

Circumstantial Evidence.

BY WALTER BLACKBURN HARTE.

"Full many a flower is born to blush unseen,
"And waste its sweetness on the desert air."

—Gray's Elegy.

I.

"So you positively refuse to accept that sixpence, eh?" demanded an elderly lady of austere appearance, of the clerk as he threw the coin on the counter with a denial for the third time.

"I'm very sorry, ma'm," he replied with serio-comic gravity, "but that coin is an unmistakable counterfeit. You have been grossly imposed upon, madam. If you know the party or parties, who had the audacity to take advantage of your confiding, ingenuous disposition, deliver 'em up to justice, ma'm. Demand restitution, or put in operation the terrors of the law." This phrase struck him as a good expression capable of infinite expansion, so he repeated it with peculiar emphasis—"the terrors of the law—the law!"

"Young man, don't you make a laughing stock of me. I won't have it. It is not at all clever, though you may imagine so. It only shows how deplorably depraved was the manner of your bringing up. You have an impudent, uncontrollable tongue, and a bad base nature. Do you think, for one moment, I would allow any one to cheat me?"

With the threatening look present in her eyes as she put this question, and the formidable looking umbrella, of immense proportions, which she always carried, quite regardless of barometer, grasped firmly in her right hand, I do not mind confessing personally I should not have cared to make such a dangerous experiment.

The clerk replied deprecatingly, that in this wicked world virtue could not always shield the defenceless and innocent from the assaults and cunning of the unscrupulous, but he imagined that it would require an exceedingly bold base villain to obtain any advantage over the lady before him.

The aggrieved lady did not appear to consider this gallant reply altogether unequivocal; at any rate it by no means pacified her.

"Very well, sir," she said with smiling sarcasm, and an unnecessary stress upon the "sir," "I shall take the earliest opportunity of informing your employer of your outrageous conduct. I will teach you to treat your superiors with befitting respect, young man. And what's more, I shall immediately withdraw my custom from this establishment."

"Pray, ma'm, don't punish the innocent with the guilty. Don't, for Heaven's sake; be so heartless as to involve my respected and trustful employer in financial difficulties on my account. Remember, he is a married man and has a large and hungry family to support. Don't —." But the injured lady had sailed majestically out of the store.

When she had withdrawn I burst out laughing, and being of a rather facetious turn of mind, enquired of the clerk, whom, in my character as a regular customer, I knew very well, whether he felt the ground slipping from under his feet. He smiled faintly. It is a part of a dry-goods' clerk's ordinary duties to beam smiles upon his employer's patrons. This, doubtless, accounted for the fact that my witticism elicited but a very weak smile, as I entertain not the least suspicion but that the poor fellow was immensely tickled, and made up his mind that I was a humorous old fogey. I may say that this is my own firm conviction, and it is shared by my aged and doting mother, so that there can be no manner of doubt about it. Of course, after his long day's work the clerk had positively not enough smile left in him to do more than summon a faint ripple to the surface. He worked every day of the week, with the exception of Sunday, from 8 a. m. until 10 p. m., so that, by about half-past nine in the evening (the time of this episode), his faculty for contracting the muscles of his face at the quasi-witticisms of every chance purchaser was pretty well

worn out. It is hard work, this keeping up an appearance of perennial and beaming delight at the sight of each new face, and the sound of the strange voice, for the sum of 15s. per week.

He reached down a box of manuscript foolscap, and then, turning to me, whispered, with a theatrical "Hush!" as if he were on the point of communicating a state secret of the greatest importance in a whispering gallery: "She's the greatest natural curiosity of this locality."

"Oh, yes. Miss Charity Savall is quite a celebrity in her way. The name and fame of Miss Savall has spread from one end of Knobbing to the other."

"Quite so. That coin has been equally as ubiquitous, if not more so, but I regret to say that the good lady has up to the present met with scant success. Smith, the butcher, told me, only last evening, that he nearly accepted it between a couple of florins, but he happened to spot it in time. Why, sir, you will hardly believe me when I tell you that it has visited this store no less than three times. It's a fact. Once the maid-of-all-work brought it, and this evening's attempt is the second the old lady has made in person. On each occasion she tendered it to a different clerk, but as we had previously held a council of war upon the matter, we are now all under the constant apprehension of being reported to the governor and dismissed."

"But how did it pass into the possession of Miss Savall? She's generally pretty wide awake."

"Ah, that's a mystery, that only Time, which the copy book say proves all things, can possibly solve. Poor, deceived woman, that coin has aged her considerably. I can see it is preying upon her mind, and bearing her down, gradually but surely under its weight, to an untimely grave. It would be necessary to have a heart of adamant not to be moved with pity for her condition. I would dearly love to advise her to try an omnibus conductor in the dark, but I daren't. The barrier which the cold formalities of Society have placed between us—here he struck the counter with his clenched fist—"this is the galley to which I am bound slave for life. The harshness of a cold, unfeeling world, sir, frustrates the benevolent promptings of my sympathetic heart."

Bestowing a consolatory "Such is life—good night" upon the good-hearted radical, I retraced my steps to my lodgings. Although I had intended burning a prodigious amount of midnight oil upon my return, as the immense package of foolscap paper indicated, I spent the remainder of the evening with my feet on the fender, in front of a bright, cheerful fire. I prefer to be on terms of intimacy with my reader, instead of laying the law down *ex cathedra*, so he can, in imagination, draw another chair up to the other side of the hearth, and join my family circle, consisting of myself, my pipe and Pip, my terrier. Pip is the sole companion of my forlorn bachelorhood, and when I settle down to work, he comes and puts his soft, cold little nose upon my knee, just where it can easily insert itself into the palm of my hand, during the pauses of composition, and, by Jove! his love and sympathy inspire me. The kind reader who wades through this sketch may be inclined to doubt it, but I maintain that my Pip possesses powers unequalled by any other dog in the universe.

Somehow I could not get Miss Savall and her troubles out of my head all that evening, and as I watched the tobacco smoke from my churchwarden roll and curl up the chimney with the blazing, roaring flame, I kept repeating to myself my farewell to the clerk at the store: "Such is life!" But I am bad company to be thus moody, dear reader, after having invited you to spend an hour at my fireside—mine and Pip's. Perhaps, too, you are a fair young thing in petticoats, which makes my remissness more heinous.

Well, then, as this history concerns Miss Charity Savall, being a refutation of the calumnies of her detractors—she had enemies; what good woman has not?—I will proceed at once to give the reader a brief, unprejudiced description of her appearance and a few of her most characteristic virtues.

II.

She certainly had never been pretty, but then she was of refined and aristocratic appearance, with severely classical features. There was a slight resemblance in her to the Mater Dolorosa of Velasquez—at least she often said so, and as she dabbled in art, and I do not, I am not in a position to contradict her. She had the thin arms of the Fornarina, the dream-look of Raphael's Santa Cecilia. No, no! Despite my intense ignorance of Art matters, I must protest. She positively lacked the dream-look. It was replaced with a wolfish, kind of Napoleon-in-exile expression, which obtained for her the respect of all the domestics who entered into her service, and acted as a sort of accident assurance policy for the sanctity of the lump sugar and the currant wine. Her mouth was small and pursed, and she had a sharp chin, which, from an artistic point of view, was most dismaying. She wore those peculiar stiff curls, which, to me at least, always seem curiously suggestive of old maids and their manner of life. You can, to a great extent, gauge a woman's character by her fashion of dressing her hair. Miss Charity was tall, straight-backed as a life guardsman, and her *embonpoint* had been warped in early youth by her extreme regard for the proprieties. She had always been remarkable for the icy niceness of her manner, and her oft proclaimed virtue struck one as being worn, like a becoming garment, to draw attention, rather than from any intense inward love of virtue for its own sake. Her age was somewhere this side of fifty, and she was constantly heard to aver that no earthly consideration would ever induce her to relinquish the state of single blessedness which she had so long enjoyed. No rash male has ever, I believe, run the risk of incurring Miss Savall's haughty displeasure by offering her the hateful chains which would drag her bounding spirit down to the narrow impertinencies of domestic joys. Her published lectures on the subject of Women's Rights should be in the library of every intelligent man. They would be read with great profit, and I heartily recommend them—they are so tastefully bound. All works published solely at the author's expense, I notice, have a tendency to gorgeousness in their external get-up. I mention these works because her views upon matrimony are eloquently expressed therein.

In some respects, it must be confessed that Miss Savall is an unsatisfactory subject for a strictly veracious historian. In direct contradiction to all the established canons of fiction, she utterly failed to inspire love and devotion wherever she went. Her name, unlike those of other maiden ladies in our orthodox novels and Sabbath school stories (which are generally supposed to be founded upon fact, like the present history), was not generally beloved and respected by all the neighbourhood. She had no secret sorrow from the Past (with a capital P), which weighed upon her soul and cast a lurid shadow over her angelic countenance. She was not the patient, kindly recipient of all the girls' love stories, giving them advice and sympathy, and she did not smile in a sad, sweet way, as thoughts of what might have been crossed her own memory. A sigh seldom escaped her lips, unless she was deprecating the follies and vices of her neighbours, which she never failed to hear of, or mounting a steep flight of stairs, or paying a bill, which would admit of no further rebate. She was not the constant nurse at every sick bedside in the town, lightening the sufferer's troubles with her cheery presence, and bringing creature comforts with her. She detested sick rooms, they were "so stuffy," she said, and moreover, she had an abnormally strong horror of "catching things." For all this she was a large-souled woman, one of those to whom the petty circumstances of every day life are irksome, but who, in a metaphorical and general sort of way, are willing to take the whole of God's creatures to their bosoms. She wrote a great deal for the "Afghan Regeneration and Flannel Petticoat Brigade Mission Society," and annually distributed thousands of her productions—in packets at 2s. per thousand. In this way she did a great deal of good and earned no little reputation. She