

"I am quite alarmed, William," said his wife, when he joined her at Peasnap's door; "they say the Asiatic cholera is coming to England."

"It is. It has been on its mysterious march for nearly two years," replied her husband.

CHAPTER VI.

SCARCELY had Harding finished his breakfast on the following morning, when the late Chairman of the P.F.D., accompanied by two members of the committee, paid him a visit.

"For the purpose," said the former, "of conferring with you respecting the formation of a league for carrying on a Moral Force Agitation. We are converts to your opinions, Mr. Harding, and believe that all violence would be destructive of the ends we have in view."

"I am but a young man, Mr. Headcorn," replied William, "and do not pretend to teach my elders. But the error of the P.F.D. seems to me now so glaring, that I am ready to contest it anywhere and at any season. Of the league you speak, I could not, however, be a member."

They had evidently reckoned on his instant acquiescence in their scheme, for they were taken aback by this announcement.

"And why, pray?" asked Headcorn. "Why, in the name of consistency, Mr. Harding!"

"Because," replied Harding, "I have learned of late to look upon mere politics with less interest than formerly. I told you last night that our social evils far outweighed our political ones. They do. The evil of which we have to rid ourselves dwells in ourselves."

"That may be true, but——"

"It is true. Beside that evil all others shrink into insignificance. That which fetters my manhood is not my political disqualification, but my spiritual incapacity. I am ruled by meat and drink and house-rent and coals. I am the servant of these things, and not their master."

"You would not, then, fan the flame of political discontent?"

"Tell me, can bad men make good laws?"

"I can't say,—perhaps not."

"Go on and get a reform in parliament. You will then send into the House men who were never there before, and under the present system of representation could not well get there. Do you think in ten or twenty years' time, the people—the masses—the brewers of wood and drawers of water, will be improved, even in worldly condition—will be better off, in short, than they are now, in this year 1832?"

"Of course we think so," replied Mr. Lynchpin, one of Headcorn's associates.

"You are mistaken," said Harding. "They will be worse off in twenty years' time. And for this reason. The hideous cancer of our innumeral social system is ever increasing. You do not attempt to heal that. You are trying to mend a gap in the hedge, while the gate stands wide open."

"Your meaning is not very clear, Mr. Harding," remarked Headcorn.

"A is a great Radical," said William. "He is to be met with at all public meetings, and is foremost in rebuking the pride of the aristocracy. He plumes himself upon his republican opinion. He asserts the natural equality of man. He talks much of human brother-hood. A is well-to-do. The world has smiled on him. He ordinarily takes, after his dinner—a half-pint of port, that has been twelve years in the wood, he tells you, that it is mild as maternal milk. Well B is also a great Radical, but a poor, striving man, finding bread by strenuous six days' toil. His wife takes in washing, and his children are taught by charity. B never tastes port. A meets B. They are equal—they are brothers. B is honest, clean, and sober, intelligent, and a good father, a good husband, a good neighbor, a good citizen. Now, tell me, will A shake hands with B?"

"Why, perhaps not——"

"And why not? Because B is poor. There is no other reason. A is the servant of meat, drink, house-rent, and of wine that is old in the wood."

"But would you carry this practice of equality so far as to shake hands with your servant?" demanded Mr. Meadowgrass, who had hitherto listened in silence.

"Why not?" asked Harding.

"Well, really," said Headcorn, "I go as far as most men, but I wouldn't demean myself to that extent, neither. I can understand A, as you call him, giving B a 'Good morning!' or a 'How'd'ye do?' but as to shaking hands with a servant——"

"You wouldn't do it?"

"Well, frankly, Mr. Harding, I wouldn't."

"And why?"

Headcorn moved in his chair, but did not reply.

"B," resumed Harding, "receives, one fine morning, a letter, which apprises him that he is the unexpected heir to a goodly estate. The news gets spread abroad. It is told to A. Does he think better of B, who really would be quite presentable in a good coat? He meets B a day or two afterwards. Does he shake hands with him on this occasion?"

There is no reply.

"Yes, he does," proceeded Harding. "And why? Because B is rich. So again A is the servant of meat, drink, house-rent, and a good coat."

"I don't see how this bears upon our project of Moral Force Agitation for Political Rights," observed Headcorn, who was unprepared for the turn which the conversation had taken.

"C and D are tradesmen," continued Harding, without heeding his guest's remark. "They are both in one line, dwell in the same neighborhood. 'Ho! ho!' says C, D is getting more custom than I am; I must sell cheaper than he does.' So C announces his stock at reduced price; but in order to obtain a profit, he adulterates his goods. 'It is so,' says D. 'I must cheapen my stock likewise.' But, to secure a livelihood, he gives short weight. Now C and D are great reformers, and lament corruption and extortion in Church and State. When tradesmen are aristocrats and speculators, the commonwealth is in danger, not from bad law, but from bad men."

"You will not join our league, then, Mr. Harding?" said Headcorn.

"I will not. Understand me, I do not object to it. Agitate, by all means. Expunge the bad law from the statute-book. But I have another mission, and, I think, a holier one."

His visitors took their leave with a hearty contempt for him.

"William," said his wife, entering the room, when they were gone. "Don't you go to Mr. Boldero this morning? It's past eleven o'clock."

"Oh," replied poor Harding, "I had forgotten to tell you; I am not to teach Boldero any longer."

"Indeed exclaimed Emma. "Your opinions, again, I dare say, have lost you that nice young man."

"Yes; my opinions. I am not stone or wood. I have a soul."

"Well do you know what I can tell you? I have only seventeen shillings left in my purse. There, now."

"Haven't we any—any credit in the neighborhood?" faltered Harding.

"To the extent of two loaves, and one leg of mutton," answered Emma. "There, don't sit with your head buried in your hands, but go out and get bread. You often say you are a breadfinder. I wish you would find some."

"Emma, dear!" said William, showing a face of expostulation.

"Aye it is very well to say Emma dear," she rejoined, "very well, and very easy. While you had one pupil you did not try to get another; and now you have nothing to fall back upon. William you are an idle man."

He felt that there was some justice in her taunt, but he would not acknowledge it. Hastily seizing his hat, he prepared to leave the house. She tried to detain him, but he wrested himself from her, and gained the street. How great the fall from high Philosophy to shabby Fact!

He did not know whether to go, and so he determined to visit Boldero, who indeed, was in his debt for a month's instruction in the Ajax and Philoctetes. But he was encountered at the door by the same man, dressed as an artisan, who had accosted him on the same spot on the previous day.

"Do you want Mr. Boldero?" this person demanded in nearly the same terms as before.