

# LARRY, OF THE CHOICE.

A Story for Both Old and Young.

Written by George E. Miles.

IN FOUR PARTS.

PART II.

## CHAPTER V.

As we have seen, Gabriel reached the house a minute before the equitians; his celerity was so marvellous that he might be called ubiquitous. At the tea-table Agnes acquainted Lel and her father with what had happened. Mr. Almy immediately ordered his carriage, and the girls bustled themselves in gathering all the delicacies of the house into a goodly bundle. After this, they selected a good bed and abundant covering for Clarence. All was put into the carriage, in charge of Gabriel, who set out at once; Melville promising to follow soon.

The stranger was still asleep; Clarence was sitting by his bed-side, thinking of the sweet looking lady who had been so kind to him. The poor boy had heard of angels, and in his solitude and sufferings he delighted to surround himself with those blessed creatures with whom he believed the air was peopled. They were his only playmates, and so vividly he pictured them, that he knew them by different forms and names, and loved to sing to them by day, and call them to share his pillow, when he was fortunate enough to have one. But Agnes seemed to him prettier than any of his invisible companions; and he was wondering whether some one of them had not crept forth from the air to comfort and cheer him in mortal shape, as Gabriel entered the room.

Without speaking, but smiling like another angel, this strange being spread the bed on the floor and made it up as nicely as a new chambermaid could have done. He then deposited the bundle in a corner, and took Clarence on his knee, drawing the child away from the bed.

"You see I have not forgotten the oranges," he whispered, pulling some of the golden fruit from his pocket.

But Clarence was looking at the soft bed, the snow-white sheet and spotless pillow-case.

"Is that for me?" he murmured. "For you," replied Gabriel, kissing him, as the fair boy, leaning against his benefactor's breast, wept as if his heart would break. It was soon over, the tears of childhood are like April showers—for every drop—a flower, a smile.

"What is your father's name?" resumed Gabriel.

Clarence shook his head.

"Where were you born?"

"I do not know."

"Is your mother dead?"

"I never saw my mother," sighed the motherless boy.

"Where have you been living?"

"In England."

"All your life?"

"No," said the child after a pause, in which he seemed lost in thought. "I remember another land where the sun was warmer, where the grapes and oranges grew on the hills. I remember travelling far and crossing the water, and feeling cold, and finding different fruits and different people. I could not understand what they said. Then we crossed the water again, and found it still colder and everything different again—it was England."

"How long were you there?"

"Oh, a long time—three or four years."

"Have you always been poor?"

"Yes, always poor—but not so poor as now; father is sick so often."

"What does your father do for a living?"

"I don't know."

"Does he work?"

"I don't know. We travel about from city to city. He is with me nearly all day—puts me to bed at night—kisses me—tells me to go to sleep, and bids me good-by. When I wake in the morning, I find him lying beside me."

"You spoke of a warmer land," whispered Gabriel.

"Yes," said the boy, eagerly, his eyes glistening with tears,—"a land where I wish to die. I should go to heaven if I died there, it seems to be so much nearer heaven than any other place on earth is."

"A land of hills and grapes! Are you a Catholic?"

Clarence opened his jacket and showed a silver medal hanging over his white breast.

"Your father too a Catholic?"

"Yes, he hears me my prayers and

takes me with him to mass on Sunday."

During the conversation, Gabriel had not forgotten to refresh the child from the bundle and from his exhausted pocket. Observing that the lids seemed to droop over these young eyes, he forbore any further questioning. Soon the untasted apple dropped from the boy's hands—he had fallen asleep on Gabriel's bosom.

"Sleep soundly, sweet child!" but as he spoke, Clarence woke, gasping round for his father.

"Andreas, my boy, I will watch your father to-night."

"Will you?" said Clarence, kissing his hand and looking into his eyes. "Yes, you will I will trust you. Wake me if he wants anything." So saying he knelt and said his customary prayers with his head between Gabriel's knees; then timidly crept into his beautiful bed, and in a moment was sound asleep.

Gabriel knelt some time over his young charge, then rose and approached the sick man, on tiptoe. The invalid for the first time moved, his brow contracted, and a slight spasm crossed over his face. Then growing more and more restless, he drew his arms from under the thick quilt, his head began to rock, and finally he turned on his side with his face toward the wall, as if oppressed by Gabriel's presence. Gabriel still stood over him, with an expression of peculiar solicitude and sadness. Suddenly he placed his hand over the stranger's heart, a deep groan answered the touch.

Melville's foot was on the staircase, Gabriel fell back from the bed, and as he did so, the sick man returned to his former position and lay as quietly as before.

"The carriage is at the door," said Melville; "you had better return and report that all is going on well. I shall keep watch to-night."

Scarcely had the door closed on Gabriel, than Melville, taking the candle from the hearth, approached the sufferer. With a trembling hand he pressed the matted hair back from the pale forehead.

"Yes! it is he!" Pale as the sleeper himself, he replaced the candle, and throwing himself in a chair, abandoned himself to the most harrowing thoughts. The scene itself, apart from association, was calculated to impress him deeply. There lay that beautiful boy, his cheek resting on his hand, a calm smile playing around his half-opened mouth;—there lay the father as stern and still as death. The wind sighed mournfully through the broken panes and loose casings, and rustled along the tattered hangings. Melville was too much excited to think collectedly, and the night seemed to him as endless as it does to a wounded soldier on the battle-field. The candle flickered in its socket—the formless shadows danced over the wall and ceiling. Twelve o'clock sounded, faintly tolled from afar off—the unwearied wheel of life and pleasure is spinning around—his brain is spinning too—he feels tempted to rush from the room into the open air. At first, anxious to gratify his curiosity, he wished the sleeper to wake;—it was too painful to watch that white, motionless form, alive, but giving no sign of life,—a stranger, and yet perhaps something more than a friend. But now, though not easily daunted, he trembled lest he should awake—he prayed that he might sleep on till morning light. And yet he could not compose himself, in spite of his utmost efforts he paced up and down the room. He lit another candle brought by Gabriel—its clear light relieved the sepulchral aspect of the room—his spirits rose—he laughed at his childish dejection—and forced himself to hum over some of his favorite songs. His back was turned to the sleeper—there is a sudden start—a motion in the bed!—The song froze on his lips—a chill went through his heart. Turning, as if he had been wrenched round by an iron hand, he saw the figure sitting upright—he saw two unnaturally large eyes fixed upon him—it was as if a corpse had risen in the terror and majesty of death—as if the soul had returned from its last errand to drag the body after it.

Melville, unable to speak, stood gazing at the spectral stranger—it was a pause of fearful silence; the apparition was the first to speak.

"Who are you?" sounded in a hollow voice.

"A friend," replied Melville, conquering his awe and advancing. "You must pardon this intrusion, it is kindly meant."

"Where is Clarence?" continued the other, searching the room with a rolling eye.

"Asleep at the foot of your bed."

"Poor fellow, he has a hard time of it. Raise me—let me see him—Melville raised him in his arms until the boy was in view. The stranger, clasping his hands in mute thankfulness over his breast, sank back on his meagre pillow and wept, that stern man wept, and his face became as soft as a woman's.

"Am I indebted to you for this?" he said, feebly pressing Melville's hand.

Melville shook his head and related the circumstances that led to his discovery, bringing Agnes forward in the beautiful relief she occupied in his own fancy.

"And who is she—this angel of mercy?"

Melville hesitated—he felt himself on dangerous ground—her name might excite an agitation fatal to his patient.

"My sister," he replied.

"And your name is—"

"Melville."

"Melville!" repeated the other, drawing his fingers across his forehead.—"Melville."

"I think we have met before," and as the stranger searched his features, he began—

"I am a wanderer!"

"Indeed!—The music store in London—Has that wretched, impious song served to connect me in sympathy with any human being. Oh, Mr. Melville, I have changed since I heard I am still a wanderer, still a prodigal, still a villain, it may be,—but that boy has bettered me—saved me. These are almost the first tears I have shed since childhood; but long accustomed to hardship and neglect, your sister's kindness, at this moment, makes me weep, I might scorn it, if returned to me alone, but to that child—Bless her! bless her! and the unbidden tears coursed down his wasted cheeks.

"Poor boy!" he resumed,—"he leads a lonely life with me, and yet I have seen him, for hours at a time, playing and talking with invisible companions—his angels, as he calls them. And who will say that those blessed spirits may not appear to a lonely, motherless boy, clad in baptismal innocence—that heaven may not minister to such a child, deprived of every earthly pleasure?"

Much as Melville wished to hear more, he begged his patient, who was already exhausted, to compose himself to sleep. He had prudently brought some liquid nourishment, which he prevailed on him to take;—there was no need of medicine; the man was well, and only required care. Whenever he attempted to speak, Melville imposed silence by laying his finger on his lips, saying:

"We will converse to-morrow."

At last the wanderer's eyes closed—it was no longer a dull stagnation of the body, but a calm, refreshing sleep. Melville was comparatively happy—happy in the consciousness of doing good—happy that a new tie between him and Agnes was spun. But a task full of difficulty, requiring the greatest prudence and delicacy was before him. Agnes had promised to return in the morning, and how to palm her off for his sister without awakening suspicion as strong as his own, he knew not. Let, too, would be sure to call her cousin by name; one word might cost the invalid his life. It was necessary to make a confidant of Lel, thus he hoped, by a harmless piece of deception, to obviate the danger. He felt that he was adopting the best course under the circumstances, and assured of the success of his plans, the night passed swiftly by.

Gabriel came with the sun, bringing a glazer's box and a pair of window curtains; he had a knack of doing everything useful, and during the evening before, detecting the absence of three entire panes of glass, he determined to replace them himself.

Melville could not repress a smile.

"Do not go to work until he is wide awake," was his parting charge.

## CHAPTER VI.

After a bath, a change of clothing, and a cup of coffee, Melville presented himself at Mr. Almy's door. The 'royal merchant' was on his way to the counting house, but the young ladies were expecting him with their bonnets on, ready to start for the scene of distress. Watching his opportunity, he drew Lel aside and whispered to her—"Call Agnes nothing but cousin before the sick man."

Lel stared at him in amazement.

"Remember—I am a wanderer!"

They exchanged a look of intelligence, and separated.

"Do you think he will recover?" inquired Agnes.

He has recovered, replied Melville; all he wants is proper management. His mind is a little disordered, yet, for I noticed that he persisted in calling you my sister, and that explanation, instead of settling his unreasonable impression, only annoyed him. I think it better for you not to contradict him.

"Of course," said Agnes. "That let us start."

"Do you mean to walk?" said Melville.

"Certainly," cried Lel. "I never ride when I can walk. If we walked longer, we'd wear longer—all of us."

Gabriel brought a wondrous change: the broken panes were restored, the old ones washed,—instead of being obscured by dirty blankets and old cloths, the windows are now ornamented with neat green curtains—the floor is brushed and sprinkled with water—the chairs are symmetrically arranged—the trunk answers all the purposes of a sofa—Clarence's bed is prettily coiled up in one corner—the light fumes of a perfumery are curling around the mantelpiece—there is an air of comfort and coziness.

They found Gabriel washing his hands—the stranger propped up in bed by pillows; he was quite as much changed as the room. His long sleep and Gabriel's care and love had made him another man. He was playing with Clarence's long silver hair, as they entered. Clarence, who had been listening eagerly, no longer recognized Agnes, then he flew to meet her like a young bird to its mother's breast.

Already there may have been noticed in the stranger's manner what the world calls breeding; Lel and Agnes were surprised at the every appearance of gentility in the sufferer whom they came to gaze on. Melville and Lel both saw that his eye was fixed on Agnes, and that although he turned from her when replying to their inquiries, his health, it required an effort to do so.

"I know not how to thank you, Miss Melville," he said,—"but the boy must do it for me. I am perhaps incapable of gratitude,—but I am unable to express it, having rarely been called upon to feel it."

Again they were surprised, not only at his language, but at the elevated tone in which the words were uttered.

"I know not," he continued,—"why you are so kind to a miserable wanderer, nor will I ask the only reward I can promise in the prayers of my child."

"Reward enough for a Christian," said Agnes, patting the golden head that was leaning against her.

The stranger trembled—her voice, her look, her motion, all reminded him too painfully of one whom she resembled. A deep flush passed over his pale cheek, his bowen heaved, his eyes glowed an instant with the unnatural light of delirium, and after an inward struggle, the shadow of fixed, familiar agony overpowered his features. Lel trembled too; she feared lest they should discover the likeness which existed between them, and which was growing stronger every moment—she knew not how they could be kind to a resemblance so evident to her. Agnes watched his agonized countenance, and feeling that the presence might rather hurt his feelings, would have given him the last glimpse attracted to him by a mysterious, overpowering influence. She longed to stay and bear more from the singular man in whom she had such a strange interest;—his face, his voice, his manner, touched her heart—his evident refinement of person and feeling, his miserable situation, inspired her with a wish to communicate more freely with him;—but that was not altogether her curiosity. It seemed to her as if she could sit forever in the chair in which Clarence used to sleep, and there forever and listen to him, and for him, and see him, and hear him.

In vain they endeavored to recall by indifferent questions, his former cheerfulness and composure; something had passed within his soul which forbade it. His eye no longer sought Agnes, he seemed to avoid meeting her—her presence oppressed him.

"Let us be gone," whispered Lel.

Agnes reluctantly assented; but first taking Clarence by the hand—

"Trust me with your child until this afternoon," she said, "I will return him safe."

"Take him!" muttered the stranger,—"take him!" and with a look that startled her, he pressed her hand to his lips.

"He is wandering," whispered Lel.

Clarence, blinking and hesitating, kissed his father good-by, and taking

the stranger's hand, followed the young ladies into the carriage. The young ladies, after a minute's conversation, said the stranger after a minute's conversation, you had better not go near him, nor allow him to leave the house.

"A strange danger is at work," said Melville.

"Yes," said Agnes.

"Where is your sympathy?"

"They left me here to watch him. Once I would have been otherwise, but I am kinder by tone and am no longer indignant. They were right in leaving me."

"Can you obtain a passport for him?"

"Enough to live when I am well enough to die when I am sick. I should be contented but for Clarence."

"I might," said Melville, hesitatingly. "I might possibly obtain for you more becoming and lucrative employment."

"Not replied the stranger, with a touch of pride, my present life is my free choice, or I could change it myself."

There was a long pause.

"Do you not love your sister?" he resumed.

Melville could say 'yes' with a clear conscience.

"Then never let her marry,—who was that bright young creature with her hair—she is made for the world."

"Miss Ellen Almy."

"The merchant's daughter?" asked the other, glancing at Melville.

"Internally shocked, the wanderer nodded affirmatively."

Again the stranger's eye was fixed on Agnes, and with a look that spoke of love, he said—

"Leave me, Mr. Melville, I will not be troubled by you."

—but I must be alone to-night, my friend, repose."

Clarence and his father, who had reached the centre of the city, Agnes still held the hand of the sick man, and that hand, which had been so cold, was now warm and throbbing.

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