

## A Letter Home

By Enoch Arnold Bennett

### I

RAIN was falling—it had fallen steadily through the night—but the sky showed promise of fairer weather. As the first streaks of dawn appeared, the wind died away, and the young leaves on the trees were almost silent. The birds were insistently clamorous, vociferating times without number that it was a healthy spring morning and good to be alive.

A little, bedraggled crowd stood before the park gates, awaiting the hour named on the notice board when they would be admitted to such lodging and shelter as iron seats and overspreading branches might afford. A weary, patient-eyed, dogged crowd—a dozen men, a boy of thirteen, and a couple of women, both past middle age—which had been gathering slowly since five o'clock. The boy appeared to be the least uncomfortable. His feet were bare, but he had slept well in an area in Grosvenor Place, and was not very damp yet. The women had nodded on many doorsteps, and were soaked. They stood apart from the men, who seemed unconscious of their existence. The men were exactly such as one would have expected to find there—beery and restless as to the eyes, quaintly shod, and with nondescript greenish clothes which  
for

for the most part bore traces of the yoke of the sandwich board. Only one amongst them was different.

He was young, and his cap, and manner of wearing it, gave sign of the sea. His face showed the rough outlines of his history. Yet it was a transparently honest face, very pale, but still boyish and fresh enough to make one wonder by what rapid descent he had reached his present level. Perhaps the receding chin, the heavy, pouting lower lip, and the ceaselessly twitching mouth offered a key to the problem.

"Say, Darkey," he said.

"Well?"

"How much longer?"

"Can't ye see the clock? It's staring ye in the face."

"No. Something queer's come over my eyes."

Darkey was a short, sturdy man, who kept his head down and his hands deep in his pockets. The rain-drops clinging to the rim of an ancient hat fell every now and then into his grey beard, which presented a drowned appearance. He was a person of long and varied experiences; he knew that queer feeling in the eyes, and his heart softened.

"Come, lean against the pillar," he said, "if you don't want to tumble. Three of brandy's what you want. There's four minutes to wait yet."

With body flattened to the masonry, legs apart, and head thrown back, Darkey's companion felt more secure, and his mercurial spirits began to revive. He took off his cap, and brushing back his light brown curly hair with the hand which held it, he looked down at Darkey through half-closed eyes, the play of his features divided between a smile and a yawn. He had a lively sense of humour, and the irony of his situation was not lost on him. He took a grim, ferocious delight in calling up the  
might-have-beens

might-have-beens and the "fatuous ineffectual yesterdays" of life. There is a certain sardonic satisfaction to be gleaned from a frank recognition of the fact that you are the architect of your own misfortune. He felt that satisfaction, and laughed at Darkey, who was one of those who bleat about "ill-luck" and "victims of circumstance."

"No doubt," he would say, "you're a very deserving fellow, Darkey, who's been treated badly. I'm not." To have attained such wisdom at twenty-five is not to have lived altogether in vain.

A park-keeper presently arrived to unlock the gates, and the band of outcasts straggled indolently towards the nearest sheltered seats. Some went to sleep at once, in a sitting posture. Darkey produced a clay pipe, and, charging it with a few shreds of tobacco laboriously gathered from his waistcoat pocket, began to smoke. He was accustomed to this sort of thing, and with a pipe in his mouth could contrive to be moderately philosophical upon occasion. He looked curiously at his companion, who lay stretched at full length on another bench.

"I say, pal," he remarked, "I've known ye two days; ye've never told me yer name, and I don't ask ye to. But I see ye've not slep' in a park before."

"You hit it, Darkey; but how?"

"Well, if the keeper catches ye lying down 'he'll be on to ye. Lying down's not allowed."

The man raised himself on his elbow.

"Really now," he said, "that's interesting. But I think I'll give the keeper the opportunity of moving me. Why, it's quite fine, the sun's coming out and the sparrows are hopping round—cheeky little devils! I'm not sure that I don't feel jolly."

"I wish I'd got the price of a pint about me," sighed Darkey,  
and

and the other man dropped his head and appeared to sleep. Then Darkey dozed a little and heard in his waking sleep the heavy, crunching tread of an approaching park-keeper ; he started up to warn his companion, but thought better of it, and closed his eyes again.

“Now then, there,” the park-keeper shouted to the man with the sailor hat, “get up ! This ain’t a fourpenny doss, you know. No lying down.” A rough shake accompanied the words, and the man sat up.

“All right, my friend.” The keeper, who was a good-humoured man, passed on without further objurgation.

The face of the younger man had grown whiter.

“Look here, Darkey,” he said, “I believe I’m done for.”

“Never say die.”

“No, just die without speaking.” His head fell forward and his eyes closed.

“At any rate, this is better than some deaths I’ve seen,” he began again with a strange accession of liveliness. “Darkey, did I tell you the story of the five Japanese girls ?”

“What, in Suez Bay ?” said Darkey, who had heard many sea stories during the last two days, and recollected them but hazily.

“No, man. This was at Nagasaki. We were taking in a cargo of coal for Hong Kong. Hundreds of little Jap girls pass the coal from hand to hand over the ship’s side in tiny baskets that hold about a plateful. In that way you can get 3000 tons aboard in two days.”

“Talking of platefuls reminds me of sausage and mash,” said Darkey.

“Don’t interrupt. Well, five of these gay little dolls wanted to go to Hong Kong, and they arranged with the Chinese sailors to stow away ; I believe their friends paid those cold-blooded fiends

fiends something to pass them down food on the voyage and give them an airing at nights. We had a particularly lively trip, battened everything down tight, and scarcely uncovered till we got into port. Then I and another man found those five girls among the coal."

"Dead, eh?"

"They'd simply torn themselves to pieces. Their bits of frock things were in strips, and they were scratched deep from top to toe. The Chinese had never troubled their heads about them at all, although they must have known it meant death. You may bet there was a row. The Japanese authorities make you search ship before sailing, now."

"Well?"

"Well, I sha'n't die like that. That's all."

He stretched himself out once more, and for ten minutes neither spoke. The park-keeper strolled up again.

"Get up, there!" he said shortly and gruffly.

"Up ye get, mate," added Darkey, but the man on the bench did not stir. One look at his face sufficed to startle the keeper, and presently two policemen were wheeling an ambulance cart to the hospital. Darkey followed, gave such information as he could, and then went his own ways.

## II

In the afternoon the patient regained full consciousness. His eyes wandered vacantly about the illimitable ward, with its rows of beds stretching away on either side of him. A woman with a white cap, a white apron, and white wristbands bent over him, and he felt something gratefully warm passing down his throat.

For

For just one second he was happy. Then his memory returned, and the nurse saw that he was crying. When he caught the nurse's eye he ceased, and looked steadily at the distant ceiling.

"You're better?"

"Yes." He tried to speak boldly, decisively, nonchalantly. He was filled with a sense of physical shame, the shame which bodily helplessness always experiences in the presence of arrogant, patronising health. He would have got up and walked briskly away if he could. He hated to be waited on, to be humoured, to be examined and theorised about. This woman would be wanting to feel his pulse. She should not; he would turn cantankerous. No doubt they had been saying to each other, "And so young, too! How sad!" Confound them.

"Have you any friends that you would like to send for?"

"No, none."

The girl (she was only a girl) looked at him, and there was that in her eye which overcame him.

"None at all?"

"Not that I want to see."

"Are your parents alive?"

"My mother is, but she lives away in the North."

"You've not seen her lately, perhaps?"

He did not reply, and the nurse spoke again, but her voice sounded indistinct and far off.

When he awoke it was night. At the other end of the ward was a long table covered with a white cloth, and on this table a lamp.

In the ring of light under the lamp was an open book, an ink-stand and a pen. A nurse (not *his* nurse) was standing by the table, her fingers idly drumming the cloth, and near her a man in evening dress. Perhaps a doctor. They were conversing in low tones.

tones. In the middle of the ward was an open stove, and the restless flames were reflected in all the brass knobs of the bedsteads and in some shining metal balls which hung from an unlighted chandelier. His part of the ward was almost in darkness. A confused, subdued murmur of little coughs, breathings, rustlings, was continually audible, and sometimes it rose above the conversation at the table. He noticed all these things. He became conscious, too, of a strangely familiar smell. What was it? Ah, yes! Acetic acid—his mother used it for her rheumatics.

Suddenly, magically, a great longing came over him. He must see his mother, or his brothers, or his little sister—some one who knew him, some one who *belonged* to him. He could have cried out in his desire. This one thought consumed all his faculties. If his mother could but walk in just now through that doorway! If only old Spot, even, could amble up to him, tongue out and tail furiously wagging! He tried to sit up, and he could not move! Then despair settled on him, and weighed him down. He closed his eyes.

The doctor and the nurse came slowly up the ward, pausing here and there. They stopped before his bed, and he held his breath.

“Not roused up again, I suppose?”

“No.”

“Hm! He may flicker on for forty-eight hours. Not more.”

They went on, and with a sigh of relief he opened his eyes again. The doctor shook hands with the nurse, who returned to the table and sat down.

Death! The end of all this! Yes, it was coming. He felt it. His had been one of those wasted lives of which he used to read in books. How strange! Almost amusing! He was one of those sons who bring sorrow and shame into a family. Again,  
how

how strange! What a coincidence that he, just *he* and not the man in the next bed, should be one of those rare, legendary good-for-nothings who go recklessly to ruin. And yet, he was sure that he was not such a bad fellow after all. Only somehow he had been careless. Yes, careless, that was the word . . . nothing worse. . . . As to death, he was indifferent. Remembering his father's death, he reflected that it was probably less disturbing to die oneself than to watch another pass.

He smelt the acetic acid once more, and his thoughts reverted to his mother. Poor mother! No, great mother! The grandeur of her life's struggle filled him with a sense of awe. Strange that until that moment he had never seen the heroic side of her humdrum, commonplace existence! He must write to her, now, at once, before it was too late. His letter would trouble her, add another wrinkle to her face, but he must write; she must know that he had been thinking of her.

"Nurse," he cried out, in a thin, weak voice.

"Ssh!" She was by his side directly, but not before he had lost consciousness again.

The following morning he managed with infinite labour to scrawl a few lines:

"DEAR MAMMA,

"You will be surprised but not glad to get this letter. I'm done for, and you will never see me again. I'm sorry for what I've done, and how I've treated you, but it's no use saying anything now. If Pater had only lived he might have kept me in order. But you were too kind, you know. You've had a hard struggle these last six years, and I hope Arthur and

Dick



Dick will stand by you better than I did, now they are growing up. Give them my love, and kiss little Fannie for me.

“WILLIE.”

“Mrs. Hancock——”

He got no further with the address.

### III

By some strange turn of the wheel, Darkey gathered several shillings during the next day or two, and feeling both elated and benevolent, he called one afternoon at the hospital, “just to inquire like.” They told him the man was dead.

“By the way, he left a letter without an address. Mrs. Hancock—here it is.”

“That’ll be his mother; he did tell me about her—lived at Endon, Staffordshire, he said. I’ll see to it.”

They gave Darkey the letter.

“So his name’s Hancock,” he soliloquised, when he got into the street. “I knew a girl of that name—once. I’ll go and have a pint of four half.”

At nine o’clock that night Darkey was still consuming four half, and relating certain adventures by sea which, he averred, had happened to himself. He was very drunk.

“Yes,” he said, “and them five lil’ gals was lying there without a stitch on ’em, dead as meat; ’s’true as I’m ’ere. I’ve seen a thing or two in my time, I can tell ye.”

“Talking about these Anarchists——” said a man who appeared anxious to change the subject.

“An—kists,” Darkey interrupted. “I tell ye what I’d do  
with

with that muck." He stopped to light his pipe, looked in vain for a match, felt in his pockets, and pulled out a piece of paper—the letter.

"I tell you what I'd do. I'd——" He slowly and meditatively tore the letter in two, dropped one piece on the floor, thrust the other into a convenient gas jet, and applied it to the tobacco.

"I'd get 'em 'gether in a heap and I'd—— Damn this pipe." He picked up the other half of the letter, and relighted the pipe.

"After you, mate," said a man sitting near, who was just biting the end from a cigar.