

[Written for The Flag of our Union]

Walnuts

by Leonard A. Studley

“One little sou, sir—one little sou—for the holy virgin’s sake, one little sou!”

Though begging is entirely prohibited in the streets of Paris, importunate addresses like the above are nevertheless of very common occurrence. Uncouth, outlandish, whining sounds they are, pitched in a high treble key, and always confined to the modest demand of a single sou, and at that a “little” one.

It is the little Savoyards to whom I allude; they who come all the way from their native mountains, while mere children, to seek their fortunes, and furnish the great metropolis with chimney-sweeps, errand-boys, shoe-blacks, etc., and eventually water-carriers, street porters, and the like. And they are not singular, by the way, with their “little” sou. The word is one to which the French, or at all events the Parisians, seem particularly partial. The first time I ever entered a Gallic omnibus, I was soon followed by an enormously fat woman, a perfect Falstaff in petticoats, who meekly presented herself at the door, and asked for *une petite place*—a little place among us! And an old gentleman in the next street begged permission to bring a *little dog* with him—a Newfoundlander, as big as a calf!

But those juvenile Savoyards, though satisfied with little sous, are sturdy little beggars, nevertheless. They run along by the side of the *trottoir*, with one eye fixed upon you, and the other roving about in search of a policeman. At the first glimpse of one, though half a mile away, the little fellow is off in a jiffy.

One day, during my sojourn in Paris, as I was returning to my lodgings, I heard the above oft-repeated petition and paid but little attention to [illegible]. This opinion and this demand were something new to me. Applications for something to fill hollow *stomachs* were common enough, but begging for means to supply the deficiencies of empty *heads*, was certainly a novelty.

“What do you mean by ‘hollow-head?’” asked I, of the Savoyards.

“There he is,” replied the boys, pointing to a poor little atom of humanity, who was trotting along with them, and finding it a difficult thing to keep up.

To have called him “hollow-stomach” would have been no misnomer, certainly; for the poor boy was manifestly half starved. Thin and pale as he was, however, he was singularly beautiful. Nothing could exceed the dazzling purity of his skin, and the delicate chiselling of his classic features. And his eyes—his great, black, dreamy eyes—a nervous person would have been frightened, and a tender-hearted person might have wept at beholding them—so strange, and weird, and wild they looked, and yet, so ineffably mournful. Yet, much as they expressed, there was a sad want of expression there; and where all else was so bright, it was a melancholy thing to see the Promethean spark of intellect was either wanting altogether, or so dimmed and blurred as

to make its existence doubtful. And yet, this very defect, accompanied as it was by so much that was attractive, appealed most powerfully to all active human sympathies.

“Where did he come from?” asked I, of the vagabond Savoyards.

“From the clouds,” replied promptly and confidently, a little fellow very nearly the boy’s own age, who had lately become the proud possessor of all the stock in trade necessary for the establishment in business of an itinerant shoe-black.

“And what makes you think he came from the clouds?” inquired I.

“Because we saw him on the Pont Neuf just after it began to rain, and some little frogs with him, and neither him nor the frogs was there before.”

“Very conclusively reasoned, indeed, my little man. And so you think it rains little frogs and little boys on the Pont Neuf, do you?”

“I’ve seen showers of frogs more’n once, but I never saw it rain boys before.”

“And how long has it been since little ‘hollow-head’ came down?”

“It’s almost two weeks.”

“And what does he do for a living?”

“He eats bread, cheese and grapes.”

“But where does he get those articles?”

“He takes little sous and buys ’em.”

“But where does he get the sous?”

“We gives ’em to him.”

It was true. These little vagabonds had worked and begged for him as they did for themselves. They might not have continued it very long, but such acts are not unusual among the members of this juvenile fraternity; the newsboys of Paris—“only more so.”

I took the whole gang into a café, and asked them what they would have to eat. One said *flutes*, another *beravoise*; one fellow wanted an *omelette soufflé*, and another a *pate de foie gras*! These last two epicures were not gratified, but most of them were supplied with the dainties they asked for, and which they had often heard of, but never seen. Though I made very minute inquiries, they could tell me nothing more of their little cloud-born foundling. Nor could he give any account of himself.

“Can’t he speak at all?” I asked.

“No, monsieur; but he says some sort of gibberish to himself sometimes.”

I had thought from the first that he looked very much like an English boy, so I tried him with my own language. He started at what was evidently a familiar sound, gazed earnestly at me, and for the first time smiled. This sudden, solitary smile, was one of the most beautiful, as well as one of the most melancholy sights I ever beheld. It was like a rainbow spanning the storm-cloud’s gloomy crest. The poor child spoke a few words of English, but there was little connection or meaning in them. All the information I could gain from what he said was that his Christian name was probably Arthur, and that was only an inference. The poor boy’s head was truly a hollow one. And yet, it was a noble-looking head, and as far in appearance from an idiot’s as could well be imagined. The jewel had somehow been stolen away, but the casket that remained was a fitting envelope for the rarest of diamonds. It was an admirably formed head, as well as a most beautiful one.

I tried for a long time, but could get nothing more out of him. As I have already remarked, he looked like an English boy, and the presumption thus created was confirmed by his tongue. I do not refer to the mere fact of his speaking English words. He might do that, and be an American. I mean that his accent, his mode of pronunciation, proved him to be English of England, and not American. A practiced ear easily detects the ear-marks, or rather the tongue-marks, which distinguish the one from the other.

I was going to England soon, and I determined to take the little fellow with me, and try to get him a place where he might be properly taken care of. I therefore took him home with me, and had him bathed and washed, and properly clothed. The clothes he had on were coarse and ragged. In a few weeks I left for England, but in that time the poor little foundling had so won upon my affections that I could not bear the thought of being separated from him. He was so handsome, so docile, so affectionate, that he stole into my heart before I was aware of it, and became fixed so firmly there, that I could not have dislodged him without greatly lacerating it. The very infirmity of the poor boy endeared him to me. He was utterly alone, and utterly helpless, and his magnificent though vacant eyes appealed to my sympathies more powerfully than if they had been sparkling with the highest order of intelligence.

Good feeding and careful nurture soon made his pale cheeks round and rosy, and heightened his wonderful beauty. But the strange, wild, melancholy air, which had so attracted [illegible] some kindly yearning struggling within them. He could not be termed an idiot, and there were indeed moments when it seemed almost as if the truant intellect might be lured back to the tenement which I felt sure it must once have inhabited. But I learned eventually that all such hopes were futile. Some fitful flashes of mental electricity were occasionally visible, but they indicated only a casual and momentary reunion, from some accidental cause, of the intellectual circuit, which seemed helplessly broken.

The adopting and rearing of such a child may seem an uninviting task. It would certainly be a melancholy one, but melancholy things are not always unattractive, and there was much more of a pleasing than a painful nature in all that related to this singular boy. At all events, I loved him.

If he had been as wise as the most knowing of infant prodigies, I could not have loved him more. Having decided to retain possession of the child, unless he should be claimed by his relatives, one of the first things I did when I arrived in London, was to look out for a suitable person to take care of him. Having spoken about it to the landlord of the hotel at which I stayed, he made some inquiries, and the next morning introduced me to a middle-aged woman, who appeared to me to be well qualified for the situation. I eventually agreed to take her on trial for a few weeks, and at the end of that time to employ her permanently, if she suited me. She came the next day.

The evening of the day I engaged her, little Arthur happened to hear the word *walnuts* pronounced, and I was surprised at the emphatic manner in which he repeated it, calling it over perhaps a dozen times. It seemed, too, to remain in his memory, and every now and then he would say softly to himself, "*Walnuts.*" I immediately sent for a plate of walnuts, and offered them to the boy. He ate one or two, but paid little attention to them, and still from time to time whispered, "walnuts." He seemed after a while to have forgotten the word, but when I again pronounced it in his presence, it again attracted his attention, and it was easy to see that it had some peculiar significance for him.

What could be the reason? Why should the word *walnut* interest him more than another? The problem was a knotty one, and I puzzled over it a good deal, for I thought if possible that some clue to the little fellow's origin might lie hid within it. I tried him with all sorts of walnuts, but I soon saw it was none of them that he referred to. And if he didn't mean *walnuts* by *walnuts*, what did he mean?

The woman I had engaged—the very respectable looking Mrs. Jones—was punctual to her engagement, and was installed in suitable apartments. She seemed to be an intelligent and judicious woman, and her conversation pleased me very much. The second day after her arrival, Mrs. Jones took little Arthur out for a walk in the park, and never came back again. I inquired about her friends and her previous history, but all I could learn was that she had lived awhile with a sister of the landlord's and borne a good character while with her.

It was a matter of astonishment, even to myself, how keenly I felt this occurrence. I traversed every quarter of London, and a goodly portion of Great Britain, and spent more money than I could well afford, in searchings and advertisements—and all to no purpose. With a heavy heart I returned to America. Many and many a time I thought of the poor little mindless boy, and wondered what could have become of him. It required many new impressions to obscure, even in a small degree, my remembrance of him.

After the lapse of four years, I made a second visit to England. In London I put up at the same hotel as before, and was welcomed by the same landlord. The circumstance vividly recalled poor little Arthur to my mind, and the abrupt and unpleasant termination of my adventure. I thought of the child and his probably fate continually.

One day I saw in the Times newspaper, an advertisement for a number of servants for the country establishment of Sir Charles Willoughby, of *Walnuts*, Devonshire. *Walnuts!* The moment my eye lit upon the word, it seemed to run through my whole system like an electric shock, and from that instant I felt a conviction—blind, baseless, ridiculous, if you will, but for all

that as strong as adamant—that this Devonshire Walnuts had something to do with my poor, lost Arthur. Here the poor child had disappeared like morning dew, leaving no trace behind him—and here I believed I had found a clue, which, if rightly followed up, would eventually enable me to find him.

Sir Charles Willoughby, in person, was to be found at Morley's hotel, Trafalgar Square, where candidates for places were directed to apply. I felt an intense desire to see what manner of man this Devonshire baronet was, and I took the only course I could think of which would enable me to see and converse with him. I metamorphosed myself into an English footman, and called at Morley's to solicit employment.

Though it were never so true that language was given to man to enable him to conceal his thoughts, it would remain equally true, that in spite of all the tongue can do, the face will often prove a tell-tale. It is one of nature's never-failing laws, that bad passions, long indulged, will set their seal upon the human countenance. It was so with Sir Charles Willoughby, and no amount of dissimulation on his part could persuade the shrewd observer that he was anything else but a heartless, unprincipled, bold, bad man. He was not past the middle age, and he was remarkably handsome and ceremoniously polite. But about his full red lip, and upon his smooth, white brow, and in his bright, black eye, lurked characters, not hard to decipher, which when put together spelled a word that looked less like man than devil.

These observations I made while Sir Charles was examining me and my credentials, and so fully convinced was I of their truth, and so greatly did they increase the suspicions I had already conceived, that I at once formed the [illegible] and when the baronet signified his willingness to employ me, I immediately closed with the offer, and left the room an engaged footman. Three days afterwards, with half a dozen fellow-menials in the livery, I accompanied my master into Devonshire. We found that "Walnuts" was not named without a reason. The groves of fine old walnut trees in the park could not be surpassed in Britain. "Walnuts" was a fine old manorial residence, a part of which was very old indeed, and almost in ruins. As a matter of course, these antiquated apartments had their ghosts, and this was said to be the reason why the servants were so frequently changed. With one exception, there was not a servant in the house who had been there more than one year. This was Ratcliffe, the valet of Sir Charles. He was a taciturn man, about forty years of age, and anything but a favorite with the servants. He had lived with his present master no one knew how long. My first object was to get some knowledge of their family history. For this purpose, I was obliged to make inquiries out of the house. Ratcliffe was the only one of the servants who knew anything, and the idea of undertaking to "pump" him was utterly preposterous. The little I could learn was not of a very satisfactory nature. I was interested, however, in hearing that the name of the last baronet was Arthur, and that he was the elder brother of Sir Charles. He had married and gone to Italy, where he perished with his wife and child—it was supposed of an epidemic fever. It was at his death, that Sir Charles succeeded to the estate and title. His youth had been a very wild one.

I had been some weeks in gleaning this information, and was now turning my attention to the exploration of the old part of the house, and unless something encouraging should occur within a few days, I was resolved to throw up my commission. None of my fellow servants, except Ratcliffe, dared to go near the old wing at night. Various ghostly sights and sounds were, by

common rumor, connected with these ancient rooms and corridors. But the chief one among the ghosts was a female figure, robed in white, which walked there between midnight and morning. It was popularly supposed to be the departed spirit of a certain heiress of the Willoughbys, who, years ago, had gone mad and killed herself—"all for love."

To most of the upper rooms of the old wing I had no difficulty in gaining access, but the main corridor, which communicated with the apartments on the ground floor of this portion of the house, was always locked. To the door of this passage, however, I had obtained a key, and was determined to use it. The night after I got hold of it, I waited until the house was quiet, and then rose and made for the haunted corridor. There was a bright moon, and I thought it best to take no light. I was always armed. My key answered the purpose admirably, and in a few minutes I was within the much-dreaded passage. I advanced cautiously, peering into all the rooms, right and left. Presently I came to a staircase, which I ascended, but was stopped by a door, locked and barred. This door opened in the direction of Sir Charles's own private apartments. Descending, I continued to advance till I reached the end of the passage, or at least, a door which stopped my further progress. I could do nothing but turn back, which I did unwillingly, and ill-pleased with the unproductiveness of my essay. I had returned my steps nearly half way when a slight noise behind me caused me to wheel about precipitately. I saw nobody, but there was a light shining through one of the doors behind me, and I thought I also heard a slight rustling, as of someone moving. There was an open door close behind me. I popped into the room to which it belonged, and ensconced myself behind the door, where I could peep out into the passage. I had hardly done so, when a tall, white figure emerged from the door through which I had seen the light shining.

That this was *the* ghost I had no doubt, and that it was not *a* ghost I had just as little. It stalked slowly towards me with a lighted taper in its hand. As it came nearer, I began to distinguish its features. They interested me, and well they might, for they were those of the "highly respectable Mrs. Jones," whom I had employed to take care of little Arthur! She passed within two feet of me, ascended the stairs of which I have spoken, passed through the door, and locked and barred it after her. When she was gone, I explored the room from which she issued, and found the door through which she must have entered it, but like the others, it was locked. As I was slowly returning along the corridor, I heard some one again opening the door at the head of the stairs. Expecting to see Mrs. Jones again, I slipped into one of the rooms as before. It was Mrs. Jones, but she had a companion. It was Sir Charles Willoughby himself. They came towards me, and as they passed, I heard the baronet say—"One of the new servants is very inquisitive, Ratcliffe tells me. If he becomes too curious, I will serve him as I did Foster."

A blasphemous oath confirmed this declaration. I knew that Foster had been my predecessor as second footman, and it was believed he had absconded with some silver spoons. I saw Sir Charles's face as he spoke of him; it was the very face I would give (were I a painter) to a fiend incarnate. The two passed on, and disappeared through the door at the far end of the passage, which they locked, but not before I had seen that it opened upon a descending staircase. By-and-by Sir Charles returned alone, and passed out the same way he entered. I listened for some time, but all remained quiet, and I stole away to my own chamber.

What I had seen gave me food for thought. Mrs. Jones's presence proved to me I had blundered on the right *walnut*; the question now was, how to crack it, and get at the kernel of the mystery which had so baffled me. The next day I was at work in the cellar, clearing out an old wine-vault. I was all alone, and could ruminate at leisure. My reflections were somewhat suddenly interrupted. I wanted to move out of my way an old beam, which had been imbedded in the wall. It was now [illegible] a crash, and a shower of stones and dirt, making a great hole in the wall. Behind this hole was a cavity I determined to explore. I procured a light, and clambered over the rubbish into it. These cellars were beneath the old wing of the mansion, and the walls were in many places very much dilapidated. I had advanced perhaps fifty feet, when I heard a human voice. I stopped and listened. It came through the wall on the left side, where it had partially fallen down. I asked who was there. The only answer was a groan several times repeated. "Can poor little Arthur be immured in that dungeon?" I said to myself. I was resolved to find out. I went back to the wine vault, and returned with a crowbar I had been using. Half an hour's work enabled me to get through what proved to be the back wall of a vaulted chamber, some fifteen feet square. Instead of a boy, I found a man, pale, feeble, and attenuated, with long matted hair and beard, and evidently insane. He was continually repeating the names of "Anna" and "Arthur," with occasionally a moan which made me shudder. As the miserable man sat on his straw pallet, gazing vacantly at me, I saw that he had little Arthur's eyes, even to their expression. While watching him, I heard a light footstep without, the door was unlocked, and Mrs. Jones entered! As she came in, I stepped behind the door, and while her back was turned, shut and locked it with the key she had left in the lock. When she saw me, she started back and screamed faintly.

"Mrs. Jones," said I, "I see you know me. I have only a word or two to say to you. Do as I tell you, and I will befriend you as far as I can; refuse, and you, as well as your infamous employer, shall meet with the utmost rigor of the law. I know that is Sir Arthur Willoughby, and I know his son Arthur is in these dungeons."

Before I had finished, Mrs. Jones fell on her knees, begged for mercy, and assured me that she would have confessed everything long ago, if she had not been afraid Sir Charles would take her life, as he certainly would.

"You need have no fear of him," said I. "Though his insane brother and nephew cannot hold this property, the power it confers will not be his much longer. All I want you to do now is to set little Arthur at liberty, and then let us out by the back door of the old wing."

I had been speaking at random to Mrs. Jones, and taking for granted what I only guessed at, but I had hit the mark. In a few minutes Arthur was at liberty, and we brought him back to the cell where his father was, whom he had not seen for five years. He was grown, but not much changed. He did not recognize me. As I was leading him to his father, a noise at the door caused me to turn around, and as I did so, I saw the face of Sir Charles Willoughby, with every bad passion that agitates the heart of man concentrated there in one focus of horrible malignity.

"Die, traitress!" he said, and before I could advance a single step, he had plunged a dagger into the heart of Mrs. Jones. I had hardly time to draw a bowie-knife, when he sprang upon me. The fury which animated him was almost supernatural, but I was younger and a stronger man than he.

I was anxious to disarm him, and I would have done so, if his fellow-scoundrel, Ratcliffe, had not appeared upon the scene, armed with a heavy club. The moment I saw this, I began to press upon my adversary with all my strength, for I now felt that it was his life, or mine. The valet aimed a tremendous blow at my head. I sprang aside and partially avoided it, while at the same instant almost I drove my knife to the hilt in Charles Willoughby's throat. The bludgeon had descended on my shoulder, and momentarily paralyzed my left arm, but the blow was not repeated. Ratcliffe saw that his master had received the punishment due his crimes, and immediately fled with the greatest precipitation. During the combat the insane father and son had stood within a few feet of us, and both had been plentifully sprinkled by the lifeblood of brother and uncle. The excitement of both was painful to behold. I gazed at them with intense interest. Sanity and insanity hung trembling in the balance, as if a feather's weight would cause one or the other to preponderate. As they stood face to face, a dim consciousness of each other's identity was evidently dawning upon their benighted minds, while both were struggling piteously with the mental darkness which still prevented full and perfect recognition.

A pin might have been heard to drop, as the boy whispered doubtfully, "Papa!" The spell was broken.

"Arthur—my child! My child!" shrieked the father, as he clasped his long lost boy to his heart. And both were from that moment as sound and sane as any of their race.

I will not dwell upon what remains to be told. Charles Willoughby was the victim of passions fostered and rendered ungovernable by long indulgence. He loved the bride of his elder brother, Anna Osburne, and to revenge her rejection of him, murdered her in the presence of her husband and child, both of whom became insane from the terrible shock. This happened at Naples. The murderer found means to prove the death of both, and to get his brother secretly immured at the old wing, at Walnuts. Little Arthur was first abandoned in the streets of Paris, and afterwards stolen from me, when I tried to preserve him, and taken to Walnuts also, where he was found as I have stated.

Ratcliffe was eventually caught, and with difficulty escaped the gallows. He was transported. My little Arthur still lives, and is now Sir Arthur Willoughby, and the best and truest friend I have on earth.

The Flag of our Union, December 31, 1859