

Chapter XLVII

In the exhaustless catalogue of Heaven's mercies to mankind, the power we have of finding some germs of comfort in the hardest trials must ever occupy the foremost place; not only because it supports and upholds us when we most require to be sustained, but because in this source of consolation there is something, we have reason to believe, of the divine spirit; something of that goodness which detects amidst our own evil doings, a redeeming quality; something which, even in our fallen nature, we possess in common with the angels; which had its being in the old time when they trod the earth, and lingers on it yet, in pity.

How often, on their journey, did the widow remember with a grateful heart, that out of his deprivation Barnaby's cheerfulness and affection sprung! How often did she call to mind that but for that, he might have been sullen, morose, unkind, far removed from her - vicious, perhaps, and cruel! How often had she cause for comfort, in his strength, and hope, and in his simple nature! Those feeble powers of mind which rendered him so soon forgetful of the past, save in brief gleams and flashes, - even they were a comfort now. The world to him was full of happiness; in every tree, and plant, and flower, in every bird, and beast, and tiny insect whom a breath of summer wind laid low upon the ground, he had delight. His delight was hers; and where many a wise son would have made her sorrowful, this poor light-hearted idiot filled her breast with thankfulness and love.

Their stock of money was low, but from the hoard she had told into the blind man's hand, the widow had withheld one guinea. This, with the few pence she possessed besides, was to two persons of their frugal habits, a goodly sum in bank. Moreover they had Grip in company; and when they must otherwise have changed the guinea, it was but to make him exhibit outside an alehouse door, or in a village street, or in the grounds or gardens of a mansion of the better sort, and scores who would have given nothing in charity, were ready to bargain for more amusement from the talking bird.

One day - for they moved slowly, and although they had many rides in carts and waggons, were on the road a week - Barnaby, with Grip upon his shoulder and his mother following, begged permission at a trim lodge to go up to the great house, at the other end of the avenue, and show his raven. The man within was inclined to give them admittance, and was indeed about to do so, when a stout gentleman with a long whip in his hand, and a flushed face which seemed to indicate that he had had his morning's draught, rode up to the gate, and called in a loud voice and with more oaths than the occasion seemed to warrant to have it opened directly.

'Who hast thou got here?' said the gentleman angrily, as the man threw the gate wide open, and pulled off his hat, 'who are these? Eh? art a beggar, woman?'

The widow answered with a curtsy, that they were poor travellers.

'Vagrants,' said the gentleman, 'vagrants and vagabonds. Thee wish to be made acquainted with the cage, dost thee - the cage, the stocks, and the whipping-post? Where dost come from?'

She told him in a timid manner, - for he was very loud, hoarse, and red-faced, - and besought him not to be angry, for they meant no harm, and would go upon their way that moment.

'Don't be too sure of that,' replied the gentleman, 'we don't allow vagrants to roam about this place. I know what thou want'st - -stray linen drying on hedges, and stray poultry, eh? What hast got in that basket, lazy hound?'

'Grip, Grip, Grip - Grip the clever, Grip the wicked, Grip the knowing - Grip, Grip, Grip,' cried the raven, whom Barnaby had shut up on the approach of this stern personage. 'I'm a devil I'm a devil I'm a devil, Never say die Hurrah Bow wow wow, Polly put the kettle on we'll all have tea.'

'Take the vermin out, scoundrel,' said the gentleman, 'and let me see him.'

Barnaby, thus condescendingly addressed, produced his bird, but not without much fear and trembling, and set him down upon the ground; which he had no sooner done than Grip drew fifty corks at least, and then began to dance; at the same time eyeing the gentleman with surprising insolence of manner, and screwing his head so much on one side that he appeared desirous of screwing it off upon the spot.

The cork-drawing seemed to make a greater impression on the gentleman's mind, than the raven's power of speech, and was indeed particularly adapted to his habits and capacity. He desired to have that done again, but despite his being very peremptory, and notwithstanding that Barnaby coaxed to the utmost, Grip turned a deaf ear to the request, and preserved a dead silence.

'Bring him along,' said the gentleman, pointing to the house. But Grip, who had watched the action, anticipated his master, by hopping on before them; - constantly flapping his wings, and screaming 'cook!' meanwhile, as a hint perhaps that there was company coming, and a small collation would be acceptable.

Barnaby and his mother walked on, on either side of the gentleman on horseback, who surveyed each of them from time to time in a proud and coarse manner, and occasionally thundered out some question, the tone of which alarmed Barnaby so much that he could find no answer, and, as a matter of course, could make him no reply. On one of these occasions, when the gentleman appeared disposed to exercise his horsewhip, the widow ventured to inform him in a low voice and with tears in her eyes, that her son was of weak mind.

'An idiot, eh?' said the gentleman, looking at Barnaby as he spoke. 'And how long hast thou been an idiot?'

'She knows,' was Barnaby's timid answer, pointing to his mother - 'I - always, I believe.'

'From his birth,' said the widow.

'I don't believe it,' cried the gentleman, 'not a bit of it. It's an excuse not to work. There's nothing like flogging to cure that disorder. I'd make a difference in him in ten minutes, I'll be bound.'

'Heaven has made none in more than twice ten years, sir,' said the widow mildly.

'Then why don't you shut him up? we pay enough for county institutions, damn 'em. But thou'd rather drag him about to excite charity - of course. Ay, I know thee.'

Now, this gentleman had various endearing appellations among his intimate friends. By some he was called 'a country gentleman of the true school,' by some 'a fine old country gentleman,' by some 'a sporting gentleman,' by some 'a thorough-bred Englishman,' by some 'a genuine John Bull;' but they all agreed in one respect, and that was, that it was a pity there were not more like him, and that because there were not, the country was going to rack and ruin every day. He was in the commission of the peace, and could write his name almost legibly; but his greatest qualifications were, that he was more severe with poachers, was a better shot, a harder rider, had better horses, kept better dogs, could eat more solid food, drink more strong wine, go to bed every night more drunk and get up every morning more sober, than any man in the county. In knowledge of horseflesh he was almost equal to a farrier, in stable learning he surpassed his own head groom, and in gluttony not a pig on his estate was a match for him. He had no seat in Parliament himself, but he was extremely patriotic, and usually drove his voters up to the poll with his own hands. He was warmly attached to church and state, and never appointed to the living in his gift any but a three-bottle man and a first-rate fox-hunter. He mistrusted the honesty of all poor people who could read and

write, and had a secret jealousy of his own wife (a young lady whom he had married for what his friends called 'the good old English reason,' that her father's property adjoined his own) for possessing those accomplishments in a greater degree than himself. In short, Barnaby being an idiot, and Grip a creature of mere brute instinct, it would be very hard to say what this gentleman was.

He rode up to the door of a handsome house approached by a great flight of steps, where a man was waiting to take his horse, and led the way into a large hall, which, spacious as it was, was tainted with the fumes of last night's stale debauch. Greatcoats, riding-whips, bridles, top-boots, spurs, and such gear, were strewn about on all sides, and formed, with some huge stags' antlers, and a few portraits of dogs and horses, its principal embellishments.

Throwing himself into a great chair (in which, by the bye, he often snored away the night, when he had been, according to his admirers, a finer country gentleman than usual) he bade the man to tell his mistress to come down: and presently there appeared, a little flurried, as it seemed, by the unwonted summons, a lady much younger than himself, who had the appearance of being in delicate health, and not too happy.

'Here! Thou'st no delight in following the hounds as an Englishwoman should have,' said the gentleman. 'See to this here. That'll please thee perhaps.'

The lady smiled, sat down at a little distance from him, and glanced at Barnaby with a look of pity.

'He's an idiot, the woman says,' observed the gentleman, shaking his head; 'I don't believe it.'

'Are you his mother?' asked the lady.

She answered yes.

'What's the use of asking HER?' said the gentleman, thrusting his hands into his breeches pockets. 'She'll tell thee so, of course. Most likely he's hired, at so much a day. There. Get on. Make him do something.'

Grip having by this time recovered his urbanity, condescended, at Barnaby's solicitation, to repeat his various phrases of speech, and to go through the whole of his performances with the utmost success. The corks, and the never say die, afforded the gentleman so much delight that he demanded the repetition of this part of the entertainment, until Grip got into his basket, and positively refused to

say another word, good or bad. The lady too, was much amused with him; and the closing point of his obstinacy so delighted her husband that he burst into a roar of laughter, and demanded his price.

Barnaby looked as though he didn't understand his meaning. Probably he did not.

'His price,' said the gentleman, rattling the money in his pockets, 'what dost want for him? How much?'

'He's not to be sold,' replied Barnaby, shutting up the basket in a great hurry, and throwing the strap over his shoulder. 'Mother, come away.'

'Thou seest how much of an idiot he is, book-learner,' said the gentleman, looking scornfully at his wife. 'He can make a bargain. What dost want for him, old woman?'

'He is my son's constant companion,' said the widow. 'He is not to be sold, sir, indeed.'

'Not to be sold!' cried the gentleman, growing ten times redder, hoarser, and louder than before. 'Not to be sold!'

'Indeed no,' she answered. 'We have never thought of parting with him, sir, I do assure you.'

He was evidently about to make a very passionate retort, when a few murmured words from his wife happening to catch his ear, he turned sharply round, and said, 'Eh? What?'

'We can hardly expect them to sell the bird, against their own desire,' she faltered. 'If they prefer to keep him - '

'Prefer to keep him!' he echoed. 'These people, who go tramping about the country a-pilfering and vagabondising on all hands, prefer to keep a bird, when a landed proprietor and a justice asks his price! That old woman's been to school. I know she has. Don't tell me no,' he roared to the widow, 'I say, yes.'

Barnaby's mother pleaded guilty to the accusation, and hoped there was no harm in it.

'No harm!' said the gentleman. 'No. No harm. No harm, ye old rebel, not a bit of harm. If my clerk was here, I'd set ye in the stocks, I would, or lay ye in jail for prowling up and down, on the look-out for petty larcenies, ye limb of a gipsy. Here, Simon, put these pilferers out, shove 'em into the road, out with 'em! Ye don't want to sell the

bird, ye that come here to beg, don't ye? If they an't out in double-quick, set the dogs upon 'em!

They waited for no further dismissal, but fled precipitately, leaving the gentleman to storm away by himself (for the poor lady had already retreated), and making a great many vain attempts to silence Grip, who, excited by the noise, drew corks enough for a city feast as they hurried down the avenue, and appeared to congratulate himself beyond measure on having been the cause of the disturbance. When they had nearly reached the lodge, another servant, emerging from the shrubbery, feigned to be very active in ordering them off, but this man put a crown into the widow's hand, and whispering that his lady sent it, thrust them gently from the gate.

This incident only suggested to the widow's mind, when they halted at an alehouse some miles further on, and heard the justice's character as given by his friends, that perhaps something more than capacity of stomach and tastes for the kennel and the stable, were required to form either a perfect country gentleman, a thoroughbred Englishman, or a genuine John Bull; and that possibly the terms were sometimes misappropriated, not to say disgraced. She little thought then, that a circumstance so slight would ever influence their future fortunes; but time and experience enlightened her in this respect.

'Mother,' said Barnaby, as they were sitting next day in a waggon which was to take them within ten miles of the capital, 'we're going to London first, you said. Shall we see that blind man there?'

She was about to answer 'Heaven forbid!' but checked herself, and told him No, she thought not; why did he ask?

'He's a wise man,' said Barnaby, with a thoughtful countenance. 'I wish that we may meet with him again. What was it that he said of crowds? That gold was to be found where people crowded, and not among the trees and in such quiet places? He spoke as if he loved it; London is a crowded place; I think we shall meet him there.'

'But why do you desire to see him, love?' she asked.

'Because,' said Barnaby, looking wistfully at her, 'he talked to me about gold, which is a rare thing, and say what you will, a thing you would like to have, I know. And because he came and went away so strangely - just as white-headed old men come sometimes to my bed's foot in the night, and say what I can't remember when the bright day returns. He told me he'd come back. I wonder why he broke his word!'

'But you never thought of being rich or gay, before, dear Barnaby. You have always been contented.'

He laughed and bade her say that again, then cried, 'Ay ay - oh yes,' and laughed once more. Then something passed that caught his fancy, and the topic wandered from his mind, and was succeeded by another just as fleeting.

But it was plain from what he had said, and from his returning to the point more than once that day, and on the next, that the blind man's visit, and indeed his words, had taken strong possession of his mind. Whether the idea of wealth had occurred to him for the first time on looking at the golden clouds that evening - and images were often presented to his thoughts by outward objects quite as remote and distant; or whether their poor and humble way of life had suggested it, by contrast, long ago; or whether the accident (as he would deem it) of the blind man's pursuing the current of his own remarks, had done so at the moment; or he had been impressed by the mere circumstance of the man being blind, and, therefore, unlike any one with whom he had talked before; it was impossible to tell. She tried every means to discover, but in vain; and the probability is that Barnaby himself was equally in the dark.

It filled her with uneasiness to find him harping on this string, but all that she could do, was to lead him quickly to some other subject, and to dismiss it from his brain. To caution him against their visitor, to show any fear or suspicion in reference to him, would only be, she feared, to increase that interest with which Barnaby regarded him, and to strengthen his desire to meet him once again. She hoped, by plunging into the crowd, to rid herself of her terrible pursuer, and then, by journeying to a distance and observing increased caution, if that were possible, to live again unknown, in secrecy and peace.

They reached, in course of time, their halting-place within ten miles of London, and lay there for the night, after bargaining to be carried on for a trifle next day, in a light van which was returning empty, and was to start at five o'clock in the morning. The driver was punctual, the road good - save for the dust, the weather being very hot and dry - and at seven in the forenoon of Friday the second of June, one thousand seven hundred and eighty, they alighted at the foot of Westminster Bridge, bade their conductor farewell, and stood alone, together, on the scorching pavement. For the freshness which night sheds upon such busy thoroughfares had already departed, and the sun was shining with uncommon lustre.