain with the Alexanders at journeyman's wages or strike out for himself? He had now several very good offers but nearly all somewhat out of the line of his business—that of an architect. Among those offers was one from the Balfours of Glasgow, calico printers, who at the time of which I write were dealing largely in those light chintzes that were then in much request.

The idea that the Balfours had in view with Bob was that he should make use of his art in sketching not only in making new designs but also in copying desirable ones wherever he should find them—that he should keep the firm well posted as to patterns and styles so that the company might be early in the market with that which was most saleable. And in order that he might prosecute his calling to the greatest advantage, he was to go to London, Paris, Vienna, Milan—wherever, in short, he could see anything new or desirable in the line of such goods. His salary was to be £500 sterling and travelling expenses—not bad for a stripling scarcely out of his teens and who had still some inches to add to his stature. He was to proceed at once to London and associate himself for a short time with an old and experienced hand already on the spot.

Usually young persons about to make a journey are radiant. All is bright within and beautiful before. They just itch to get away and keep frisking about while their mother is packing their trunk and getting things ready. But Bob was far from being in such a mood. He had no mother to pack his trunk as in former days or give him a Bible with her name written on the fly-leaf (and can there be anything more beautiful than such writing—quaint and crooked as it may be?). Then the memory of Mabel! How could he ever forget her whose image was deeply graven on his young heart? Ever since her death a shadow had been resting on his soul. The world had lost much of its glamour and life, much of its sweetness. It was little that ever he said to anyone on the subject—little even to old Chubb and his wife with whom he was most communicative. It was a wonderful death her death and we all liked to speak about her—her patience, resignation, tenderness to poor Phil Martin, and last of all her departure, so sweet, so calm and blessed, looking as if she saw the King in His beauty and the land that is afar off!

Bob said nothing; but plainly those things were much in his mind, and I have no doubt at all that he loved to think of them and ponder them in his heart. Now he was going to leave the place perhaps forever; and old Chubb that had proved himself a friend in need—that had faith in him when everyone was faithless; and the Browns, too, whose house it was such a pleasure to visit, not so much for their sake as the fair young girl with the flaxen hair that sang so sweetly and secretly loved him, though she carried her virgin love to the grave, unconfessed, unrevealed to mortal ears, but not the less real on that account. How then was it known that Mabel loved him, if she never revealed her love to mortal ears? Is that what you say? How do the flowers know when the sun rises? How do the birds know when spring comes? Is the tongue the only medium of communication? Is the human countenance made of wood? Is it not rather like a plate of porcelain with a light behind it? Has the eye nothing to say, nothing to reveal of the workings of the soul within, so mysterious in its movements, so far-reaching in its desires? True, there was nothing either in the shape of letter or speech that ever passed between these lovers on the subject and yet it was impossible for those who were in daily attendance upon this young girl not to see where her heart was. He had only been once at the Browns since she died and the house to him looked so desolate and woe-begone compared with former years that he did not care to return. But often he went to the quiet grave where all that is mortal of Mabel lies. Very carefully, too, he husbanded the few little relics that the Browns gave him as *souvenirs* of that lovely child, so beautiful in death, and not only in the hour and article of death, but for hours afterwards. A halo of celestial light seemed to rest on the forehead and features and lend to them something of a transfiguration beauty, and any one that drew near will never forget the spectacle. My own private opinion in regard to Bob is that above and beyond natural affection there was a great work of grace going on in the heart of this young man—that the good spirit of all grace, that takes one plan with one man and another with another, was working mightily in his soul—that he was taking the lessons he had been getting for years in the Sabbath school and elsewhere and making them spirit and life to his soul. I may be wrong in my supposition, but from the way in which he acted at this time and after this time—from the fact that he early took Christian ground and cast in his lot with the Lord Jesus Christ and His people, I conclude that it is not unlikely that that had something to do with his somewhat strange manner on the eve of his departure for London.

Old Chubb, who did not understand Bob's silence and moodiness in any other way than this, that he was sad at the thought of leaving him and the house, the only home he had ever known for years, said to him:—

"We'll be kind o' lonesome without you, Bob, but we'll be seeing you soon again."

Bob: "I daresay."

Chubb: "And you'll be lonesome too for a while without us, and I am sure you'll miss old Rover that sleeps under your bed and barks at night if a stranger should put but his foot on the sill o' the door."

Bob: "Yes, I'll miss Rover and Rover will miss me."

Chubb: "And you'll miss old Girsay (Mrs. Chubb), who darned your stockings and made up your lunch before you went away to the office in the morning."

Bob: "Yes, I'll miss her too, for she aye put in something nice, and she did all she could to supply the place of a mother."

Girsay: "Oh Bob, Bob! It's me that will be lonesome. You are gawn away to-morrow to the big toons and the grand houses far awa', and you'll soon forget us poor bodies, and the Browns that ha' been such friends to you, and the Sabbath school and Miss Carruthers and a' this place where you ha' bided sa lang and where your guid kine mither and your father before you bided. Oh Bob, Bob! don't forget, for you are very dear to us all."

Bob's mind was running much on his mother on those sad days and nights, but Mabel occupied a large space in his thoughts too. How are we to explain the strength of that pure affection that grew up in such unfavourable circumstances during those years of severe applications to books and business? How are we to explain the fact that a love so immaterial, so visionary, begotten in the tender days of childhood and fed with an element so unsubstantial, exercised such a power? He worshipped her till the day of her death with steadfast, silent adoration. To see her pass on the street, to receive her salutation, to sympathize with her at a distance in her joys and sorrows sufficed to keep alive the flame till she closed her eyes in death. These are questions too high for us to understand.

The rest of the day he spent in visiting his mother's and Mabel's grave. Concerning the former I had many a conversation with him, but of Mabel he was silent as the grave. Many a time he came to the edge of the subject, but as surely as he did he checked himself as if it were too sacred for speech. Poor lad, he had had three great troubles in his young life, and it is hard to say which gave him the greatest grief—his imprisonment when he was but a child, Mabel Brown's death, and more recently that of his mother. It is hard, I say, to tell from which he suffered most, but this I know, that all of them were overruled for good and wrought out in him the peaceable fruits of righteousness—a deeper impression of the eternal world—a more precious sense of the continuous presence of God, the great, the everlasting Father ever looking on, throwing His shield over his head in the hour of danger and ordering all his steps, his goings out and his comings in from day to day.

Around the spot where the ashes of his mother lay, which had been lying open and neglected, he had recently planted a fence of beautiful Irish yews, and over it he had erected a marble slab to commemorate her worth with the simple inscription:—

"Sacred to the memory of my mother, who patiently endured, seeing Him that is invisible, and who had this testimony that she pleased God. Erected by her son, Robert Armstrong, in grateful remembrance."

"Obit 17th July, 1870."

"The morning cometh," Isaiah xxi. 12.

CHAPTER XXIV.

MABEL BROWN'S PROTEGE, PHIL MARTIN—FIRST VISIT TO THE FAMILY.

In connection with Mabel Brown we must not forget the case of the poor boy, Phil Martin. On him she spent her dying breath. Her last days on earth were taken up with his instruction, and what with pictures and paper cuttings and other illustrations she did much not only for him, but for herself in the way of furnishing some employment for many a weary hour that might otherwise have passed heavy on her hands.

I shall never forget the first visit I made to the Martin family. The mother was a sceptic, and belonged to a race of sceptics; she hated the sight of a clergyman with a perfect hatred, and counted the whole class her enemies, and on this occasion, fancying I was one, she looked at me with scorn. Seated in a dirty room she was reading a novel with yellow covers, and on my entering scarcely raised her eyes to greet me, though she knew my errand well. I tried to engage her in conversation, but failed:—

"Is Mr. Martin at home?"

"No," she said, scornfully, never raising her eyes.

"Where is he?"

"I dunno," she said in the same spirit.

"Do you expect him home soon?"

"I dunno," still preserving the same attitude.

"How about your family? Would you mind me speaking to them for a little and giving them some books to read against my next coming, when I would take them and give them others?"

"I don't care about them things," she replied, as if I had insulted her.

I suspected her husband was not far away. Indeed he was at hand all the time, and by-and-by he made his appearance. Now Martin, though less rude in his behaviour and more polished in his manner, was a worse man in heart than even his wife, as we shall see soon. I made the same proposal to him about reading the Word of God and leaving some books for the children to read, and with some difficulty he consented. We read the Scriptures together, and he apparently engaged in prayer with us. At least we all knelt down together. Yes, we all knelt down together, but during all those exercises (I think I see her still) this woman kept her seat, kept reading her novel, looking, I have no doubt, with supreme contempt on our devotions. I gave the children the little books intended, and such counsels as I thought they needed, and promised to return in a month, when I would expect some account from them of the books which I gave them to read. But before leaving I thought it behooved me, nay, I felt constrained, to do so—I mean, to put in a word of remonstrance as to the conduct of that woman. I said:—

"I don't like, Mrs. Martin, in making my visits from time to time and from door to door, to pass your house."

"You can pass if you like; nobody asked you to call here," she said, in a bitter tone.

"Don't you think you are responsible for the godly upbringing of these children?"

"No, I have no such responsibility. I think nothing of the kind. Religion is a personal thing, and children must judge for themselves when they grow up."

"But God says: 'Bring up your children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.'"

"Well, all that is good enough for those that hold your

views, but I don't, and I don't think you should bother other people with your views. You think one way about religious matters and I think another."

I saw that it was vain for me to go on any longer at that time. She was in no mood for remonstrance, and for me to continue longer in controversy was only to provoke a sturdier antagonism. In such cases I had learned that we must watch for the opportunity rather than make the opportunity of doing good. But I must say that through my entire experience, stretching over a period of fourteen years, I met with no case more discouraging or forbidding than that of Mrs. John Martin. I felt, on leaving her dirty house on this occasion, my heart sinking within me, and I inwardly said, "O God, the work of conviction is Thine own. Thou hast all hearts in Thy hand and Thou turnest them as the mighty waters. Look with mercy on this woman and her miserable family."

Then as to Phil's father, he was an infidel of the darkest dye—an infidel died in the wool, for he belonged to an infidel race that gloried in their shame. He was a man full of brawn and muscle, coarse and carnal in his disposition, full of bluster and blasphemy though possessed of a large share of low cunning. He could assume the appearance of piety when it suited his purpose as we have seen on this occasion of my first visit to his miserable den in Glasgow.

I must say that among all the hard cases that I have ever known that his was the most awful. Again and again I have approached him with tender expostulation and tried to reach his heart by other means; but no; the one thing on which he was inexorable was religion—the duty of making a surrender of himself to God. The very mention of the subject seemed to rouse in him a sort of Satanic virulence—a deadly, hopeless antagonism which makes all remonstrance vain. On other subjects he was calm and reasonable, but touch the subject of religion and his face would redden and his eye would glare and his countenance would fall, reminding you of the demoniacs of the Gospel that cried out when Christ approached them. "Torment me not before the time."

This man hated me with a perfect hatred—hated all clergymen and counted them his enemies. As an instance of this I may mention a conversation which passed between him and a friend of mine that wanted to cross an arm of the sea near Glasgow one day when the sky looked stormy:—

"Do you think it is safe to cross to-day? Will you go?"

Ferryman: "Go? No, unless you are one of those bloody ministers that are always speaking of hell and blackness and darkness."

"Well, I am a minister, but I speak of something more than blood and blackness and darkness. I am sent to speak of a light brighter than the sun and of One who came to rescue—rescue—"

Ferryman: "Oh stop, stop. We had plenty of that in Glasgow. There was a chap there (meaning me) that used to come round and deave me to death about tha' things."

"Well, you think you'll not be crossing to-day."

Ferryman: "No, no, there's only one thing that would make me cross to-day, and that is, if I could get you chap and about a half dozen more like him—if I could get sic a hoatfu' I would venture so as to get a chance to droon them a'."

"But you might drown yourself too."

Ferryman: "Well I don't care much. My life is miserable."

"What's the matter?"

Ferryman: "Oh don't ask me. You'll begin that everlasting story of the Gospel and resignation—resignation to the will o' Goad."

"You don't like ministers. Did they ever do you any harm?"

Ferryman: "No; I neither like ministers of the Church nor ministers of the State. They work to one another's hands against folk."

"What harm have they done to you?"

Ferryman: "Harm? They've stopped me from getting a drink. They have stopped me from being heed o' my an' hoose, ever since we had a bit row o' a day. They set my wife up against me, and I think they are trying to make a priest o' young Phil. Then that chap, he comes looking round, watching how the balls are rolling. Harm? I can't tell you the tenth part o' the harm they've done me."

My friend began to explain and remonstrate, but he was soon cut short with a threat of violence—a curse that made him shudder and made all remonstrance vain.

But it is not with the father we have now to do but with the son. Phil is a picture. Suppose him standing before you. The bloom of health is on his cheek and the lustre of animal spirits is in his eye. The distended nostrils, the sturdy attitude, the somewhat pot-bellied appearance, giving one the idea that he lived on potatoes, are features that will strike you at once. Then there are his tattered clothes, his unkempt head, his white teeth, his red bare feet and the jagged legs of his trousers reaching a little way below the knee and all this set off with the bounce and the glare of a neglected Irish boy of seven years—not boldness in the sense of impudence, but the brusqueness of a startled hare—suppose, I say, you have such a picture before you, and you have a picture of Phil Martin.

He belongs to the class that supply the criminal population—that herd about the great cities, that vitiate the atmosphere and pollute the very fountains of health. And yet these children are not altogether hopeless. Even in their filthy surroundings where Satan's seat is, we sometimes come upon cases that surprise us—cases showing a strength of innate moral principle which we could not expect. For example, a friend of mine going along Argyle Street some weeks ago was accosted by a clamorous newspaper girl, thus:—

"Glasgow Herald, sir. Glasgow Herald, sir, only a ha'penny, only a ha'penny—"

He took the paper and gave the child a penny, and when he noted her embarrassment in not having the ha'penny to return in change, he said:—

"Oh, never mind. Give me a paper to-morrow instead."

About six weeks after this he happened to be walking along the same street, and, having forgotten all about the occurrence, was surprised to hear one calling out behind him:—

"Here's the Herald, sir."

"What Herald?" He enquired.

"Oh the Herald I was awn (owing) you. I could na see ya next day and I ha been looking for ya ever since."

No wonder my friend was surprised, and that from that day he began to take an interest in this poor child. So I