

CHOICE LITERATURE.

THE LAST O' THE LUSCOMBS.

BY HELEN PEARSON BARNARD.

V.—THE PILGRIM PREACHER.

As yet no one at the almshouse had noticed the absence of Winn. Joe, fearful and conscience-smitten, saw the schooner set sail at last, with the child undiscovered in the hold. He had gone supperless that he might see every figure that crossed her decks.

"I do miss the little chap dreadful bad," said Joe, as he smoked beneath a shady tree. "A month since I wouldn't have believed I'd kidnapped a pauper. But howsomdever I've been drawn into it, 'n' I've got to stan' it, risk or no risk. I meant it fur kindness, but I has my misgivin's. Et it's disklivered I'll be tumbled out o' this birth heels over head, my character spoiled. There's Maggie Hanlan, too, she'd be awful down on me, et she knowed I was playin' a game on our sup."

Joe was silent, but he must have been still thinking of the subject, for he broke out with:

"I wa'n't no 'count when I anchored among the paupers; but I've kerried myself like a parson, 'n' kep' the place straight; they think a sight o' me now, sup. 'n' all the rest the grands. But this 'ere'll be an all-killin' black thing fur me ef it comes to light."

These were not agreeable meditations for the philosophical Joe; he could not regain his usual self-satisfaction, even by frequently remarking, with a wise air, that "they'd find it difficult to get another fellow like me!"

It would indeed have been scarcely possible to "get another fellow like" the shrewd, weather-beaten sailor, whose strangely chosen attire and queer ways made him an odd specimen of manhood. He filled an humble but important place in the almshouse. If anything was wanted about the farm or buildings, Joe was the man to ask. Despite a fondness for "breathin' spells," he accomplished a vast amount of work. He was willing to aid at any hour, his sea-training making him as alert at midnight as noon. His kind heart and willing service made him many friends. He was also a useful link between the inmates and the officials, often giving the former wise counsel, while putting the latter on guard. Joe usually scented the runaway plots that the poor half-witted men or boys were forever concocting. He was sure to appear suddenly among the malcontents with:

"Now look a here! Joe's got sharp ears 'n' he knows what's up. Don't ye try it, boys! Ye can't do better than to stick to the town-farm; mebbe 'tain't ginter, but it's bread 'n' clothes 'n' a roof to shelter ye. Joe's sailed on many seas 'n' been knowin' to many sech plans. They only get them as is in 'em into misery."

Joe now thought of this.

"I'll here I be the wast on 'em all, after preschin' at the paupers! I'd ought ter be chained in the hold! There's the sup. so kind, 'n' the overseer tellin' on me to keep a sharp eye out while the *Water Queen* is in!"

As Joe mused he did not notice the approach of an old man whose silvery beard, staff, and bundle of books were familiar and welcome in many parts of the New England coast—Father Gwynn, the pilgrim preacher. For many years he had travelled on foot, a self-appointed missionary, preaching the Gospel to the poor. What joy his words have given in humble homes, or how often his scanty purse had been emptied for the destitute, no one knew; Father Gwynn had all such things in his own great heart. What little income he had was all spent thus.

So accustomed was he to read faces that he knew something troubled Joe, even before he heard him sigh, and saw him lean his head on his hand.

"Have you trouble, friend?" he asked, in his own quaint, winning way. Every one whom he met was "friend," and it rarely happened that they did not become so after knowing the rare spirit of the evangelist.

Joe instantly pulled off his cap, but with a shaking hand. He felt a secret dread of the stately stranger, whose manner and address inspired him with awe.

"Joe's all right, he allus is, sir, 'n' thank ye kindly," he stammered, adding anxiously, "I hope I haint said nothin'. Cap'n, to make ye think there's summat wrong. I'm a master hand at ponderin' aloud, sir, sometimes it's stones I makes up out o' me own head, sometimes it's them as the papers tell me," indicating their neighbourhood with a backward motion of the thumb, "sometimes it's what I've seed on high seas. I war afore the mast twenty-two years afore I anchored here, sir, 'n' that gives a man a right to dream on."

Joe spun this off in a rapid, honest fashion, but his face wore a ludicrously disturbed look he met the quiet, penetrating gaze of Father Gwynn. He added nervously:

"A person can't never depend on what Joe Luscombe says when he's ponderin', ef they should, he'd get into trouble. Be you a parson, Cap'n?"

"No," replied Father Gwynn, "but I have people to whom I preach."

"So ye ben't a parson, yet ye preach—now that 'ere's quite a conundrum," observed Joe.

"The people call me Father Gwynn," continued the pilgrim, with gentle dignity. "I talk to those who will not go to hear a parson, because they do not care for those things, or are too poor and too far away from churches. God has given me a message to such as these."

Joe's fears were fast giving place to curiosity.

"Wal, I wa'n't!" he said. Then recollecting the grave presence of the preacher he apologized. "That 'ere im't swarn' (ap'n, I guess) that up when I hove in here. I knowed it wouldn't do 'n' me a lookin' arter the paupers. hoo-a-grove with the sup. a all on em;" Joe said this carefully, but with a secret hope of impressing his visitor. Et you know the sup. or any o' the rest o' them grands

you've probably heered 'em tell o' Joe. Mebbe ve never heered sech a name throwed in by way o' talk?"

Father Gwynn did not appear to remember such a circumstance, which brought back Joe's depression.

"I am weary with a long walk," added the good man, "and will sit beside you and rest, if agreeable to you."

"Sartin, sir, sartin. But you'll find me dreadful poor comp'ny. I haint a pious turn—ben knocked about too much, sir, as ye must see, with twenty-two year afore the mast 'n' no bringin' up. I hed a good mother, sir, but I left her, steered my own boat since I war a dozen year. There war a little chap here, as you'd a doated on, sir, 'ud made yer eyes water to hear him speak his little pieces from the Bible, 'n' say his prayers reg'lar as victuals. He got among the paupers by reason o' a stoopid jedge, 'n' he's got so much religion you couldn't get him to cut 'n' run 'bout any poorhouse sign a plastered to him. Whenever I says, 'You'll be nobody 'n' nothin' ef ye stay here,' says he to me, as set us as a man, 'Mister Joe, it wouldn't be right to run away!'"

Joe stopped suddenly. He was on dangerous ground: then he added with fervour: "I declare, I never did see sech a likely chap!"

Father Gwynn, of course, did not imagine that Joe had given the clue to his secret. Perhaps he did not think it possible that such a wonderful child had got among the paupers "by reason o' a stoopid jedge," for he did not pursue the subject, but questioned Joe about himself. There are some people reticent to others, who unburden themselves freely to one like Father Gwynn. The evangelist often had family secrets confided to him. Such confidence was always sacredly kept to himself.

Joe seemed glad to tell his story—it was not often that people troubled themselves to hear it—in his own queer way, to be sure, but Father Gwynn understood him.

Joe was the only son of a wealthy farmer in New Hampshire.

"Our folks wa'n't allus so well off," said he, "time was when if the corn 'n' taters didn't turn out well we was hard up. But the old man said he wa'n't a goin' to allus be waitin' for crops, 'n' worritin' 'bout the weather, 'n' so forth; so he up 'n' turned the old corn-house into a cider mill, 'n' laid in with a city fellow to supply him with genuine cider. Father he got his name up right away. 'No more corn 'n' taters fur me,' he says a pullin' in the money hand over fist."

Joe unconsciously illustrated with his own fists the "pullin' in" process.

"Twan't long afore he 'n' grand'ther set up a brandy stillery."

"Mother she never took to the business," he added, in a meditative way. "Her 'n' father war allus a argufyin' on't! She war allus a askin' father did he think he war a doin' right to make drangards for a livin'; 'n' ruther 'bout puttin' a cup to the lips o' a neighbour, 'n' sech. Father he'd get dreadful riled. Then they'd hev it out 'bout me," continued Joe, taking out his knife, and beginning to whittle. "Mother, she'd say: 'If you don't care for others, think of little Joe. This is a goin' to be the ruin of our boy, I fear.' Says father, 'Don't you fret about Joe; he's doin' fine. Larnin' the business, 'n' he'll be able by 'n'-by to carry it on while the old folks rest!' Many's the time I've heered 'em a jawin'," said Joe, "whilst I lay on a barril suckin' 'n' through a straw."

He was silent a moment, then repeated, with sudden intensity:

"Larnin' the business! Yes little Joe larn't the business fine!"

"That was not a favourable beginning for a boy," observed Father Gwynn.

Joe's broad chest heaved with a big sigh. "I war a little shaver, sir, what wa'n't o' much 'count long's I kept out o' the men's way. Perhaps I wouldn't made much o' a man, any way, but it war that old cider mill what busted Joe Luscomb!"

Father Gwynn did not smile at Joe's queer way of expressing the wreck of his manhood. He was silent, but his deep-set eyes were fixed upon Joe with yearning compassion.

After a moment, Joe resumed his story. He acquired an appetite for drink at an early age. His father at last became alarmed, and joined the mother in pleading with him. He was forbidden to enter the distillery; but little Joe found means to satisfy his appetite, despite both parents.

Finally he left home, decoyed by the stories of an old sailor. The deluded boy expected to return with much glory some day. It was a good way to satisfy his conscience when he had visions of the grief of his loving mother. But the day of triumph had never come. In Joe's story, it was plainly to be seen that as the child had been, so was the man—kept down by appetite. He had never returned to his native place.

"Some chaps as sets out to hunt their forchins has luck, 'n' comes home with flags a flyin'," said Joe, "but I wa'n't that kind, Cap'n. Jest as soon as I hed a chance, scithin' 'ed step in 'twixt me 'n' it, 'n' I'd lose my forchin. I never seed in all my travels a chap what hed sech trials!"

Joe spoke as if he longed for sympathy; poor Joe, whose child-life had been so unfavourable. He added, bitterly:

"I never could get through me what the Lord made Joe Luscomb for!"

As his listener was still silent, Joe added: "Perhaps it gin ye a start, sech des'p'rite talk, but a man like me haint nobody to comfort 'em. I never spoused," said Joe, with a sob like the one that startled Winn in the forecastle of the *Water Queen*, "that I should be brung so low as to go whinin' round a parson, or tell anybody my story. But sence the little fellow left, he as war pious as I spike on, Joe Luscomb's all off his pegs." He said himself at all. He'd sech a patty way o' sayin' as how I was good, 'n' the bes' friend he hed—scithin' like what some men's wives does, 'n' ef 'told 'twer, it makes them try to do better."

"You need not fear to talk freely with me," said Father

Gwynn. "It is a part of my work to comfort and counsel; part of the blessed message He has given me to bear to those I meet. It is little matter, friend, whether you have been successful or not in money affairs; although we are told that 'he who provides not for his own household is worse than an infidel.'"

"But ye see I haint no household, 'n' no wife—long o' roamin' about so!" interposed Joe.

"But you should not have left your mother to watch and wait all these years for tidings from her child," said the good man.

No one could have taken exception to the gently uttered reproof. Joe's face brightened with a shrewd, comical look, as he said:

"That little matter kinder fixed itself up!"

The brig he shipped in had been lost on the return trip, soon after he had been discharged by the captain.

"So the old lady she thinks I'm dead," said the incomprehensible Joe; "she haint worried 'bout me this ten year."

Father Gwynn's benevolent face looked disapproval of this novel way of curing a mother's grief.

Then Joe went on to tell how a good lady had interested herself in him, persuading him, when ill at the hospital, to give up the sea, and obtained for him his present situation. Here, away from his peculiar temptation, he had gained the confidence of all. In this story of his life, Joe unconsciously gave glimpses of a frank, generous disposition. It gleamed through the sad history like the silver lining of a cloud; it appealed to the tenderest sympathies of the great-hearted man who had listened, and encouraged him to talk, that he might know how to help him. Very tenderly did Father Gwynn now speak with him of his wasted years, and the great wrong he had done his mother.

"While you lived she could hope and pray for you; even that comfort you took from her, leaving her almost certain that you died as you had lived!"

There was a long silence afterwards. At last, Joe raised his head, his face strongly marked with suffering, as he said, hoarsely:

"You're right, parson. Joe Luscomb's ben a mistake all through." His pipe dropped as he slowly rose; it was instantly and fiercely ground beneath his heel. "Joe lost his chance years ago, went back on the best o' mothers, 'n' ben livin' a poor, miserable lie. I thought perhaps it 'ud case me to tell ye all, but it don't."

As he was going, a firm but gentle hand detained him.

"Do not leave me thus, friend," said Father Gwynn, the magnetism of his goodness and earnest purpose constraining Joe. "No man ever has lost his chance while he can reason. Listen while I read the message I bear to such mistaken ones as you."

"The message" was in an ancient book, that bore marks of much study. Joe listened, but would talk no more that night. So the wise evangelist did not press the truths upon him, but gave him something to read from his bundle.

"My Master's business is urgent; I must not tarry longer," he said, in his quaint way. There was a rapt expression on his face as he looked across the river, where the sunset clouds were emblems of the glory of Him he served, and he added: "If my Lord will, I shall come again."

So saying, the pilgrim took up his staff and bundle, and journeyed on.

(To be continued.)

"PUT UP FOR REPAIRS."

In these days of artificial living, it is not surprising that there are many devices by which mankind seek to make up for their over-tax, and so have to spend a good portion of their time in seeking restoration. The rights of man, as an animal, are, to a great degree, overlooked. The child has no sooner arrived at an age of possible impression, than it is chirped and chattered at as if the brain were in danger of collapse. It is too often pampered with this or that delicacy before it has arrived at an age for judicious choice. Appetites become trained in the wrong direction. The greed for education leads to a too early tax upon the mental nervous system, until, in the end, in the very eye, there is a languid expression of unrest and exhaustion. How often it is happening that the bloom of youth is lost in childhood, so that, in the place of vigour, there is a wan debility which is worse than the feebleness of age. Many a child who is not very sick must thus be put aside for repair in the very period of life when buoyancy and health are as natural as to the skipping lamb or the blushing rose. How refreshing is it now and then to meet with a perfectly natural family. Father and mother earn their daily food, and know little if any serious departure from health. The children, reared on simple food, relish their home-made bread and their bowl of milk as if, indeed, there was a perfect fitness of things between appetite and aliment. We recently attended the funeral of a man of seventy-seven. For over fifty years he and his sunny wife had never known of sickness. Seven sons and one daughter formed the family group. No death had ever occurred; and, with the youngest over thirty, they all stood around the coffin with the look of perfect health. Free country life and good food and a good home had given them what so many now lack. Alas! how common it has become for men and women to accept a plan which really means that every year the body must be put up for repairs. What is now called summer recreation means, in very many cases, that there is such exhaustion of vital force that the routine of life must be stopped in order to patch up. We have never been willing to accept this as the normal order of a human life. The world has never seen a perfect an instrument as a perfectly natural human being. The forces of nature are so arranged that waste and repair follow each other with a rhythm which renders both alike imperceptible. The food is converted into force, and the toil of the day into the sleep of the night, with such order that the toll is as much a part of the harmony as is the rest. The wonderful capacity of endurance which seems stored up as both a latent and operative power is not more wonderful than the