

CHAPTER XXIII - "Cannybles"

The night school gained ground steadily. The number of scholars was constantly on the increase, so much so, indeed, that Grace had his hands inconveniently full.

"They have dull natures, these people," said the Reverend Harold; "and in the rare cases where they are not dull, they are stubborn. Absolutely, I find it quite trying to face them at times, and it is not my fortune to find it difficult to reach people, as a rule. They seem to have made up their minds beforehand to resent what I am going to say. It is most unpleasant. Grace has been working among them so long that, I suppose, they are used to his methods; he has learned to place himself on a level with them, so to speak. I notice they listen to, and seem to understand him. The fact is, I have an idea that that sort of thing is Grace's forte. He is not a brilliant fellow, and will never make any particular mark, but he has an odd perseverance which carries him along with a certain class. Riggan suits him, I think. He has dropped into the right groove."

Jud Bates and "th' best tARRIER i' Riggan" were among the most faithful attendants. The lad's fancy for Anice had extended to Grace. Grace's friendly toleration of Nib had done much for him. Nib always appeared with his master, and his manner was as composed and decorous as if rats were subjects foreign to his meditations. His part it was to lie at Jud's feet, his nose between his paws, his eyes twinkling sagaciously

behind his shaggy eyebrows, while occasionally, as a token of approval, he wagged his tail. Once or twice, during a fitful slumber, he had been known to give vent to his feelings in a sharp bark, but he never failed to awaken immediately, with every appearance of the deepest abasement and confusion at the unconscious transgression.

During a visit to the Rectory one day, Jud's eyes fell upon a book which lay on Anice's table. It was full of pictures--illustrations depicting the adventures and vicissitudes of a fortunate unfortunate, whose desert island has been the paradise of thousands; whose goat-skin habiliments have been more worthy of envy than kingly purple; whose hairy cap has been more significant of monarchy than any crown. For the man who wore these savage garments has reigned supreme in realms of romance, known only in their first beauty to boyhood's ecstatic belief.

Jud put out his hand, and drawing the gold and crimson snare toward him, opened it. When Anice came into the room she found him poring over it. His ragged cap lay with Nib, at his feet, his face was in a glow, his hair was pushed straight up on his head, both elbows were resting on the table. He was spelling his way laboriously, but excitedly, through the story of the foot-print on the sand. Anice waited a moment, and then spoke:

"Jud," she said, "when you can read I will give you 'Robinson Crusoe.'"

In less than six months she was called upon to redeem her promise.

This occurred a few weeks after Craddock had been established at the lodge at the Haviland gates. The day Anice gave Jud his well-earned reward, she had a package to send to Mrs. Craddock, and when the boy came for the book, she employed him as a messenger to the park.

"If you will take these things to Mrs. Craddock, Jud, I shall be much obliged," she said; "and please tell her that I will drive out to see her to-morrow."

Jud accepted the mission readily. With Nib at his heels and "Robinson Crusoe" under his arm, three miles were a trivial matter. He trudged off, whistling with keen delight. As he went along he could fortify himself with an occasional glance at the hero and his man Friday. What would he not have sacrificed at the prospect of being cast with Nib upon a desert island?

"Owd Sammy" sat near the chimney-corner smoking his pipe, and making severe mental comments upon the conduct of Parliament, then in session, of whose erratic proceedings he was reading an account in a small but highly seasoned newspaper. Sammy shook his head ominously over the peppery reports, but feeling it as well to reserve his opinions for a select audience at The Crown, allowed Mrs. Craddock to perform her household tasks unmolested.

Hearing Jud at the door, he turned his head.

"It's yo', is it?" he said. "Tha con coom in. What's browten?"

"Summat fur th' missis fro' th' Rectory," Jud answered, producing his parcel; "Miss Anice sent me wi' it."

"Tak' it to th' owd lass, then," said Sammy. "Tak' it to her. Tha'lt find her in th' back kitchen."

Having done as he was bidden, Jud came back again to the front room. Mrs. Craddock had hospitably provided him with a huge sandwich of bread and cheese, and Nib followed him with expectant eyes.

"Sit thee down, lad," said Sammy, condescendingly. "Sit thee down, tha'st gotten a walk both afore and behind thee. What book 'st gotten under thy arm?"

Jud regarded the volume with evident pride and exultation.

"It's Robyson Crusoe, that theer is," he answered.

Sammy shook his head dubiously.

"Dunnot know as I ivver heerd on him. He's noan scripter, is he?"

"No," said Jud, repelling the insinuation stoutly; "he is na."

"Hond him over, an' let's ha' a look at him."

Jud advanced.

"Theer's picters in it," he commented eagerly. "Theer's one at th' front. That theer un," pointing to the frontispiece, "that theer's him."

Sammy gave it a sharp glance, then another, and then held the book at arm's length, regarding Robinson's goat-skin habiliments over the rims of his spectacles.

"Well, I'm dom'd," he exclaimed. "I'm dom'd, if I would na loike to see that chap i' Riggan! What's th' felly gotten on?"

"He's dressed i' goat-skins. He wur cast upon a desert island, an' had na owt else to wear."

"I thowt he must ha' been reduced i' circumstances, or he'd niver ha' turnt out i' that rig less he thowt more o' comfort than appearances. What wur he doin' a-casting hissen on a desert island? Wur he reet i' th' upper story?"

"He wur shipwrecked," triumphantly. "Th' sea drifted him to th' shore, an' he built hissen a hut, an' gettin' goats an' birds, an'--an' aw sorts--an'--it's the graideliest book tha ivver seed. Miss Anice gave it

me."

"Has she read it herself?"

"Aye, it wur her as tellt me most on it."

Sammy turned the volume over, and looked at the back of it, at the edges of the leaves, at the gilt-lettered title.

"I would na be surprised," he observed with oracular amiability. "I would na be surprised--if that's th' case--as their's summat in it."

"That as I've tow'd thee is nowt to th' rest on it," answered Jud in enthusiasm. "Their's a mon ca'd Friday, an' a lot o' fellys as eats each other--cannybles they ca' 'em----"

"Look tha here," interposed Craddock, his curiosity and interest getting the better of him. "Sit thee down and read a bit. That's something as I niver heard on--cannybles an' th' loike. Pick thee th' place, an' let's hear summat about th' cannybles if tha has na th' toime to do no more."

Jud needed no second invitation. Sharing the general opinion that "Owd Sammy" was a man of mark, he could not help feeling that Crusoe was complimented by his attention. He picked out his place, as his hearer had advised him, and plunged into the details of the cannibal feast with pride and determination. Though his elocution may have been of a style

peculiar to beginners and his pronunciation occasionally startling in its originality, still Sammy gathered the gist of the story. He puffed at his pipe so furiously that the foreign gentleman's turbaned head was emptied with amazing rapidity, and it was necessary to refill it two or three times; he rubbed his corduroy knees with both hands, occasionally he slapped one of them in the intensity of his interest, and when Jud stopped he could only express himself in his usual emphatic formula--

"Well, I am dom'd. An' tha says, as th' chap's name wur Robyson?"

"Aye, Robyson Crusoe."

"Well, I mun say, as I'd ha' loike to ha' knowed him. I did know a mon by th' name o' Robyson onct, but it could na ha' been him, fur he wur na mich o' a chap. If he'd a bin cast o' a desert island, he would na had th' gumption to do aw that theer--Jem Robyson could na. It could na ha' been him--an' besides, he could na ha' writ it out, as that theer felly's done."

There was a pause, in which Craddock held his pipe in his hand reflectively--shaking his head once more.

"Cannybles an' th' loike too," he said. "Theer's a soight o' things as a mon does na hear on. Why, I nivver heard o' cannybles mysen, an' I am na considert ignorant by th' most o' foak." Then, as Jud rose to go, "Art tha fur goin'?" he asked. "Weil, I mun say as I'd loike to hear

summat more about Robyson; but, if tha mun go, tha mun, I suppose. Sithee here, could tha coom again an' bring him wi' thee?"

"I mowt; I dunna moind the walk."

"Then thee do it," getting up to accompany him to the gates. "An' I'll gi'e thee a copper now an' then to pay thee. Theer's summat i' a book o' that soart. Coom thee again as soon as tha con, an' we'll go on wi' the cannybles."

"What's th' lad been readin' to thee, Sammy?" asked Mrs. Craddock entering the room, after Jud had taken his departure.

"A bit o' litterytoor. I dunnot know as tha'd know what th' book wur, if I tow'd thee. Tha niver wur mich o' a hand at litterytoor. He wur readin' Robyson Crusoe."

"Not a tract, sure-ly?"

"Nay, that it wur na! It wur th' dairy o' a mon who wur cast upo' a desert island 'i th' midst o' cannybles."

"The dairy?"

"Nay, lass, nay," testily, "not i' th' sense yo' mean. Th' dairy wur o' th' litterairy soart. He wur a litterairy mon."

"Cannybles an' th' loike," Sammy said to him-self several times during the evening. "Cannybles an' th' loike. Theer's a power o' things i' th' universe."

He took his pipe after supper and went out for a stroll. Mental activity made him restless. The night was a bright one. A yellow harvest moon was rising slowly above the tree-tops, and casting a mellow light upon the road stretching out before him. He passed through the gates and down the road at a leisurely pace, and had walked a hundred yards or so, when he caught sight of two figures approaching him--a girl and a man, so absorbed that they evidently had not noticed him. The girl was of light and youthful figure, and the little old red shawl she wore over her head was pushed aside, and showed curly hair lying upon her brow. It was plain that she was uneasy or frightened, for, as soon as she was near enough, her voice reached him in a tone of frightened protest.

"Oh, dunnot!" she was saying, "I conna bear it I dunnot want to hear yo', an'--an' I will na. Yo' moight ha' let me be. I dunnot believe yo'. Let me go whoam. I'll nivver coom again," and then she broke out crying.

Craddock looked after them as they passed from sight.

"Theer's trouble there," he said, eagerly. "A working lass, an' a mon i' gentlemen's cloas. Dom sich loike chaps, say I. What would they think if workin' men ud coom meddlin' wi' theer lasses? I wish I'd had more toime

to see th' wench's face."