

LADY BOUNTIFUL.

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

CHAPTER XX.

DOWN ON THEIR LUCK.

Engaged in these pursuits, neither Angela nor Harry paid much heed to the circle at the Boarding-House, where they were still nominally boarders. For Angela was all day long at her Association, and her general assistant or Printe Minister, after a hasty breakfast, hastened to his daily labor. He found that he was left entirely to his own devices; work came in which he did or left undone, Miss Messenger's instructions were faithfully carried out, and his independence was respected. During work time he planned amusements and surprises for Miss Kennedy and her girls, or he meditated upon the Monotony of Man, a subject which I may possibly explain later on; or when he knocked off, he would go and see the draymen roll about the heavy casks as if they were footballs: or he would watch the machinery and look at the great brown mass of boiling hope, or he would drop suddenly upon his cousin Josephus, and observe him faithfully entering names, ticking off and comparing, just as he had done for forty years, still a Junior Clerk. But he gave no thought to the Boarders.

One evening, however, in late September, he happened to look in toward nine o'clock, the hour when the frugal supper was generally spread. The usual occupants of the room were there, but there was no supper on the table, and the landlady was absent.

Harry stood in the door-way, with his hands in his pockets, carelessly looking at the group. Suddenly he became aware, with a curious sinking of heart, that something was gone wrong with all of them. They were all silent, all sitting bolt upright, no one taking the least notice of his neighbor, and all apparently to some physical pain.

The illustrious Pair were in their usual places, but his lordship, instead of looking sleepy and sleepily content, as was his custom at the evening hour, sat bolt upright and thrummed the arm of his chair with his fingers, restless and ill at ease; opposite to him sat his consort, her hands tightly clasped, her bright beady eyes gleaming with impatience, which might at any moment break out into wrath. Yet the Case was completely drawn up, as Harry knew, because he had finished it himself, and it only remained to make a clean copy before it was 'sent in' to the Lord Chancellor.

As for the professor, he was seated at the window, his legs curled under the chair, looking moodily across Stepney Green—into space, and neglecting his experiments. His generally cheerful face wore an anxious expression, as if he was thinking of something unpleasant, which would force itself upon his attention.

Josephus was in his corner, without his pipe, and more than usually melancholy. His sadness always, however, increased in the evening, so that he hardly counted.

Daniel, frowning like a Rhine baron of the good old time, had his books before him, but they were closed. It was a bad sign that even the Version in the Hebrew had no attraction for him.

Mr. Maliphant alone was smiling. His smiles, in such an assemblage of melancholy faces, produced an incongruous effect. The atmosphere was charged with gloom: it was funereal: in the midst of it the gay and cheerful countenance, albeit wrinkled, of the old man, beamed like the sun impertinently shining amid fog and rain, sleet and snow. The thing was absurd. Harry felt the force of Miss Kennedy's remark that the occupants of the room reminded her of a fortuitous concourse of flies, or ants, or rooks, or people in an omnibus, each of whom was profoundly occupied with its own affairs and careless of its neighbors. Out of six in the room, five were unhappy; they did not ask for, or expect, the sympathies of their neighbors: they did not reveal their anxieties: they sat and suffered in silence: the sixth alone was quite cheerful: it was nothing to him what experiences the rest were having, whether they were enjoying the upper airs, or enduring hardness. He sat in his own place near the professor: he laughed aloud: he even talked and told stories, to which no one listened. When Harry appeared, he was just ending a story which he had never begun.

'So it was given to the other fellow. And he came from Baxter Street, close to the City Hall, which is generally allowed to be the wickedest street in New York City.'

He paused a little, laughed cheerfully, rubbed his dry old hands together, smoked his pipe in silence, and then concluded his story, having filled up the middle of his own mind, without speech.

'And so he took to the coasting trade off the Andes.'

Harry caught the eye of the professor, and beckoned him to come outside.

'Now,' he said, taking his arm, 'what the devil is the matter with all of you?'

The professor smiled feebly under the gas-lamp in the street, and instantly relapsed into his anxious expression.

'I suppose,' he said, 'that is, I guess, because they haven't told me, that it's the same with them as with me.'

'And that is—?'

The professor slapped his empty pockets.

'Want of cash,' he said. 'I'm used to it in the autumn, just before the engagements begin. Bless you! It's nothing to me; though, when you've had no dinner for a week, you do begin to feel as if you could murder and roast a cat, if no one was looking. I've even begun to wish that the Eighth Commandment was suspended during the autumn.'

'Do you mean, man, that you are all hungry?'

'All except old Maliphant, and he doesn't count. Josephus had some dinner, but he says he can't afford supper and dinner too at the rate his heels wear out. Yes, I don't suppose there's been a dinner apiece among us for the last week.'

'Good heavens!' Harry hurried off to see the landlady.

She was in the kitchen sitting before the fire, though it was a warm night. She looked up when her lodger entered, and Harry observed that she, too, wore an air of dejection.

'Well, Mrs. Bormalack.'

She groaned and wiped away a tear.

'My heart bleeds for them, Mr. Goslett,' she said. 'I can't bear to set eyes on them; I can't face them. Because to do what I should like to do for them would be nothing short of ruin. And how to send them away I can not tell.'

He nodded his head encouragingly.

'You are a young man, Mr. Goslett, and you don't consider—and you are thinking day and night of that sweet young thing, Miss Kennedy. And she of you. Oh! you needn't blush: a handsome fellow like you is a prize for any woman, however good-looking. Besides, I've got eyes.'

'Still, that doesn't help us much to the point, Mrs. Bormalack, which is, what can we do for them?'

'Oh, dear me! the poor things don't board and lodge any more, Mr. Goslett. They've had no board to-day. If I did what I should like to do—but I can't. There's the rent and rates and all. And how I can keep them in the house, unless they pay their rent, I can't tell. I've never been so miserable since Captain Suffrey went away, owing for three months.'

'Not enough to eat?'

'Lady Davenant came to me this morning and paid me the rent for this week, but not the board; said that her nephew Nathaniel hadn't sent the six dollars, and they could only have breakfast, and must find some cheap place for dinner somewhere else. In the middle of the day they went out. Her ladyship put quite a chirpy face upon it: said they were going into the city to get dinner, but his lordship groaned. Dinner! They came home at two, and his groans have been heart-rending all the afternoon. I never heard such groaning.'

'Poor old man!'

'And there's the professor, too. It's low water with him. No one wants conjuring till winter comes. But he's quite used to go without his dinner. You needn't mind him!'

'Eels,' said Harry, 'are used to being skinned. Yet they wriggle a bit.'

He produced a few coins and proffered a certain request to the landlady. Then he returned to his fellow-lodgers.

Presently there was heard in the direction of the kitchen a cheerful hissing, followed by a perfectly divine fragrance. Daniel closed his eyes, and leaned back in his chair. The professor smiled. His lordship rolled in his chair and groaned. Presently Mrs. Bormalack appeared, and the cloth was laid. His lordship showed signs of an increasing agitation. The fragrance increased. He leaned forward, clutching the arm of his chair, looking to his wife as if for help and guidance at this most difficult crisis. He was frightfully hungry: all his dinner had been a biscuit and a half, his wife having taken the other half. What is a biscuit and a half to one accustomed to the flesh-pots of Canaan City?

'Clara Martha,' he groaned, trying to whisper, but failing in his agitation, 'I must have some of that beefsteak or I shall—'

Here he relapsed into silence again.

It was not from a desire to watch the sufferings of the unlucky Peer, or in order to laugh at them, that Harry hesitated to invite him. Now, however, he hesitated no longer.

'I am giving a little supper to-night, Lady Davenant, to—celebrate my birthday.'

May I hope that you and his lordship will join us?

Her ladyship most affably accepted.

Well, they were fed; they made up for the meagerness of the midday meal by such a supper as should be chronicled, so large, so generous was it. Such a supper, said the professor, as should carry a man along for a week, were it not for the foolish habit of getting hungry twice at least in the four-and-twenty hours. After supper they all became cheerful, and presently went to bed as happy as if there were no to-morrow, and the next day's dinner was assured.

When they were gone, Harry began to smoke his evening pipe. Then he became aware of the presence of the two who were left—his cousin Josephus and old Mr. Maliphant.

The former was sitting in gloomy silence, and the latter was making as if he would say something, but thought better of it, and smiled instead.

'Josephus,' said Harry, 'what the devil makes you so gloomy? You can't be hungry still?'

'No,' he replied. 'It isn't that: a junior clerk fifty-five years old has no right to get hungry.'

'What is it, then?'

'They talk of changes in the office, that is all. Some of the juniors will be promoted; not me, of course; and some will have to go. After forty years in the Brewery, I shall have to go. That's all.'

'Seems rough, doesn't it? Can't you borrow a handful of malt, and set up a little Brewery for yourself?'

'It is only starvation. After all, it doesn't matter—nobody cares what happens to a junior clerk. There are plenty more. And the workhouse is said to be well managed. Perhaps they will let me keep their accounts.'

'When do you think—the—the reduction will be made?'

'Next month, they say.'

'Come, cheer up, old man,' said his cousin.

'Why, if they do turn you out—which would be a burningshame—you can find something better.'

'No,' replied Josephus, sadly, 'I know my place. I am a junior clerk. They can get to do my work at seven bob a week. Ah! in thousands.'

'Well, but can't you do anything else?'

'Nothing else.'

'In all these years, man, have you learned nothing at all?'

'Nothing at all.'

Is there, thought Harry, gazing upon his luckless cousin, a condition more miserable than that of the cheap clerk? In early life he learns to spell, to read, to write, and perhaps keep books, but this only if he is ambitious. Here his education ends: he has no desire to learn anything more: he falls into whatever place he can get, and then he begins a life in which there is no hope of preferment and no endeavor after better things. There are, in every civilized country, thousands and thousands of these helpless and hopeless creatures: they mostly suffer in silence, being at the best ill-fed and ill-paid; but they sometimes utter a feeble moan, when one of them can be found with vitality enough, about their pay and prospects; no one has yet told them the honest truth, that they are already paid as much as they deserve: that their miserable accomplishments can not for a moment be compared with the skill of an artisan: that they are self-condemned because they make no effort. They have not even the energy to make a Union: they have not the sense of self-protection; they are content, if they are not hungry, if they have tobacco to smoke and beer to drink.

'How long is it since you did—whatever it was you did, that kept you down?' asked the younger man, at length.

'I did nothing. It was an accident. Unless,' added Josephus with a smile—'unless it was the Devil. But devils don't care to meddle with junior clerks.'

'What was the accident, then?'

'It was one day in June; I remember the day quite well. I was alone in my office, the same office as I am still. The others, younger than myself, and I was then twenty-one, were gone off on business. The safe stood close to my desk. There was a bundle of papers in it sealed up, and marked 'Mr. Messenger, Private,' which had been there a goodish while, so that I supposed they were not important: some of the books were there as well, and Mr. Messenger himself had sent down, only an hour before... before... It happened, a packet of notes into the bank. The money had been brought in by our country collectors—fourteen thousand pounds, in country bank-notes. Now remember, I was sitting at the desk and the safe was locked, and the keys were in the desk, and no one was in the office except me. And I will swear that the notes were in the safe. I told Mr. Messenger that I would take my oath to it and I would still. Josephus grew almost animated as he approached the important point in his history.

'Well?'

'Things being so—remember, no one but me in the office, and the keys—'

'I remember. Get along.'

'I was sent for.'

'By Mr. Messenger?'

'Mr. Messenger didn't send for junior clerks. He used to send for the Heads of Departments, who sent for the chief clerks, who ordered the juniors. That was the way it those days. No, I was sent for to the chief clerk's office and given a packet of letters for copying. That took three minutes. When I came back the office was still empty, the safe was locked and the keys in my desk.'

'Well?'

'Well—but the safe was empty!'

'What! all the money gone?'

'All gone, every farthing—with Mr. Messenger's private papers.'

'What a strange thing!'

'No one saw anybody going into the office or coming out. Nothing else was taken.'

'Come—with fourteen thousand pounds in his hand, no reasonable thief would ask for more.'

'And what is more extraordinary still, not one of those notes have ever since been presented for payment.'

'And then, I suppose, there was a row.'

Josephus assented.

'First, I was to be sacked at once; then I was to be watched and searched; next, I was to be kept on until the notes were presented and the thief caught. I have been kept on, the notes have not been presented; and I've had the same pay, neither more nor less, all the time. That's all the story. Now, there's to be an end of that. I'll be sent away.'

Mr. Maliphant had not been listening to the story at all, being pleasantly occupied with his own reminiscences. At this point one of them made him laugh and rub his hands.

'When Mr. Messenger's father married Susanah Coppin, I have heard—'

Here he stopped.

'Halloo!' cried Harry. 'Go on, Venerable. Why, we are cousins or nephews, or something, of Miss Messenger, Josephus, my boy, cheer up!'

Mr. Maliphant's memory now jumped over two generations, and he went on.

'Caroline Coppin married a sergeant in the army, and a handsome lad—I forget his name. But Mary Coppin married Bunker. The Coppins were a good old Whitechapel stock, as good as the Messengers. As for Bunker, he was an upstart, he was; and came from Barking, as I always understood.'

Then he was once more silent.

CHAPTER XXI.

LADY DAVENANT.

It was a frequent custom with Lady Davenant to sit with the girls in the work-room in the morning. She liked to have a place where she could talk; she took an extraordinary interest in their occupation; she had the eye of an artist for their interpretation of the fashion. Moreover, it pleased her to be in the company of Miss Kennedy, who was essentially a woman's woman. Men who are so unhappy as to have married a man's woman will understand perfectly what I mean. On the morning after Harry's most providential birthday, therefore, when she appeared, no one was in the least disturbed. But to-day she did not greet the girls with her accustomed stately inclination of the head, which implied that, although now a Peeress, she had been brought up to their profession and in a Republican School of Thought, and did not set herself up above her neighbors. Yet respect to rank should be conceded, and was expected. In general, too, she was talkative, and enlivened the tedium of work with many an anecdote illustrating Canaan City and its ways, or showing the lethargic manners of the Davenants, both her husband and his father, to say nothing of the grandfather, contented with the lowly occupation of a wheelwright, while he might have soared to the British House of Lords. This morning, however, she sat down and was silent, and her head drooped. Angela, who sat next her and watched, presently observed that a tear formed in her eye, and dropped upon her work, and that her lips moved as if she was holding a conversation with herself. Thereupon, she arose, put her hand upon the poor lady's arm, and drew her away without a word to the solitude of the dining-room, where her ladyship gave way and burst into an agony of sobbing.

Angela stood before her, saying nothing. It was best to let the fit have its way. When the crying was nearly over, she laid her hand upon her hair and gently smoothed it.

'Poor dear lady,' she said, 'will you tell me what has happened?'

'Everything,' she gasped. 'Oh! everything. The six months are all gone, all but one. Nephew Nathaniel writes to say that as we haven't even made a start all this time, he reckons we don't count to make any; and he's got children, and as for business, it's got down to the hard pan, and dollars are scarce, and we may come back again right away, and there's the money for the voyage home whenever we like, but no more.'

'Oh!' said Angela, beginning to understand. 'And... and your husband?'

'There's where the real trouble begins. I wouldn't mind for myself, money or no money. I would write to the queen for money. I would go to the workhouse. I would beg my bread in the street, but the Case I would never give up—never—never never.'

She clasped her hands, dried her eyes, and sat bolt upright, the picture of unyielding determination.

'And your husband is not, perhaps, so resolute as yourself?'

'He says, "Clara Martha, let us go hum. As for the title, I would sell it to Nephew Nathaniel, who's the next heir, for a week of square meals; he should have the coronet if I'd got it, for a month's certainty of steaks and chops and huckleberry pie; and as for my seat in the House of Lords, he should have it for our old cottage in Canaan City, which is sold, and the school which I have given up and lost." He says: "Pack the box, Clara Martha—there isn't much to pack—and we will go at once. If the American Minister won't take up the Case for us, I guess that the Case may slide till Nathaniel takes it up for himself." That is what he says, Miss Kennedy. Those were his words. Oh! Oh! Oh! Oh! Mr. Feeble-minded! Oh! Mr. Facing-Both-Ways!'

She wrung her hands in despair, for it seemed as if her husband would be proof against even the scorn and contempt of these epithets.

'But what do you mean to do?'

'I shall stay,' she replied. 'And so shall he, if my name is Lady Davenant. Do you think I am going back to Canaan City to be scorned at by Aurelia Tucker? Do you think I shall let that poor old man, who has his good side, Miss Kennedy—and as for Virtue he is an angel, and he knows not the taste of tobacco or whiskey—face his nephew, and have to say what good he has done with all those dollars? No, here we stay.' She snapped her lips, and made as if she would take root upon that very chair. 'Shall he part with his birthright like Esau, because he is hungry. Never. The curse of Esau would rest upon us. He's at home now, she went on, 'preparing for another day without dinner; groans won't help him now; and this time there will be no supper—unless Mr. Goslett has another birthday.'

'Why! good gracious, you will be starved.'

'Better starve than go home as we came. Besides, I shall write to the queen when there's nothing left. When Nathaniel's money comes, which may be to-morrow, and may be next month, I shall give a month's rent to Mrs. Bormalack, and save the rest for one meal a day. Yes, as long as the money lasts, he shall eat meat—once a day—at noon. He's been pampered, like all the Canaan City folk; set up with turkey roast and turkey boiled, and ducks and beef every day, and buckwheat cakes and such. Oh! a change of diet would bring down his luxury and increase his pride.'

Angela thought that starvation was a new way of developing pride of birth, but she did not say so. 'Is there no way,' she asked, 'in which he can earn money?'

She shook her head.

'As a teacher he was generally allowed to be learned, but sleepy. In our city, however, the boys and girls didn't expect too much, and it's a sleepy place. In winter they sit round the stove and they go to sleep; in summer they sit in the shade and they go to sleep. It's the sleepest place in the States. No, there's no kind o' way in which he can earn any money. And if there were, did you ever hear of a British Peer working for his daily bread?'

'But you, Lady Davenant? Surely your ladyship would not mind—if the chance offered—if it were a thing kept secret—if not even your husband knew—would not object to earning something every week to find that square meal which your husband so naturally desires?'

Her ladyship held out her hands without a word.

'Angela, in shameful contempt of Political Economy, placed in them the work which she had in her own, and whispered:

'You had better,' she said, 'take a week in advance. Then you can arrange with Mrs. Bormalack for the usual meals on the old terms; and if you would rather come here to work, you can have this room to yourself all the morning. Thank you, Lady Davenant. The obligation is entirely mine, you know. For, really more delicate work, more beautiful work, I never saw. Do all American ladies work so beautifully?'

Her ladyship, quite overcome with these honeyed words, took the work and made no reply.

'Only one thing, dear Lady Davenant,' Angela went on, smiling, 'you must promise me not to work too hard. You know that such work as yours is worth at least twice as much as mine. And then you can push on the Case, you know.'

The little lady rose, and threw her arms round Angela's neck.

'My dear!' she cried, with more tears, 'you are everybody's friend. Oh! yes, I know. And how you do it and all—I can't think, nor Mrs. Bormalack neither. But the day may come—it shall come—when we can show our gratitude.'

She retired, taking the work with her.

(To be Continued.)