

LADY BOUNTIFUL.

A STORY WITH A MORAL FOR SOCIAL THEORISTS TO ACT UPON.

CHAPTER VII.

THE TRINITY ALMSHOUSE.

From Stepney Green to the Trinity Almshouse is not a long way; you have, in fact, little more than to pass through a short street and to cross the road. But the road itself is not worthy: for, of all the roads which lead into London or out of it, this of Whitechapel is the broadest and noblest by nature. Man, it is true, has done little to embellish it. There are no avenues of green and spreading lime and plane-trees, as, one day, there shall be: there are no stately buildings, towers, spires, miracles of architecture; but only houses and shops which, whether small or big, are all alike mean, unlovely, and depressing. Yet, in spite of all, a noble road.

This road, which is the promenade, breathing-place, place of resort, place of gossip, place of amusement, and place of business for the greater part of East London, stretches all the way from Aldgate to Stratford, being called first Whitechapel Road, and then the Mile End Road. Under the first name the road has acquired a reputation of the class called, by moralists, unenviable. The history of police-courts records, under the general heading of Whitechapel Road, shows so many free fights, brave robberies, gallant murders, dauntless kickings, outdugings, pummelings, pocket-pickings, shop-liftings, watch-snatchings, and assaults on constables, with such a brave display of disorderly drunks, that the road has come to be regarded with admiration as one of those Alsatian retreats, growing every day rarer, which are beyond and above the law. It is thought to be a place where manhood and personal bravery reign supreme. Yet the road is not worthy this reputation: it has of late years become orderly; its present condition is dull and law-abiding, brilliant as the past has been, and whatever greatness may be in store for the future. Once out of Whitechapel, and in the respectable region of Mile End, the road has always been eminently respectable; and as regards dangers, quite safe, ever since they built the bridge over the Lea, which used now and again to have freshets, and, at such times, tried to drown harmless people in its ford. Since that bridge was built, in the time of Edward I., it matters not for the freshets. There is not much in the Bow Road when the stranger gets there, in his journey along this great thoroughfare, for him to visit, except its almshouses, which are many; and the beautiful old church of Bow, standing in the middle of the road, crumbling slowly away in the East End fog, with its narrow strips of crowded church-yard. One hopes that before it has quite crumbled away some one will go and make a picture of it—an etching would be the best. At Stratford the road divides, so that you may turn to the right and get to Barking, or to the left and get to Epping Forest. And all the way, for four miles, a broad and noble road, which must have been carved originally out of No Man's Land, in so generous a spirit is it laid out. Angela is now planting it with trees; beneath the trees she will set seats for those who wish to rest. Here and there she will erect drinking-fountains. Whitechapel Road, since her improvements begun, has been transformed; even the bacon shops are beginning to look a little less rusty; and the grocers are trying to live up to the green avenues.

Angela's imagination was fired by this road from the very first, when the Idle Apprentice took her into it as into a new and strange country. Here, for the first time, she realized the meaning of the universal course, from which only herself and a few others are unnaturally exempted; and this only under heavy penalties and the necessity of flouting out their own work for themselves, or it will be worse for them. People think it better to choose their own work. That is a great mistake. You might just as well want to choose your own disease. In the West End, a good many folk do work—and work pretty hard, some of them—who need not, unless they please; and a good many others work who must, whether they please or not; but somehow the forced labor is pushed into the background. We do not perceive its presence; people drive about in carriages, as if there were nothing to do; people lounge; people have leisure; people do not look pressed, or in a hurry, or task-mastered, or told to make bricks without straw.

Here, in the East End, on the other hand, there are no strollers. All day long the place is full of passengers hastening to and fro, pushing each other aside, with set and anxious faces; each driven by the invisible scourge of necessity which makes slaves of all mankind. Do you know that famous picture of the Israelites in Egypt? Upon the great block of stone, which the

poor wretches are painfully dragging, while the cruel lash goades the weak and terrifies the strong, there sits one in authority. He regards the herd of slaves with eyes terrible from their stony gaze. What is it to him whether the feeble suffer and perish, so that the Pharaoh's will be done? The people of the East reminded Angela, who was an on-looker and had no work to do, of these builders of pyramids: they worked under a task-master as relentless as that stony-hearted captain or foreman of works. If the Israelites desisted, they were flogged back to work with cats of many tails; if our workmen desist, they are flogged back by starvation.

'Let us hope,' said Harry, to whom Angela imparted a portion of the above reflection and comparison—'let us hope the Pharaoh himself means well and is pitiful.' He spoke without his usual flippancy, so that perhaps his remark had some meaning, for himself.

All day long and all the year round there is a constant Fair going on in Whitechapel Road. It is held upon the broad pavement, which was benevolently intended, no doubt, for this purpose. Here are displayed all kinds of things: bits of second hand furniture, such as the head of a wooden bed, whose griminess is somewhat exaggerated, in order that a purchaser may expect something extraordinary cheap. Here are lids of pots and saucepans laid out, to show that in the warehouse, of which these things are specimens, will be found the principal parts of the utensils for sale; here are unexpected things, such as rows of skates, sold cheap in summer; light clothing in winter; workmen's tools of every kind, including, perhaps, the burglarious Jimmy; second-hand books—a miscellaneous collection, establishing the fact that the readers of books in Whitechapel—a feeble and scanty folk—read nothing at all except sermons and meditations among the Tombs; second hand boots and shoes, cutlery, hats and caps, rat traps and mouse-traps and bird-cages, flowers and seeds, skittles, and frames for photographs. Cheap-jacks have their carts beside the pavement; and with strident voice proclaim the goodness of their wares, which include in this district bladders and dried haddock, as well as crockery. And one is amazed, seeing how the open-air Fair goes on, why the shops are kept open at all.

And always the same. It saddens one, I know not why, to sit beside a river and see the water flowing down with never a pause. It saddens one still more to watch the current of human life in this great thoroughfare and feel that, as it is now, so it was a generation ago, and so it will be a generation hence. The bees in the hive die, and are replaced by others exactly like them, and the honey-making goes on merrily still. So, in a great street, the waggons always go up and down; the passengers never cease; the shop boy is always behind the counter; the workgirl is always sewing; the workman is always carrying his tools as he goes to his work; there are always those who stay for half a pint, and always those who hurry on. In this endless drama, which repeats itself like a musical box, the jeune premier of to-day becomes to-morrow the lean and slippared pantaloon. The day after to-morrow he will have disappeared, gone to join the silent ones in the grim, unlovely cemetery belonging to the Tower Hamlets, which lies beyond Stepney, and is the reason why on Sundays the frequent funeral blackens all the road.

'One can moralize,' said Harry one day, after they had been exchanging sentiments of enjoyable sadness, 'at this rate forever. But it has all been done before.'

'Everything, I suppose,' replied Angela, 'has been done before. If it has not been done by me, it is new to me. It does not make it any better for a man who has to work all the days of his life, and gets no enjoyment out of it, and lives ignobly and dies obscurely, that the same thing happens to most people.'

'We can not help ourselves.' This time it was the Cabinet-maker who spoke to the Dress-maker. 'We belong to the crowd. You can't make much glory out of a mercenary lathe or out of a dress-maker's shop, can you, Miss Kennedy?'

It was by such reminders, one to the other, that conversations of the most delightful kind, full of speculations and comparisons, were generally brought up short. When Angela remembered that she was talking to an artisan, she froze. When Harry reflected that it was a dress-maker to whom he was communicating bits of his inner soul, he checked himself. When, which happened every day, they forgot their disguises for awhile, they talked quite freely, and very prettily communicated all sorts of thoughts, fancies, and opinions to each other; inasmuch that once or twice a dis-

agreeable feeling would cross the girl's mind that they were perhaps getting too near a line at which 'keeping company' begins; but he was a young workman of good taste, and he never presumed.

She was walking beside her guide, Mr. Bunker, and pondering over these things as she gazed down the broad road, and recollected the talk she had held in it; and now her heart was warm within her, because of the things she thought and had tried to say.

'Here we are, miss,' said Mr. Bunker, stopping. 'Here's the Trinity Almshouse.'

She awoke from her dream. It is very odd to consider the strange thoughts which flash upon one in walking. Angela suddenly discovered that Mr. Bunker possessed a remarkable resemblance to a bear. His walk was something like one, with a swing of the shoulders, and his hands were big and his expression was hungry. Yes, he was exactly like a bear.

She observed that she was standing at a wicket-gate, and that over the gate was the effigy of a ship in full sail done in stone. Mr. Bunker opened the door, and led the way to the court within.

Then a great stillness fell upon the girl's spirit.

Outside, the waggons, carts, and omnibuses thundered and rolled. You could hear them plainly enough; you could hear the tramp of a thousand feet. But the noise outside was only a contrast to the quiet within. A wall of brick with iron railings separated the tumult from the calm. It seemed as if, within that court, there was no noise at all, so sharp and sudden was the contrast.

She stood in an oblong court, separated from the road by the wall above named. On either hand was a row of small houses, containing, apparently, four rooms each. They were built of red brick, and were bright and clean. Every house had an iron tank in front, for water; there was a pavement of flags along this row, and a grass lawn occupied the middle of the court. Upon grass stood the statue of a benefactor, and at the end of the court was a chapel. It was a very little chapel, but was approached by a most enormous and disproportionate flight of stone steps, which might have been originally out for a portal of St. Paul's Cathedral. The steps were surmounted by a great door-way, which occupied the whole west front of the chapel. No one was moving about the place except an old lady, who was drawing water from her tank.

'Pretty place, ain't it?' asked Mr. Bunker.

'It seems peaceful and quiet,' said the girl.

'Place where you'd expect Pride, ain't it?' he went on, scornfully. 'Oh! yes, Paupers and Pride go together, as well known. Lowliness is for them who've got a bank and money in it. Oh, yes, of course. Gar! The Pride of an Inmate!'

He led the way, making a most impertinent echo with the heels of his boots. Angela observed immediately that there was another court beyond the first. In fact, it was larger; the houses were of stone, and of greater size; and it was if anything more solemnly quiet. It was possessed of silence.

Here there is another statue erected to the memory of the Founder, who, it is stated on the pedestal, died, being then 'Commander of a ship' in the East Indies, in the year 1686. The gallant captain is represented in the costume of the period. He wears a coat of many buttons, large cuffs, and full skirts; the coat is buttoned a good way below the waist, showing the fair doublet within, also provided with many buttons. He wears shoes with buckles, has a soft silk wrapper round his neck, and a sash to carry his sword. On his head there is an enormous wig, well adapted to serve the purpose for which Solar Topes were afterward invented. In his right hand he carries a sextant, many sizes bigger than those in modern use, and at his feet dolphins sport. A grass lawn covers this court, as well as the other, and no voice or sound ever comes from any of the houses, whose occupants might well be all dead.

Mr. Bunker turned to the right, and rapped with his knuckles at a door. Then, without waiting for a reply, he turned the handle, and with a nod invited his companion to follow him.

It was a small but well-proportioned room with low ceiling, furnished sufficiently. There were clean white curtains with rose-colored ribbons. The window was open, and in it stood a pot of mignonette, now at its best. At the window sat, on one side, an old gentleman with silvery white hair and spectacles, who was reading, and on the other side a girl with work on her lap, sewing.

'Now, Cap'n Sorensen,' said Mr. Bunker, without the formality of greeting, 'I've got you another chance. Take it or leave it, since you can afford to be particular. I can't; I'm not rich enough. Ha! He snorted and looked about him with the contempt which a man who has a Banker naturally feels for one who hasn't, and lives in an Almshouse.

'What is the chance?' asked the Inmate,

meekly, looking up. When he saw Angela in the door-way he rose and bowed, offering her a chair. Angela observed that he was a very tall old man, and that he had blue eyes and a rosy face—quite a young face it looked—and was gentle of speech and courteous in demeanor.

'Is the chance connected with this young lady, Mr. Bunker?'

'It is,' said the great man. 'Miss Kennedy, this is the young woman I told you of. This young lady'—he indicated Angela—'is setting herself up, in a genteel way, in the dress-making line. She's taken one of my houses on the Green, and she wants hands to begin with. She comes here, Cap'n Sorensen, on my recommendation.'

'We are obliged to you, Mr. Bunker.'

The girl was standing, her work in her hands, looking at Angela, and a little terrified by the sight of so grand a person. The dress-makers of her experience were not young and beautiful; mostly they were pinched with years, troubles, and anxieties. When Angela began to notice her, she saw that the young workgirl, who seemed about nineteen years of age, was tall, rather too thin, and pretty. She did not look strong, but her cheeks were flushed with a delicate bloom; her eyes, like her father's, were blue; her hair was light and feathery, though she brushed it as straight as it would go. She was dressed, like most girls of her class, in a frock of sober black.

Angela took her by the hand. 'I am sure,' she said, kindly, 'that we shall be friends.'

'Friends!' cried Mr. Bunker, aghast. 'Why, she's to be one of your girls! You can't be friends with your own girls.'

'Perhaps,' said the girl, blushing and abashed, 'you would like to see some of my work.' She spread out her work on the table.

'Fine weather here, cap'n,' Mr. Bunker went on, striking an attitude of patronage, as if the sun was good indeed to shine on an Almshouse. 'Fine weather should make grateful hearts, especially in them as is provided for—having been improvident in their youth—with comfortable roofs to shelter them.'

'Grateful hearts, indeed, Mr. Bunker,' said the captain, quietly.

'Mr. Bunker,'—Angela turned upon him with an air of command, and pointed to the door—'you may go now. You have done all I wanted.'

Mr. Bunker turned very red. 'He could go!' Was he to be ordered about by every little dress-maker? 'He could go!'

'If the lady engages my daughter, Mr. Bunker,' said Captain Sorensen, 'I will try to find the five shillings next week.'

'Five shillings!' cried Angela. 'Why, I have just given him five shillings for his recommendation.'

Mr. Bunker did not explain that his practice was to get five shillings from both sides, but he retreated with as much dignity as could be expected.

He asked, outside, with shame, how it was that he allowed himself thus to be sat upon and ordered out of the house by a mere girl. Why had he not stood upon his dignity? To be told he might go, and before an Inmate—a common Pauper!

There is one consolation always open, thank Heaven, for the meanest among us poor worms of earth. We are gifted with imaginations; we can make the impossible an actual fact, and can with the eye of the mind make the unreal stand before us in the flesh. Therefore, when we are down trodden, we may proceed, without the trouble and danger of turning (which has been known to bring total extinction upon a worm), to take revenge upon our enemy in imagination. Mr. Bunker, who was at this moment uncertain whether he hated Miss Kennedy more than he hated his nephew, went home glowing with the thought that but a few short months would elapse before he should be able to set his foot upon the former and crush her. Because, at the rate she was going on, she would not last more than that time. Then would he send in his bills, sue her, sell her up, and drive her out of the place stripped of the last farthing.

He might go! He, Bunker, was told that he might go! And in the presence of an Inmate. They thought of his nephew, and while he smote the pavement with the iron end of his umbrella, a cold dew appeared upon his nose, the place where inward agitation is frequently betrayed in this way, and he shivered, looking about him suddenly as if he was frightened. Yet, what harm was Harry Goslett likely to do him?

'What is your name, my dear?' asked Angela, softly, and without any inspection of the work on the table. She was wondering how this pretty, fragile flower should be found in Whitechapel. Oh, ignorance of Newham! For she might have reflected that the rarest and most beautiful plants are found in the most savage places—there is beautiful botanizing, one is told, in the Ural Mountains; and that the sun shines everywhere, even, as Mr. Bunker remarked, in an Almshouse; and that she herself had gathered in the ugliest ditches around Cambridge the sweetest flowering mosses, the tenderest campion, the lowliest little herb-robot.

'My name is Ellen,' replied the girl.

'I call her Nelly,' her father answered, 'and she is a good girl. Will you sit down, Miss Kennedy?'

Angela sat down and proceeded to business. She said, addressing the old man, but looking at the child, that she was setting up a dress-maker's shop; that she had hopes of support, even from the West End, where she had friends; that she was prepared to pay the proper wages, with certain other advantages, of which more would be said later on; and that, if Captain Sorensen approved, she would engage his daughter from that day.

'I have only been out as an improver as yet,' said Nelly. 'But if you will really try me as a dress-maker—oh, father, it is sixteen shillings a week.'

Angela's heart smote her. A poor sixteen shillings a week! And this girl was delighted at getting so much.

'What do you say, Captain Sorensen? Do you want references, as Mr. Bunker did? I am the granddaughter of a man who was born here and made a little—money here, which he left to me. Will you let her come to me?'

'You are the first person,' said Captain Sorensen, 'who ever, in this place, where work is not so plentiful as hands, offered work as if taking it was a favor to you.'

'I want good girls—and nice girls,' said Angela. 'I want a house where we shall all be friends.'

The old sailor shook his head.

'There is no such house here,' he said, sadly. 'It is "take it or leave it"—if you won't take it, others will. Make the poor girls your friends, Miss Kennedy? You look and talk like a lady born and bred, and I fear you will be put upon. Make friends of your servants? Why, Mr. Bunker will tell you that Whitechapel does not carry on business that way. But it is good of you to try, and I am sure you will not scold and drive like the rest.'

'You offended Mr. Bunker, I learn, by refusing a place which he offered,' said Angela.

'Yes; God knows if I did right. We are desperately poor, else we should not be here. That you may see for yourself. Yet, my blood boiled when I heard the character of the man whom my Nelly was to serve. I could not let her go. She is all I have, Miss Kennedy—the old man drew the girl toward him and held her, his arm round her waist. 'If you will take her and treat her kindly, you will have—it isn't worth anything, perhaps—the gratitude of one old man in this world—soon in the next.'

'Trust your daughter with me, Captain Sorensen,' Angela replied, with tears in her eyes.

'Everybody round here is poor,' he went on. 'That makes people hard-hearted; there are too many people in trade, and that makes them mean; they are all trying to undersell each other, and that makes them full of tricks and cheating. They treat the workgirls worse because they can not stand up for themselves. The long hours, and the bad food, and the poisonous air—think a little of your girls, Miss Kennedy. But you will—you will.'

'I will, Captain Sorensen.'

'It seems worse to us old sailors,' he went on. 'We have had a hardish life, but it has been in open air. Old sailors haven't had to cheat and lie for a living. And we haven't been brought up to think of girls turning night into day, and working sixteen hours on end at twopenny an hour. It is hard to think of my poor girl—' he stopped and clenched his fist. 'Better to starve than to drive such a mill!' He was thinking of the place which he had refused.

'Let us try each other, Nelly,' she said, kissing her on the forehead.

The captain took his hat to escort her as far as the gate.

'A quiet place,' he said, looking round the little court, 'and a happy place for the last days of improvident old men like me. Yet some of us grumble. Forgive my plain speech about the work.'

'There is nothing to forgive, indeed, Captain Sorensen. Will you let me call upon you sometime?'

She gave him her hand. He bowed over it with a courtesy of a captain on his own quarter deck. When she turned away she saw that a tear was standing in his eyes.

'Father!' cried Nelly, rushing into his arms, 'did you ever see anybody like her? Oh! oh! do you think I really shall do for her?'

'You will do your best, my dear. It is a long time, I think, since I have seen and spoken with any one like that. In the old days I have had passengers to Calcutta like her; but none more so, Nelly—no, never one more so.'

'You couldn't father.' His daughter wanted no explanation of this mysterious qualification. 'You couldn't. She is a lady, father,' she looked up and laughed. 'It's a funny thing for a real lady to open a dress-maker's shop on Stepney Green, isn't it?'

Remark, if you please, that this girl had never once before, in all her life, conversed with a lady, using the word in the prejudiced and narrow sense peculiar to the West End. Yet she discovered instantly the truth. Whence this instinct? It is a world full of strange and wonderful things; the more questions we ask, the more we may; and the more things we consider, the more incomprehensible does the sum of things appear. Inquiring reader, I do not know how Nelly divined that her visitor was a lady.

(To be Continued.)