

NOBLESSE OBLIGE.

A BRITISH SOCIETY NOVEL,

BY A CROWNED HEAD.

ABRIDGED AND MUTILATED BY W. BLACKBURN HARTE.

I.

IN WHICH THE PRINCIPALS OF THE STORY FALL OUT TO OBLIGE THE AUTHOR.

The crowd rolled unceasingly east and west along the Strand. Phœbus appeared to have concentrated all his forces upon the devoted heads of the toiling multitudes, whose horizon was confined by stern necessity and grim circumstance to the glaring pavements and endless vista of bricks and chimneys, which constitutes the world's great Babylon—London. It was perfectly impossible to believe that the sun could have distributed his rays in equal proportion all over Great Britain; it seemed as if he was determined to scorch the great city with his contempt for endeavouring to profane the glory of a summer day with its roar of heedless, bustling activity.

It was noon-tide of an exceptionally hot day in the middle of August; one of a number of such days when a wave of heat sweeps over the city, and makes the atmosphere like that of a baker's oven. Even the breath of night, when it descended upon the city, failed to cool the streets, and the pavements burned with the condensed heat of several days. Pedestrians look dusty, weary and sad. Stray dogs, with their parched tongues lolling out of their mouths, were regarded with suspicion by the nervous folks, who, at this season of the year, always get scared at the mere thought of hydrophobia. The policemen on their beats looked even more aimless than usual, and one of the principal objects of life in London seemed to be quenching one's thirst.

A huge open umbrella obstructed the pavement at the corner of Chancery lane, just outside the palatial establishment of the celebrated firm of Attenborough Brothers, whose business is public philanthropy and the affording of temporary accommodation to persons whose superfluous personal estate happens to be in excess of their direct income. Passers-by, who either damaged their hats or were obliged to dodge beneath this umbrella, or step out into the road, commented in no measured terms, in fact, in hot-weather language, upon the thickness of the two heads beneath it.

What would have been the confusion of these coarse revilers could they but have known that they were insulting two pillars of the State—two blue-blooded aristocrats!

They—the “they” consisting of the Right Honourable the Earl of Fosky-Bosky, and his eldest and only son, Lord Brazen—had just emerged from the side door of the before mentioned institution, having hypothecated a silver cup, which the younger man, in the happy days of yore, had won at a regatta.

The Earl stood and glared at his son as only an outraged nobleman can glare. My lord, however, passed his arm through that of his father's in the most filial way imaginable, and made a motion to move forward. Then, perceiving the glare in the paternal eye, and being fully aware of what was demanded of him in such an exigency, he regarded his sire with a look of stony indifference. The reader, doubtless, recognizes this expression. It is a “stock” characteristic of aristocratic *roués* and dress-coated stage burglars. Indeed, we might almost say they have a monopoly of it.

And so a chasm yawned between them as they stood beneath that umbrella—a gulf which was to widen and part them for many bitter years to come.

“Say, dad,” said his lordship, breaking an ominous silence, and speaking also with just a *souçon* of *insouciance* levity in his tone, which did not tend to lessen his father's ire, “let's go and consume the family heirloom—I'm famished.”

“No, my lord,” replied the earl, with a dangerous light in his cold blue eyes—this is another peculiarity of a bloated aristocracy—“you shall eat no more of my good chattels and personal

effects. You have existed now for twelve months on my front sitting-room, and I'm tired of supporting a great, useless—”

“Your personal effects! By gad! I like that.”

“Yes, mine! That cup was won whilst you were under age, consequently, although I can no longer claim any jurisdiction over you, I still retain my right to curtail the expenses of your minority, and I intend to exercise it.”

“Then the trophy falls under the head of youthful profit and loss?”

“Exactly. But if you agree to wed the woman of my choice—”

“That I'll neva do. No, neva!”

“You are fully determined to marry the plebian wretch who has caught your wandering fancy? You are resolved to bring disgrace and ruin upon an honourable house.” The young man shrugged his shoulders impatiently. “You will sully the blue blood of Mincing lane, which has flowed in our veins uninterrupted ever since your grandsire (peace to his ashes!) struck ‘ile’ in cotton and was elevated to the peerage in consequence of his undisguised fierce democratic principles and the immense prestige attached to his name.”

“I have already given you my final decision.”

“Final!—final fiddlesticks! Have you lost all filial feeling? Would you reduce to beggary the man who has watched over you from the cradle with the devotion of—a father?”

“Pardon me, but this is hardly within my power. To whose extravagance are we indebted for our present embarrassing position? Why do we, at this moment, stand trying to look unconscious, beneath the arms of ancient Lombardy? Why? Because you squandered your old father's hoard. Did you not cut down all the timber in the park of Fosky-Bosky?—timber which had been the pride of our family for generations—that is, since granddad bought the estate for a song under the hammer at Christie's, ever such a time ago!”

“Taunt me not, ingrate! Remember the number of tarts you consumed per diem at Eton. Think of the sums I spent in a vain endeavour to give you the education of a gentleman. Recall the wild dissipations of your college career—the oyster suppers at Verrey's—the *demi-mondaines* who crowded your drag and devoured your inheritance, obtained from the Jews at a terrible rate of interest at Ascot. Think of the bills you ran up at Oxford and—”

“Inheritance! That's splendid! Did you ever once pay me my annual allowance? Certainly not! And was it not wholly due to the filial obedience, with which I gave my consent to go through the Bankruptcy court and consequent inconveniences, that we were enabled to have such a good time at Baden-Baden last year?”

“There, there, Percy, perhaps I have been too hasty. Forgive me. I can see that the theme is distasteful to you and will therefore desist. Let us have no further recriminations. But come”—with a momentary burst of paternal tenderness in his voice, and an unmistakable liquid pearl in each eye, which he carefully removed with the corner of his silk handkerchief, and deposited, for future reference, in his coat-pocket—“come, my boy, and share my simple meal at the Monico. We will then calmly and dispassionately talk the business over. I've no doubt that with a bottle of chablis and a box of cigars between us things will assume a very different complexion. I know your disposition, Percy, my boy. You could not exist without these trifling luxuries. Come! Your nerves are disturbed, and you are in the mood to resort to heroic remedies. When you are in a better frame of mind you will see things in the right light and agree to marry Lady Gwendeline—”

“Nevah! Confound it, neva! Mary Elizabeth Brown becomes Lady Brazen, or—I've not quite decided what course I shall pursue, but I am resolved to do something very desperate. Yes; I'll horrify the fashionable world. I'll make things lively for the society journals. Sweet Mary!” he exclaimed, breaking off into an apostrophe, as a vision of her divine loveliness, in all the sweet simplicity of her kitchen attire, arose in his mind. “Guardian angel of my life—my only hope of a brighter and happier future—my guiding star and—

and only available source of pocket-money. Break my plighted troth to thee? Nevah!”

“What! Marry a penniless kitchen-maid? Preposterous!”

“Yes. Her station in life is not precisely an exalted one, but then she has escaped the temptations and shams of high life. In the seclusion of the region of the pots and pans she has escaped the rapidity of the upper flats. Besides, I'm certain she's a somebody or a something in disguise. Then she's got a lump sum in the post office savings bank. I've seen the receipt book; and you are by no means certain what dowry Lady Gwendeline will have.”

“I'll have no more of this!” cried the earl, crimson with passion. “Quit this roof-tree—I mean this door-step—for ever!”

“I'll do no such thing, my lord! I am obliged to come here occasionally to visit a relative who suffers with a chronic complaint.”

“Don't pass your profane jests with me. Leave the protection of my umbrella. Go forth under the pitiless sun. Ruin your complexion. Get freckled. Place oceans between us. Go! I cut you off with a shilling—no, confound it! no, with my blessing. Nevah let me look on your face again!”

This was the unkindest cut of all. His lordship had confidently reckoned upon two bitters and some cold meat and pickles, and to receive nothing more material than a blessing hurt him to the quick. The iron entered into his soul. He bestowed upon his father a look which spoke volumes of withering contempt, and, turning upon his heel in silence, he hastily crossed the street in the direction of the Temple Gardens. His eyes were bent upon the ground, and a world of perplexing emotions was depicted upon his finely chiselled features as he disappeared from his parent's gaze under the archway. His upper lip curled aristocratically heavenward as a dictionary of selected “Billingsgate” gurgled from between his clenched teeth. He was fiercely invoking everlasting destruction upon himself, the world and his friends generally, when he suddenly plunged full into the waistcoat of a stout little gentleman who was going in the opposite direction. With the inconsequent unreasonableness of a man under such circumstances, he was about to pour the vials of his wrath upon the unoffending and injured man, when he recognized him as his old friend, Algernon Smithers.

Smithers was studying for the Bar, and was very proud of his acquaintance with a scion of nobility. The two friends often went about town—generally at bars. Algy was profuse at his hospitality, and a very bad hand at euchre, *ecarté* and other games of chance, so the two were almost inseparable—that is, of course, when his lordship was not otherwise engaged in the houses of his “own set,” a charmed circle, in which all Smithers' generosity availed him nothing.

“Why, Percy, old man,”—he always felt an exquisite thrill under his white waistcoat when allowing himself this familiarity—“you look as if you'd got the blues.”

“Oh, I'm all right. Fact, neva felt better. I was thinking, that's all.”

“That's all! Ain't that enough for you? Don't, for pity's sake, tax those poor brains of yours any farther—it don't agree with you. No wonder you look pale and haggard. I'm just going to my chambers for luncheon—I prefer it to the club. Will you join me? Pot luck, you know.”

If there is one common attribute more distinctly characteristic of the British aristocracy it is their innate diplomacy. Lord Brazen was no exception to this rule. He had a minute perception of the delicate shades of outward seeming to be assumed in all the ordinary exigencies of every-day life. It was just where this luncheon was to come from which had been troubling him, and he was really as delighted to meet Smithers as if he had been a second Alladin; but he affected to remember another pressing engagement in Park lane, which he had forgotten. With a little pressing from Smithers, however, he decided to disappoint the other party and acceded to his request. And so, with one of Algy's cigars between his teeth, and a cloudless brow, he passed his arm through his friend's, and the pair strolled away through the Temple court.