

Literature, &c.

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PETER BENSON, THE MISER.

A TALE.

PETER BENSON was the son of a miser who died in the possession of immense wealth, amassed by a life of toil and privation. His son was endowed by nature with great energies and a firmness of purpose, which showed itself while yet a child; for he became the terror of his playmates, and the tyrant of all about him. His education was neglected for his father would have shuddered to spend money on it. His example pointed out to his son, that to get riches was the sole aim of life; his precept was, to guard them at the risk of all but life; and to habituate his heir early to follow his example, he forced him to earn even the pittance of his pocket money. Peter was an apt scholar; at an early age he had actually put his savings out to interest; and his father was so delighted at this trait that he doubled the amount to confirm him in the habit. That same night the miser died! Was it this solitary instance of liberality that did violence to his nature, and destroyed him?

During a severe illness, some years before, old Benson had been advised to make his will; and he had even consented to send for a lawyer, who, having gone through the usual preamble, waited for the client's instructions; but, after a long pause, ventured to ask the sick man to whom he wished to bequeath his property. The sufferer started up wildly in his bed, exclaiming,

'Wish to bequeath?—I wish to bequeath my property?—never man, never! What! give my life's blood, my soul's recompense!—and,' added he (as if struck by the danger of having admitted to a stranger his possession of wealth)—'what have I, a hard working man, to bequeath!'

And so he died without a will, and Peter Benson found himself heir; and as he thought, without any one to interfere with his administration of this wealth. But he was one morning surprised by the receipt of a letter from his mother, whom he had been led to suppose died during his infancy, and of whom his father had never made mention. Interest being the reigning principle of this youth's heart, it was upon this that he reflected ere he allowed himself to grieve or rejoice at this unexpected news. His mother's existence might be of incalculable value to him; for, as a minor he could not take out letters of administration, and he dreaded having a guardian appointed by the law. His mother's being alive, he understood, might render such a step unnecessary. But then, it was said, she would have a right to a share in his property. Of this fact, he hoped to keep her ignorant, but as he could not deceive her as to the amount of wealth, would she not expect to be indulged in an expenditure suitable to it? And he groaned as he thought how this would diminish the profits of the concern. His father had vegetated (and even that sparingly); he had never dared to live.

Peter was puzzled how he should reply to his mother's letter without committing himself or his property. At length he thought it would be best to go to her; if she came to town, he might be expected to fetch her—so the expense must be incurred and by getting it over at once, he would be able to judge better of her disposition, and capabilities to render her an eligible guardian as far as the name went, to his interests during his minority—the real control of them he intended should remain in his own hands—and he felt the coach fare to be an excusable expense, as he reflected on the advantages to which his journey might lead. His mother was a poor sickly looking woman, whose spirit had been so crushed by oppression and tyranny that she hardly dare speak to her own child. His personal resemblance to his father made her tremble; and it was not long before she perceived the resemblance was not merely personal. He uttered no grief for the new found parent,—money, gain, saving, were all he could talk upon,—and when, on bidding her good night he said,—

'Mother, I shall never die happy unless I become twice as rich as my father,' she felt that the life of toil and mortification she had endured with the father was about to recommence under the yoke of her offspring; and for six years meekly bore with all the privations her child's parsimony forced on her. During these years he had never once offered his mother a pleasure, as in e-

ment, or a single comfort, that could have drawn a guinea from his purse. His main study was on how little could she manage to keep a home for him; and when, on attaining twenty one, he took the concern nominally (as it had all along been virtually) into his own hands, she hazarded a request to retire into the country to end her days in quiet, free from the feverish excitement of trade; he remarked,—

'As you please, mother; only I cannot allow you as much as my father did. I mean to increase my business, and every farthing will be wanted: besides you had money by you when my father died, and therefore must have been able to save out of the provision he made.'

The poor mother submitted in silence; he had long known that policy and interest had alone kept her son on terms with her and now her allowance curtailed to the very lowest pittance, he permitted her to depart, and from that hour her quarterly payments were, for many years, the only evidence of her son's existence, while he was straining every nerve to realize and amass riches—to spend them, to give them, to circulate them would have been agony.

He thought of marrying, but then his choice must be dictated by the same unvarying rule—his interest. A gentleman, with whom he had formed extensive relations, invited him to his country house. He had one daughter and only child, and Peter Benson became enamoured with not her beauty, nor her sweet and gentle manners—but her expectations. He made proposals to the father who could not but view with pleasure such a prospect for his child. Peter Benson the young millionaire, whose word could make or mar thousands whose existence depended on his nod for employ,—this colossus of wealth a suitor to his child—it was a match very far beyond his hopes; and the worthy merchant's sight became dazzled and blinded to the real character of the man who sought his gentle Marian; and she timed and submissive, yielded to her father's wishes, and gave her consent to wed Peter Benson.

Every day after this engagement was formed inflicted some new trial on the miser's sole feeling. Marian had in the village a school supported entirely at her expense. 'What worthless expenditure!' thought he; 'but it will cease—in London we shall have no village schools to think of.' As they walked through the village, he listened with terror to the grateful thanks of many of the poorer classes, for money and clothing, bestowed by the gentle being whose arm rested on his. Poverty he knew was not confined to the country, and the continuance of such folly was not to be thought of. Had he spent his best years in incessant toil, in restless drudgery, to get riches to give them away?—the thought was horror; and he actually looked at this innocent girl as though she had already been drawing his treasure from his sacred hold.

He had passed a restless night, half spent in repenting of the bold measure which had placed him in perilous position, when, on entering the breakfast room he found Marian busily perusing a letter with several enclosures. She looked up, and smiling her welcome, said, 'I have been waiting for you, Mr. Benson to assist my judgement as to the best and most effective manner of relieving a poor family, whose distress is really heart rending. My father's and my own donation of £5 each may be of momentary use; and,' added she, 'I have ventured to mark a similar sum against your name: but this is not all.'—'Not all?' gasped Peter. 'No, said she, (too engrossed by her own benevolent thoughts to remark his manner); 'it is but a small part of what I should wish to do. We must find employment for the boys, who are old enough to exert themselves for the benefit of the others. Will you undertake this part of the business, Mr. Benson? you must have many facilities for obtaining situations for the poor and destitute.' None I assure you, Marian; situations now-a-days are worth what they will fetch. No one gives them away—that is, no one who is not a fool or a rogue to himself; besides, I make it a rule never to pay attention to begging letters; and I have at last found the value of my resolution not to open any—for now I am never pestered with them. Allow me to settle this matter with you. He took the papers from her and placed them in a blank cover, and on the bell being answered, desired that that letter might be given to the person waiting.'

'And now, Marian,' said he, 'permit me to request that on all future occasions you will meet such applications in a similar manner.' Marian remained

silent. She was too hurt and astonished to trust herself to speak: and fearing he had offended her, (the vision of her £50,000 stood before him,) he endeavored to make some excuse by saying all who listen to such idle stories are sure to be deceived. 'For my part, I could not bear the feeling of being made a dupe—as the vulgar call it, being out witted.' But surely,' interrupted Marrian, 'because there may be some imposture in the world, we are not to set all down as rogues: and if you return every appeal made to your charity, without examining into it, how often may you not have sent away some deserving object, who, had you known the truth, you would have been delighted to befriend! Delighted to befriend! Peter Benson delight in befriending the poor and needy! little did Marian know the pang, the convulsive shiver, occasioned by the mere supposition of such weakness. The arrival of visitors put an end to the discussion: but the thoughts of both parties dwelt on this scene. She was sorry her father had not been present,—he, who never turned from the poor till he had ascertained whether their poverty arose from guilt or misfortune—he who had taught her that it would be far more conducive to her own peace of mind to relieve two who might not be deserving, than to send one innocent victim away, perhaps to perish for want of that aid she could afford to give. Her father had told her to search out the truth as well as circumstances might permit, but never to suspect (without examination) guilt where virtue seemed possible. Habitually she was charitable in mind, and liberal in her bounty towards others: and her father's advice only made by a wiser dispenser of the gifts placed in her power without checking the rich stream from whence they flowed.

On leaving the breakfast table the following morning, Marian was desired by her father to come to his study in half an hour. There was an unusual air of anxiety in his manner when he made this request; and Marian feared it might be to make some arrangement respecting the time of her marriage, and consequent separation from him. Lately she could not think of the former event without dread; and the alternative had become proportionably fearful to her imagination.

When she entered the study, her father took her by the hand, and placing her on the sofa by him, said, 'My dear Marian, I have never found you wanting in candor; tell me in one word what caused you to send back the letter we had been perusing together without even a word of kindness to the poor afflicted people we had (as I thought) decided on relieving?'

Marian burst into tears, saying, 'Oh, papa, do not look so sternly at me; it was Mr Benson, who insisted on its being returned: indeed, it was he who directed and gave it back.'

'Bless you, my child! I thought it never could be your act. Your poor old father knew you better; and so I told your amiable young curate, who came to me this morning quite broken hearted about it. Indeed, I never saw any one more deeply pained than Mr Villiers appeared to be at this occurrence.'

Marian's face was suffused with crimson as she inquired how Mr Villiers became acquainted with it.

'He told me,' replied her father, 'that the poor widow (who, it appears was herself the bearer of the packet,) called on him,—and on his proposing to give her a letter to me, she related the heartless rebuff she had just met with.'

'Dear papa, do not deceive Mr Villiers (and she blushed yet more deeply,) it would distress me that he should think it my act.'

'He does not, my child! he did you the justice to believe you must have been dictated to by another,—but it is of this other we must now speak. Deal with me frankly, Marian after which has passed, what are your feelings towards Mr Benson?'

Thus called upon, Marian acknowledged that her acceptance of him had been in obedience to what she supposed her father's positive wish,—but that nothing in his character since their engagement had made any favourable impression on her,—she had sometimes perceived it to be selfish,—and this last act, with his reasoning upon it (which she now repeated,) appeared to stamp him as so thoroughly heartless, that she could not now think of their union but with horror.

'Nor shall you think any longer; this very day he shall receive his dismissal. The man who could thus act, and thus argue, never could deserve you,' and tenderly embracing her, the

fond father continued, 'who ever will deserve you, Marian!'

In time to hear the close of this inquired, Mr Villiers entered the study,—and had either father or daughter looked at him, they would have seen one whose dearest hopes had been fixed on being at some future day considered so, and whose altered looks and suppressed sighs showed how these hopes had been blighted by hearing of her engagement to another.

Peter Benson's rage at the receipt of a letter, which plainly gave him to understand his harshness of his opinion and want of liberality had caused his affianced bride to reject him, was unbounded,—nor was his disappointment lessened by hearing, within a few weeks, that she had been unexpectedly left a legacy to a large amount and had thus become one of the richest heiresses of the day. He had hardly recovered from this shock, when news was brought him of a severe conflagration which had destroyed his extensive warehouses in London. No one doubted that a man of his caution would be amply insured: they were not aware of the extent of his parsimony. Though frequently prompted to take this precaution, he could not persuade himself to pay money for that which by possibility might never make him any return.

Loss after loss closely followed on each other: and in every instance this hardhearted unsympathising man could trace their origin to some act of brutality, or some niggardly conduct of his own. His health became impaired; and he was nearly driven mad by the clerks in the counting house sending for a doctor, whom he refused to pay. He became unequal to the daily call of business; and having always been the active superintendent of his own concerns, things became worse and worse,—all his underlings hated him, and were but too prompt to take advantage of his imbecile state. The nervous fear that he was robbed, aggravated the disease under which he laboured,—and he was hardly to be recognised when he set out, for the second time, in search of his mother. His appeal could not be rejected by that mother's heart. His obdurate nature, his uncharitable mind, were known to her,—but he was her son, and she allowed him to share the scanty pittance he had, in the pride of wealth and power, almost grudged her.

The village doctor advised a warm climate,—and by the sale of her furniture and other effects, his mother procured the means and accompanied him abroad. Every day increased his fretful, discontented temper—every day, too, his bodily weakness augmented; and ere they had been a month at Nice, where suffering had obliged them to halt, it was evident his end was fast approaching, and his mother became anxious that he should see a clergyman, who might, even at that late hour, bring his mind to reflect on those truths of which he never would permit her to speak.

Full of this thought, she one evening stole from his sick couch to make inquiries about the resident minister,—but had the disappointment to find he was absent from Nice. Worn out with the fatigue she had undergone, both of body and mind, she was retracing her feeble steps, but tears flowing fast as she reflected how terrible would be her son's last moments, deprived of the only hope she had dared to look for to render them peaceful by prayer and repentance, when she found herself accosted by an Englishman, who had observed her dejected appearance, asked if he could be of any service in her distress. On hearing her errand and its disappointment, Villiers (for it was he, who was travelling with his bride, his long loved Marian, and her father) told her he was a Protestant clergyman and would accompany her home. Arrived at the sick man's chamber, he gently approached the bed with an expression of sympathy and pity. He did not recognize the emaciated dying form before him as the man he had once slightly known and whose character he had cordially despised, but Benson's memory was rendered faithful by hatred and fancied wrong, and starting up in bed with the sudden strength of frenzy, he exclaimed, with a dreadful oath, 'Out of my sight thou sycophant! was it not enough to rob me of the girl's money, but you come here to gloat your eyes on my wretchedness, and watch my dying moments?'

'Poor soul, how he raves!' said the terrified mother.

'Raves!' cried the dying man, as he shook his fist with convulsive energy: do you think I know him not? I tell you, mother, it is Villiers—it is the fiend who has crossed my path to wealth, and who has come to look on his victim! and