

The Man of Feeling – Henry Mackenzie: Chapter 14

CHAPTER XIV

HE SETS OUT ON HIS JOURNEY – THE BEGGAR AND HIS DOG

1 He had taken leave of his aunt on the eve of his intended departure; but the good lady's affection for her nephew interrupted her sleep, and early as it was next morning when Harley came down stairs to set out, he found her in the parlour with a tear on her cheek, and her caudle-cup in her hand. She knew enough of physic to prescribe against going abroad of a morning with an empty stomach. She gave her blessing with the draught; her instructions she had delivered the night before. They consisted mostly of negatives; for London, in her idea, was so replete with temptations, that it needed the whole armour of her friendly cautions to repel their attacks.

5 Peter stood at the door. We have mentioned this faithful fellow formerly: Harley's father had taken him up an orphan, and saved him from being cast on the parish; and he had ever since remained in the service of him and of his son. Harley shook him by the hand as he passed, smiling, as if he had said, 'I will not weep.' He sprung hastily into the chaise that waited for him: Peter folded up the step. 'My dear master,' said he, (shaking the solitary lock that hung on either side of his head) 'I have been told as how London is a sad place.'—He was choked with the thought, and his benediction could not be heard:—but it shall be heard, honest Peter!—where these tears will add to its energy.

10 In a few hours Harley reached the inn where he proposed breakfasting; but the fulness of his heart would not suffer him to eat a morsel. He walked out on the road, and gaining a little height, stood gazing on that quarter he had left. He looked for his wonted prospect, his fields, his woods, and his hills: they were lost in the distant clouds! He pencilled them on the clouds, and bade them farewell with a sigh!

15 He sat down on a large stone to take out a little pebble from his shoe, when he saw, at some distance, a beggar approaching him. He had on a loose sort of coat, mended with different-coloured rags, amongst which the blue and the russet were the predominant. He had a short knotty stick in his hand, and on the top of it was stuck a ram's horn; his knees (though he was no pilgrim) had worn the stuff of his breeches; he wore no shoes, and his stockings had entirely lost that part of them which should have covered his feet and ankles: in his face, however, was the plump appearance of good humour; he walked a good round pace, and a crook-legged dog trotted at his heels.

20 'Our delicacies,' said Harley to himself, 'are fantastic; they are not in nature! that beggar walks over the sharpest of these stones barefooted, while I have lost the most delightful dream in the world, from the smallest of them happening to get into my shoe.'—The beggar had by this time come up, and, pulling off a piece of hat, asked charity of Harley; the dog began to beg too:—it was impossible to resist both; and in truth, the want of shoes and stockings had made both unnecessary, for Harley had destined sixpence for him before. The beggar, on receiving it, poured forth blessings without number; and, with a sort of smile on his countenance, said to Harley, 'that, if he wanted to have his fortune told'—Harley turned his eye briskly on the beggar: it was an unpromising look for the subject of a prediction, and silenced the prophet immediately. 'I would much rather learn,' said Harley, 25 'what it is in your power to tell me: your trade must be an entertaining one: sit down on this stone, and let me know something of your profession; I have often thought of turning fortune-teller for a week or two myself.'

30 'Master,' replied the beggar, 'I like your frankness much; God knows I had the humour of plain-dealing in me from a child; but there is no doing with it in this world; we must live as we can, and lying is, as you call it, my profession: but I was in some sort forced to the trade, for I dealt once in telling truth.

65 'I was a labourer, Sir, and gained as much as to make me live: I never laid by indeed; for I was reckoned a piece of a wag, and your wags, I take it, are seldom rich, Mr. Harley.' 'So,' said Harley, 'you seem to know me.' 'Ay, there are few folks in the country that I don't know something of: how should I tell fortunes else?' 'True; but to go on with your story: you were a labourer, you say, and a wag; your industry, I suppose, you left with your old trade; but your humour you preserve to be of use to you in your new.'

70 'What signifies sadness, Sir? a man grows lean on't: but I was brought to my idleness by degrees; first I could not work, and it went against my stomach to work ever after. I was seized with a jail-fever at the time of the assizes being in the county where I lived; for I was always curious to get acquainted with the felons, because they are commonly fellows of much mirth and little thought, qualities I had ever an esteem for. In the height of this fever, Mr. Harley, the house where I lay took fire, and burnt to the ground: I was carried out in that condition, and lay all the rest of my illness in a barn. I got the better of my disease however, but I was so weak that I spit blood whenever I attempted to work. I had no relation living that I knew of, and I never kept a friend above a week, when I was able to joke; I seldom remained above six 75 months in a parish, so that I might have died before I had found a settlement in any: thus I was forced to beg my bread, and a sorry trade I found it, Mr. Harley. I told all my misfortunes truly, but they were seldom believed; and the few who gave me a half-penny as they passed, did it with a shake of the head, and an injunction not to trouble them with a long story. In short, I found that people don't care to give alms without some security for their money; a wooden leg or a withered arm is a sort of draught upon heaven for those who chuse to have their money placed to account there; so I changed my plan, and, instead of telling my own 80 misfortunes, began to prophesy happiness to others. This I found by much the better way: folks will always listen when the tale is their own; and of many who say they do not believe in fortune-telling, I have known few on whom it had not a very sensible effect. I pick up the names of their acquaintance; amours and 85 little squabbles are easily gleaned among servants and neighbours; and indeed people themselves are the best intelligencers in the world for our purpose: they dare not puzzle us for their own sakes, for every one is anxious to hear what they wish to believe, and they who repeat it, to laugh at it when they have done, are 90 generally more serious than their hearers are apt to imagine. With a tolerable good memory, and some share of cunning, with the help of walking a-nights over heaths and church-yards, with this, and showing the tricks of that there dog, whom I stole from the serjeant of a marching regiment (and by the way, he can steal too 95 upon occasion) I make shift to pick up a livelihood. My trade, indeed, is none of the honestest; yet people are not much cheated neither, who give a few halfpence for a prospect of happiness, which I have heard some persons say is all a man can arrive at in this world.—But I must bid you good-day, Sir; for I have three 100 miles to walk before noon, to inform some boarding-school young ladies, whether their husbands are to be peers of the realm, or captains in the army: a question which I promised to answer them by that time.'

105 Harley had drawn a shilling from his pocket; but virtue bade him consider on whom he was going to bestow it. —Virtue held back his arm:—but a milder form, a younger sister of virtue's, not so severe as virtue, nor so serious as pity, smiled upon him: His fingers lost their compression;—nor did virtue offer to catch the money as it fell. It had no sooner reached the ground than the watchful cur (a trick he had been taught) snapped it up; and, contrary to the most approved method of stewardship, delivered it immediately into the hands of his master.

**Provide a textual analysis of *The Man of Feeling*
chapter 14 by Henry Mackenzie paying close attention to
its language, imagery, and thematic content**

Chapter 14 is concerned with Harley's first encounter on his expedition to London occurring only a few hours after he leaves his aunt's company. As with many of the episodes in the novel it can be read in isolation, or as a fragment, as there is only a minimal sense of plot development at the opening of the chapter. The events are all recounted by an external narrator and describe Harley taking a tearful leave of his aunt and servant (which the narrator interrupts briefly to commend Peter's benediction prophetically to the reader) and his meeting with a beggar and his dog outside an inn. The beggar relates his sad history, offers his opinions on begging, and explains how, and more importantly why, he tells fortunes. The meeting concludes abruptly with Harley's proposed donation being prematurely appropriated by the beggar's dog.

The first thirty lines dealing with Harley's departure are typically sentimental and loaded with emotional responses: the aunt is tearful (line 4), as is his servant (22), and Harley looks back towards his home with a sigh (29). The servant tries to speak to Harley, but "he was choaked with the thought" (20), and this choking wordlessness can be seen by the use of the em dashes in the text which also force the reader to pause to share Peter's sadness; Brewer suggests that "sentimental eloquence was a matter of sighs, tears and palpitations, not words (1997:118). The human heart has been described as "the key to sentiment" (Brewer, 1997:117) and Harley's figurative "fulness of heart" (24) which prevents him from eating, embodies his unhappiness and is a classic example of epithetic sentimental language.

Initially the description of the beggar's patched coat, worn breeches, and bare feet seems intended to create a sympathetic response in the reader, but the details could be seen to confound this. The coat is patched primarily with blue and russet (36), but these colours have opposing connotations: blue is often associated with uniforms and authority, whereas the reddish-brown russet is the traditional colour and material used for peasants' clothes. His worn breeches give the impression of having been worn while

kneeling, but the narrator is quick to point out that “he was no pilgrim” (35) indicating a marked lack of religiosity. These apparent discrepancies could be seen to suggest that even at this early stage in the meeting the reader’s sympathy is being misdirected.

Harley is however filled with admiration for the beggar’s nonchalance at walking barefoot when he has, in his overly dramatic description, “lost the most delightful dream in the world” (43) because of a small stone in his shoe, and already has sixpence to give the beggar before he speaks. This is the first of many, and indeed two in this chapter, instances where Harley offers charity based on the pity he feels for the people he meets. Ackroyd describes him as suffering from “the English malady” or “sensitive sentimentality” which ultimately kills him, as he is too good for this world (2002:434).

Harley’s charity is a persistent theme in the book; he is repeatedly overwhelmed by his emotions resulting in his paying increasingly larger sums to others. His economic awareness appears to be minimal, but his feeling and lack of understanding of the realities of the world overcompensate for this despite the financial cost: Harley attempts to relieve the suffering and improve the life of others by giving them money. The beggar’s explanation of his fortune telling inverts this as his attempts to improve other people’s lives by “prophesy[ing] happiness” (95) in return for money. This episode provides two perspectives on the same question of emotion and feeling versus economic worldliness.

This morality of the beggar’s seemingly generous act is brought into question when he details his methods, as he gleans his genuine information from eavesdropping, and everything else is simply telling people what they want to hear. He acknowledges that his trade is not the “honestest” (111) but quite justifiably he points out that they are “not much cheated” (111), and he gives them the “prospect of happiness” (112) which he agrees is the best some people can hope for in life. It could be argued that the beggar’s morals are unacceptable as he only tells fortunes for personal financial gain; although this raises the question of whether this is any different to Harley giving money to others for his personal emotional gain. The other difficulty that arises with the beggar is that he reports when he is telling his highly

emotive and sorrowful story truthfully, people are not interested in helping him and he is able to make more money by lying to them through his fortune telling.

Their meeting concludes with the “watchful cur” (125) stealing Harley’s dropped coin for its master. In this act Harley’s further generosity is rudely precipitated, and a pensive internal dialogue questioning whether he should be supporting the beggar’s immoral lifestyle is interrupted before it can reach a satisfactory conclusion. The discomfort of the situation is increased by the fact that the beggar has already told Harley that he originally stole the dog and then, providing an implicit warning, that the dog can steal when required. Despite this, the reader is left sympathising for Harley as the dog has acted against the “approved method of stewardship” (126), and Harley is without his shilling. This sympathetic response is described by Harkin as being brought about by a reaction to “the erosion of traditional notions of social responsibility” (1994:318). The fact that these events emerge because of Harley’s sceptical “unpromising look” (53) seems a little out of place as it might be expected that a man of his humanity and sensitivity would have welcomed having his fortune told.

In the context of the entire book this episode acts as a salutary warning for Harley’s mission. Even though he has only travelled a few miles from his home he has been subjected to a negative experience, possibly of the type of which his aunt has warned him, which he would have expected to find in London. With this occurring so proximately to home, attention is drawn to Harley’s insular and very limited, both geographically and experientially, world. To this end this episode and the novel as a whole could be seen as a warning against sentimentality in human nature, even though the reader is obliged by the narrative to empathise, to some degree at least, with Harley throughout.

(1073 words)

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