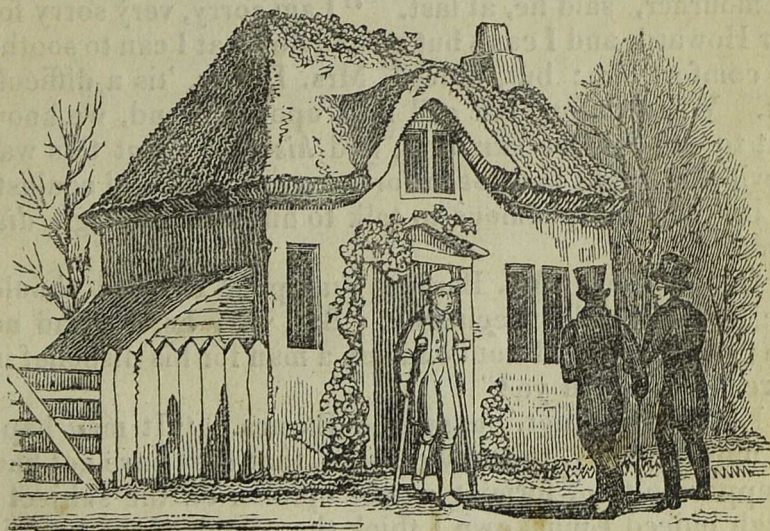


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OUR OWN TIMES.



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OUR OWN TIMES.

"O, MR. BARNES, have ye heard what has happened since ye were last in these parts?" asked Mrs. Driver, the landlady at the Tuns Inn, Gloucester, as the travelling vehicle of a respectable looking personage, apparently laden with books, tracts, &c. drove up to her door.

The traveller alighted, and, giving the horse in charge to the hostler, gravely asked what Mrs. Driver meant.

"Why, that poor Howard, the glazier, has lost that pretty little boy he doted on so."

"No, sure!" exclaimed Mr. Barnes, "you don't say so! How did it happen?"

"He took the small-pox, poor little fellow, they say, from a child at the door, and died in a very short time."

Mr. Barnes shook his head, and sighed deeply. "This is just one of those trials in which one hardly knows what to say to a mourner," said he, at last. "I am sorry, very sorry for poor Howard, and I can't but go and do what I can to soothe and comfort him: but, indeed, Mrs. Driver, 'tis a difficult task. When unforeseen evil falls upon a friend, we know what to do; we see *our* duty, and *his* duty: but this was an evil that might have been foreseen and guarded against, and it seems blasphemous to talk to him of its being a *dispensation*."

"O, you mean, Mr. Barnes, that poor Howard should have had his child vaccinated. But, may be, he had no faith; and ye would not condemn a man for his disbelief in the remedy, would ye?"

"No, I would not," answered Barnes. "It may happen, unfortunately, to many persons, that they have not had the opportunity of forming a just opinion on the subject; though indeed I must own I think the proofs of the superiority of vaccination lie open to any sensible person who will make good use of his eyes and ears, and not give ear to every old woman's tale he may chance to hear. But that is not to the purpose; for our friend Howard *does* admit the efficacy of vaccination. When I passed this way, half a year ago, he was talking with me about it, and he spoke highly in its praise. I asked him *then* if his little boy was vaccinated; and he said, No, but he meant to have it done '*next week*.' I am very sorry to think he altered his mind."

"O, that is his way to the life!" exclaimed the landlady; "he is always on the put-off. I would lay any money there was no reason in the world for deferring it, but only just his easiness. Well, poor man, he won't be easy just yet again, I've a notion."

"I don't know that, Mrs. Driver, I don't know that: from what I've seen of Mr. Howard, I'm afraid he will find a way of comforting himself much too soon."

"Don't you think he has a conscience then?" asked the landlady.

"No doubt: yet I fear he has fallen upon one of the many ways we have of putting conscience to sleep. Because the loss of an only child is a severe loss, he will pride himself on bearing it submissively, and think too little of the neglect and culpable remissness by which this calamity was brought upon him. However, I must go to see him, poor man."

"Well, Sir, and you'll be kind enough to let me know how he is as you come back?"

The traveller went to his cart, took out two or three little books, and then set off towards the glazier's cottage, which was a pretty little dwelling, just out of the town. Here, when he reached the door, he knocked softly, for our traveller felt averse to disturb the dwellers in the house of mourning unnecessarily. The door was opened by a servant girl, who shewed Mr. Barnes into a little kitchen, where the bereaved father, who formed the subject of the conversation above recorded, was sitting, in a listless, indolent attitude, over the fire.

At sight of Barnes, it seemed as if some more painful emotion passed across his mind; for his countenance was for a moment almost convulsed with agony. "O, Mr. Barnes! what a change is here!" cried he. "My poor boy!"—He could say no more, but wept bitterly; and the traveller sympathized deeply in his sorrow. He was no stranger in the house of mourning. He knew much of the many and sore afflictions which belong to this mortal state. He was well read in the word of God, and well practised in the knowledge of the human heart; and if this had been a case in which *comfort* alone was required, no one would have been better able to administer it than he, and no one would have more enjoyed the delightful office of applying these holy promises for the consolation of the mourner. But Barnes, though he had a feeling heart, was not weak. He could not bear the short-sighted tenderness which would risk the interests of an immortal soul, lest a little temporary pain should ensue from

a religious rebuke. He was, however, judicious, and he gave his friend time to see that he felt for him from the bottom of his heart.

After the first burst of grief was over, Mr. Howard entreated him, as evening was now closing in, to take up his abode for that night beneath his roof.

To this Barnes readily acceded: the servant girl was called in, and the table soon made ready for their frugal supper. Howard speaking almost incessantly on the subject of his departed child, seemed little inclined to advert to any thing else; and the traveller let him give vent to all his feelings for a time unchecked. He observed, however, that, while Mr. Howard spoke much of his own affliction, and much of the amiable qualities of his child, he did not the least allude to his own neglect with reference to the disease which terminated his son's life. He talked of his last illness exactly as if it had been a fever, or consumption, or an accident from which no care could have secured him. He spoke of himself as smitten of God. He even ventured to quote, as words which had given him comfort, the Apostle's words to the Hebrews—*Whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth.*

Here his friend could not forbear interposing. "Excuse me," said he; "but we must not quote Scripture without remembering the connexion which one passage has with another. It is not merely to those who are *sufferers* of the will of God, but to those who are *doers* of his will, that these words are spoken. This you will see, if you turn to the thirty-sixth verse of the tenth chapter. Sorrow, my friend, has its temptations, as well as joy. It is so easy to think, that *because* we are 'chastened,' *therefore* we are 'loved.'"

"Very true," replied Mr. Howard. "I hope I shall not fall into this error under my present affliction. It is my constant study to submit my will to the will of God."

"I am glad to find you so disposed. We ought indeed to submit to the just punishment of our transgressions."

After a general remark or two of this kind, Mr. Barnes turned the discourse, as gently as he could, to the point at which he aimed. "I was the more shocked," said he, "when I heard of your recent loss, because of the occasion of it. I remember you told me your determination to vaccinate your son six months ago. Did any thing occur to change your opinion respecting that question?"

"No, I cannot say there did: but it seemed as if something always stood in the way of its being done. Once, I was going to write for the surgeon: but, when I was just sitting down,

a neighbour came in, and it was put off for that time. But who would have thought of the poor boy's taking the small-pox? It has not been known here these many years. It was only his playing for a minute or two with a travelling tinker's child, who was just recovering. Who could have foreseen it? I'm sure, at all events, it has been nearly the death of me. But I must strive to submit."

Just at that moment, a gentle knock at the door was heard, and a little girl entered, with a small basket on her arm. "Well, child," asked Mr. Howard, "what do you come for now?"

"Please, Sir," answered the child, "father has nothing at all to take to-night, and the doctor says he must die if he hasn't nourishing things. Perhaps you'd be so good as to give me a little something for him."

"Why, does not he get ever so much money from the parish! and don't I know very well that he won't work when he might?" said Mr. Howard. "And now, here he is, coming or sending regularly every day to me for something or other. I declare, it goes very hard with me to supply him."

"How far off is this man's house?" asked Mr. Barnes.

"Not a stone's throw," answered Mr. Howard.

"Then I'll step back with the child, if you'll excuse me a few moments."

The traveller, accordingly, took his hat, and soon reached a miserable cottage. We cannot describe its wretchedness. On the floor, which was covered with all kinds of filth and litter, lay or sat eight children of various sizes. A dirty and bad-tempered looking woman was scolding some of these violently. The father, a sallow looking, unhealthy man, sat in a chair by the fire. When Mr. Barnes entered, he turned his head, and gave a sort of lazy nod; but neither he nor his wife offered the stranger a chair, or attempted to check the children, who came round him, pulling his clothes, and committing all sorts of impertinences. "I am sorry to find, my friend," said Barnes, "that you are under the necessity of requiring so much relief from your neighbours. I am sure it is a painful thing for a man at your time of life to need this. How happens it?"

"How happens it!" repeated the wife, very rudely and angrily, "why, don't you see with your own eyes what a state we're in? Don't you see all these brats must be fed and clothed?—and the parish (Heaven soften their hard hearts!) will scarce give us enough for bread for them."

"I do see them, my good woman: but I have seen a great deal of poverty and distress; and you must forgive me for making a few enquiries about your present and past condition, before I can at all judge how I can best serve you. I am not one of those who give money to any one who asks for it, without knowing whether there is nothing I can give more valuable or more suitable. It is not my way."

The woman, seeing the firmness of her visitor, and yet understanding that he was able and willing to help the distressed, grew more calm and civil. "I ask pardon, Sir," said she; "but the parish people are so hard and so cruel-like, that one gets into the way of speaking rude to 'em. Now would you believe it?—they have given Ned Jones, the miller's man, nine shillings a week, for himself and only four children, the last three weeks, since he fell into the mill-stream and was hurt by the wheel; and here we, with all these eight children, and my husband always ailing, off and on, can't get more than eight shillings!"

"But, perhaps," said Mr. Barnes, "you have had this allowance for a long time, in good times as well as bad: is it not so? Besides, your two eldest children must be quite fit for service; and their father, I should think, is very capable of earning a few shillings even now, and must get more when well. How long has he had this present illness?"

"Just a week and a day," drawled out the man.

"How did it come on?"

"Why, I can't say but I mainly brought on this last bout, Sir; for I couldn't help going into the water one day when I was very warm with work, and so, I suppose, I caught cold. But, as I tell wife, Sir, you know we must submit to these things."

"SUBMISSION, again!" thought Barnes.

"Yes, yes, I know all that," said his wife. "Affliction is God's sending, and we must bear it; and so, ye may remember, Robert, I told ye the first day ever ye went to the parish. Ye were unwilling enough then; but we must submit, ye know."

"Let me say one word, my friend," said Barnes. "Were you always in trouble and poverty?"

"O no, indeed: before I married, I had no care or thought at all, Sir," said the woman. "I was at service at the Squire's, and a pleasant time it was; and I believe Robert may say the same, Sir."

"But were you COMPELLED to leave your place and marry?" asked Mr. Barnes.

"No, Sir, I cannot say that. We just liked one another, and thought life would be pleasanter spent together than away; so we did."

"And so we *do*, Jenny, you might say," added the man, looking at his wife with a glance of affection which shewed that time and trouble had not brought the chill of indifference to their hearts.

"Ah, Robert," said his wife, "I am afraid ye don't often say it, or think it. I know I'm not the kind thrifty wife I should be: but sometimes the children vex and fret one, and that makes me cross."

"Well, well; and I'm cross too, now and then," said her husband, smiling.

Mr. Barnes had stood by, hearing this dialogue with interest he could not conceal. The tear sprang to his eye more than once as he beheld another proof of the strength of those affections which neither poverty, nor starvation, dirt, and rags, can wholly subdue. "O," thought he, "that the industrious classes did but know their own interests! What a blessing these two people might have been to one another! How peacefully, how honourably, how usefully, they might have lived together, had religious principle, or had even common prudence, regulated their attachment! It seems cruel to say to them now, 'Why did you marry so early? Why did not you remain a while longer, contented with pursuing the path of industry apart? Then you might have come together with the comfortable hope of having, by the diligent use of the means which God has given to you and to every one, insured some portion of domestic comfort;—then the vexatious circumstances, which now try your tempers and spirits, would perhaps never have appeared;—then your children, if fewer in number, might have been healthier, better fed, better clothed, better instructed. Of all these blessings you have robbed yourselves, and now you call your calamities "sent of God."'"

Barnes *thought* all this, but he could not find the heart to say all he thought. It seemed to him, that this was a case which was as nearly hopeless (as far as this world is concerned) as any he had ever met with. To give a few shillings, to advise the woman to make her children more cleanly, to get the eldest immediately to service, to send in a few nourishing things for the sick man,—how easily all these things can be done! But how ill do they satisfy the hearts of those who are the real friends of the poor! They know how impossible it is to render them lasting benefit, when they have

involved themselves in cares from which they cannot and ought not to be freed : they have *chosen* to put themselves into these circumstances, and they are but suffering what every one anticipated. Their children ! will they ever know the pleasure and pride of being above beggary ? Early trained to depend on the parish, they *can* feel no shame in such dependence. Barnes, however, could not come away with a safe conscience till he had said a few words to these poor people. " I think," said he, " you must wish to see your children grow up with better prospects than your own. If your daughter there, my good woman, should be so fortunate as to obtain a good place, what, from your own experience, would you most wish her to do ?—to marry, as you did, young and inexperienced ? or to wait till, by some years of patient and respectable industry, she has secured a little fund of money, and, what is far better, some knowledge of domestic economy, and some portion of judgment and experience both in religious and in worldly matters ? "

" O, Sir, there cannot be a doubt, there cannot be a doubt, which a true friend must wish : but they won't be ruled, Sir, by any body in those things. "

" I don't know what to say to that, my friend ; much depends on the manner of bringing up. A child that is humoured in every thing, never learns to deny itself in any thing. The most important point in education seems to me that of making children look to the future. You can't expect that they who do not keep *that* in view, will ever be good Christians ; for it is the most remarkable part of the Christian character always to *stretch on to the things which are before*. And I must say, I think every little act of self-denial, for the sake of future good, may be made of great use in a Christian parent's hands. It may lead a child from temporal to eternal advantage, even to the thought of promises not yet received, but *seen afar off*. "

" I like to hear you speak, Sir," said the man, who had listened very attentively. " Thank God, I *can* read my Bible a little, and know what part of it you have an eye to just now. We have very fine preachers of the word now, Sir, very fine. "

" Yes, we have, indeed : but I wish Christian doctrines were more closely applied to practice. "

" So they will, Sir, I suppose, when God pleases. "

" God always rejoices in the conversion of the sinner," replied Barnes. " But I was going to observe, that I have great reason for fearing, that, among the besetting sins of the

people at this time is this very one--this want of virtuous self-denial--this plunging into beggary and ruin, rather than practise a little restraint upon their own inclinations; and then calling their afflictions visitations of Providence. However, my good friends, let me not seem too harsh; only let me urge you, in bringing up your children, to lead them to the exercise of forethought for themselves and others. Don't let a little one waste a drop of milk or a piece of bread one day because he happens to have a little more than he wishes for: to-morrow, perhaps, he may be glad of what he would have thrown away to-day. And don't let one child be kept from school because another will cry at parting from her: they must learn to think of what is really for one another's good, not what will please their fancies for the moment."

Barnes then took his leave, and returned to Mr. Howard, who had wondered much at his long stay.

After he had heard how the traveller had been employed, the conversation naturally turned upon the difference of management among different families. Barnes observed, that we are apt to speak of "the poor" as if all were *alike poor* who received only a certain sum of money for their labour. "But," added he, "I have seen as great a difference in the way of living, bringing up families, &c. among labouring men, earning precisely the same wages, as ever I saw in gentlemen's families, where the fortune was supposed to be equal."

"And so have I," answered Howard. "For instance: the man of whose accident you heard this evening; he started in life as nearly as possible with the same prospects as Jenkins, the person you have just seen. They both got good places: the difference began when Jenkins married; he was but twenty, his wife just eighteen. Now Jones also loved his fellow-servant, and, to say truth, I believe would have married as early and hastily as Jenkins; but, happily, the young woman had more sense and good principle. She told him she never would marry another man, so long as *he* continued in his present mind; but as to marrying him, to be maintained by the parish, to that she never would submit, and if he loved her, he never would wish it. In short, she gave him such reasons as satisfied him, and led him to be the more diligent in making himself worthy of such a woman as he found her to be. In all his difficulties, she was his counsellor; in every trouble, he found her ever ready to console and strengthen him. Some years passed away; a longer time, indeed, than he at one time thought it possible to wait for her: but at last

they married ; and a more happy, respectable couple there cannot be. They never took a farthing from the parish till this accident really made it necessary ; and their characters are so well known, that the overseers have been liberal to them. I hope, however, they will soon be afloat again."

"I hope so too," said Barnes. "You make me desirous of knowing them. Alas! such characters are but too rare; and what makes the subject particularly painful to one who does not like to see his Master's words perverted is, that it gives occasion to a great deal of self-deceit in applying Scripture. It is a very great error indeed, when people talk of misery as unavoidable which might very well have been avoided. It is almost blasphemy to speak of calamities as being sent to try our faith, when we know very well they are the fruits of our own improvidence."

"Yes, I remember," said Mr. Howard, "when Farmer Wells' daughter Mary went off with a recruiting sergeant, every body said the farmer might call it a misfortune if he pleased, but it was one entirely of his own choosing. He was warned again and again of the acquaintance, and of the bad character of the man. He could have put a stop to it at one time, with a word. But he never moved a finger in the business; and yet he was said to be quite a religious man too. He was always at all the missionary meetings and prayer meetings in the neighbourhood; and, as soon as his daughter was gone, he sent for the clergyman to comfort him. But the clergyman knew better than to speak 'peace' quite so soon to him."

"I am glad to hear it," said Barnes: "that clergyman was faithful to the trust committed to him. Happy is he, who, losing his best earthly blessing, has not the aggravation of feeling that it might possibly have been spared to him, had he used all the means afforded for its preservation."

As Barnes said this with great earnestness, he steadily looked at the father before him. In a moment, he felt that he had at last made the impression he desired. Howard covered his face with his hands, and wept bitterly. "O, Mr. Barnes," said he, at last, "you need not say, 'Thou art the man!' I know it; I feel it; I know I threw away my poor boy's life. It is a *punishment*, not a *trial*—a punishment for my shameful carelessness. God forgive me: I have murdered my poor boy! Don't think my conscience never smote me before. I had misgivings ere now, I assure you: but I hushed them; I would not hear them. I feel now I have greatly sinned."

Barnes was for a while too much affected to speak. At last, he said, "Then now is the time for me to give you comfort; now I may hope, that the blessing of Heaven will attend your affliction. Before, I own, I feared it might prove a curse, a *double* curse."

"Ah, Mr. Barnes, I have planted a thorn in my side that will rankle there many a day. But better to feel it than be insensible to the chastisements of God."

"A thousand times," answered the traveller.

They parted for that night; but not until prayer and some select passages from Scripture had calmed the spirits of the penitent. When he rose in the morning, Barnes was pleased to see his serious and thoughtful, but not gloomy, countenance, and to hear him propose walking with him part of the way to Gloucester, that he might call on some neighbours whom he had too long neglected. "It is the least I can do," said he: "I must not add neglect of my other duties to past neglects. May I not compare my own feelings to those of David? While his child languished in sickness, he fasted, and prayed, and wept; but when he died, he rose up, and worshipped God, and went about his daily business."

Barnes rejoiced that a better and more Christian sorrow was taking the place of that unprofitable sort of mourning he had witnessed the night before. They called, on their way, at the house of Ned Jones, the miller's man, whom they found beginning to walk on his crutches; his cottage beautifully neat, his wife busy and active, one child working, another making the bread, two others were at school. Barnes did not praise what he saw; he felt a sort of respect for these people which forbade him to notice these things as any thing uncommon. Jones, however, himself mentioned the circumstance of his having, for the first time in his life, received parish pay. "It would not have been needed now, Sir," said he, "had this misfortune happened in summer instead of winter. But every thing is dear just now, and the children can't get work either. Poor things, they're as ashamed to go to the vestry as I should be. That little girl, there, cried half the morning about it. Next week, however, I hope I shall be able to get free again; and I'm sure the children will be saving and industrious, rather than force me to keep taking the poor's money."

Barnes left a present with Mr. Howard for this worthy couple, and could not help saying, as he walked on, "How rare it is to meet with this sort of respectable, honourable feeling, now-a-days! I am quite of the opinion of Mrs.

Sherwood, in her tract 'Old Times,' that the present race of Christian professors are very inferior to the people of past times in some excellent habits and feelings. Not only are family discipline and parental authority less attended to, but children are not taught, by precept and example, any self-denial. They are not trained to consider it even as *an evil*, that their aged parents, instead of being assisted and nursed by them in their latter days, are sent to a workhouse; they do not exert themselves beyond what is barely necessary for their own sakes; and, if they wish for a piece of finery, a cake, or a toy, they seldom have a denial. They are seldom told, that all these little indulgences are selfish, that they must learn to think of others, as well as themselves. Now, really, in former times, it was a refreshing thing to see an old grandfather or mother sitting by the children's firesides, receiving comfort and support, as far as they had the means to give it. These are sights we rarely see now. And why? Not, I honestly believe, half so much because the poor are worse off, as because there is less frugality, less hatred of going to the parish, less generosity, and more selfishness. No one can say this is a harsh, unfeeling age: with all our sins, we do not turn away from the cry of the distressed. But it is grievous to see how little real help can be afforded to those who will not help themselves. I cannot *flatter* the poor, my friend," added he; "I love them too well to do so. They *suffer* under the misjudging compassion of friends who would relieve all indiscriminately, because they are poor."

Mr. Howard, in repeating the words of his friend to a neighbour, a day or two afterwards, observed, "Now, nobody can think our friend Barnes says this in order to excuse himself from giving to the poor; for there is not a more generous being on the face of the earth. He has done more good on his travels than any man I know; but then he has respect to the *characters* as well as *circumstances* of those he relieves. His eye is always on the word of God, and his first wish is to lead people to live nearer that standard: next to that, he desires to see them comfortable and respectable in this world. I wish there were more such travellers!"

FINIS.