

LADY BOUNTIFUL.

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

CHAPTER XIV.

THE TENDER PASSION.

It is always a dangerous thing for two young persons of opposite sexes to live together under the same roof, even when the lady is plain and at first sight unattractive and when the young man is stupid. For they get to know one another. Now, so great is the beauty of human nature, even in its second-rate or third-rate productions, that love generally follows when one of the two, by confession or unconscious self-betrayal, stands revealed to the other. It is not the actual man or woman, you see, who is loved—it is the ideal, the possible, the model or type from which the specimen is copied, and which it distinctly resembles. But think of the danger when the house in which these young people find themselves is not a large country house, where many are gathered together of like pursuits, but an obscure boarding-house in a Society-forgotten suburb, where these two had only each other to talk to. Add to this that they are both interested in an experiment of the greatest delicacy, in which the least false step would be fatal. Add, further, the fact that each is astonished at the other: the one to find in a dress-maker the refinement and all the accomplishments of a lady; the other to find in a cabinet-maker the distinguishing marks of a gentleman; the same way of looking at things and talking about them; the same bearing and the same courtesy.

The danger was even made greater by what seemed a preventive, namely, by the way in which at the beginning Angela so very firmly put down her foot on the subject of 'keeping company'; there was to be no attempt at love-making; on that understanding the two could, and did, go about together as much as they pleased. What followed naturally was that more and more they began to consider, each the other, as a problem of an interesting character. Angela observed that the young workman, whom she had at first considered of a frivolous disposition, seemed to be growing more serious in his views of things, and even when he laughed there was method in his folly. No men are so solemn, she reflected, as the dull of comprehension; perhaps the extremely serious character of the place in which they lived was making him dull, too. It is difficult, certainly, for any one to go on laughing at Stepany, the children, who begin by laughing like children everywhere, have to give up the practice before they are eight years of age, because the streets are so insufferably dull; the grown-up people never laugh at all; when immigrants arrive from livelier quarters, say Manchester or Sheffield, after a certain time of residence—the period varies with the mercurial temperament of the patient—they laugh no more. 'Surely,' thought Angela, 'he is settling down; he will soon find work; he will become like other men of his class; and then, no doubt he will fall in love with Nelly. Nothing could be more suitable.'

By saying to herself, over and over again, that this arrangement should take place, she had got to persuade herself that it certainly would. 'Nelly possessed,' she said, 'the refinement of manner and nature, without which the young man would be wretched; she was affectionate and sensible; it would certainly do very well.' And she was hardly conscious, while she arranged this in her own head, of a certain uneasy feeling in her mind, which in smaller creatures might have been called jealousy.

So far, there had been little to warrant the belief that things were advancing in the direction she desired. He was not much more attentive to Nelly than to any other of her girls; worse still, as she reflected with trepidation, there were many symptoms by which he showed a preference for quite another person.

As for Harry, it was useless for him to conceal from himself any longer the fact that he was by this time head over ears in love. The situation offered greater temptations than his strength could withstand. He succumbed—whatever the end might be, he was in love.

If one comes to think of it, this was rather a remarkable result of a descent into the Lower Regions. One expects to meet in the Home of Dull Ugliness things repellent, coarse; enjoying the freedom of Nature, unrestrained, unconventional. Harry found, on the contrary, the sweetness of Eden, a fair garden of delights, in which sat a peerless lady, the Queen of Beauty, a very Venus. All his life, that is, since he had begun to think about love at all, he had stoutly held and strenuously maintained that it was less majesty, high treason to love, for a man to throw away—he used to say 'throw away'—upon a maiden of low degree the passion which should be offered to a lady—a demoiselle. The position was certainly altered, inasmuch as he was no longer of gentle birth. Therefore, he argued, he

would no longer pretend to the hand of a lady. At first he used to make Resolutions, as bravely as a Board of Directors; he would arise and flee to the desert—any place would be a desert without her; he would get out of temptation; he would go back to Piccadilly, and there forget her. Yet he remained; yet every day he sought her again; every day his condition became more hopeless; every day he continued to walk with her, play duets with her, sing with her, dance with her, argue with her, learn from her, teach her, watch over her, and feel the sunshine of her presence, and at meeting and parting touched her fingers.

She was so well educated, he said, strengthening his faith; she was so kindly and considerate; her manners were so perfect; she was so beautiful and graceful; she knew so well how to command, that he was constrained to own that no lady of his acquaintance was, or could be, her superior. To call her a dress-maker was to enoble and sanctify the whole craft. She should be to that art what Cecilia is to music—its patron saint; she should be to himself—yet, what would be the end? He smiled grimly, thinking that there was no need to speculate on the end, when as yet there had been no beginning. He could not make a beginning. If he ventured on some shy and modest tentative in the direction of—call it an understanding—she froze. She was always on the watch; she seemed to say, 'Thus far you may presume, but no further.' What did it mean? Was she really resolved never to receive his advances? Did she dislike him? That could hardly be. Was she watching him? Was she afraid to trust him? That might be. Or was she already engaged to some other fellow—some superior fellow—perhaps with a shop—gracious heavens!—of his own? That might be, though it made him cold to think it possible. Or did she have some past history, some unhappy complication of the affections, which made her as cold as Dian? That, too, might be.

The ordinary young man, thrown into the society of half a dozen working-girls, would have begun to flirt and talk nonsense with all of them together, or with one after the other. Harry was not that kind of young man. There is always by the blessing of kind Heaven, left unto us a remnant of those who hold woman sacred, and continually praise, worship, and reverence the name of love. He was one of those young men. To flirt with a milliner did not seem a delightful thing to him, at any time. And in this case there was another reason why he should not behave in the manner customary to the would-be Don Juan; it was simply for the gentle man; he was tolerated among them all on a kind of unspoken, but understood, parole. Miss Kennedy received him in confidence that he would not abuse her kindness.

One Sunday afternoon when they were walking together—it was in one of the warm days of last September—in Victoria Park, they had a conversation which led to really important things. There were one or two very pretty walks in that garden, and though the season was late, and the leaves mostly yellow, brown, crimson, or golden, there were still flowers, and the ornamental water was bright, and the path crowded with people who look happy, because the sun was shining; they had all dined plentifully, with copious beer, and the girls had got on their best things, and the swains were gallant with a flower in the button-hole and a cigar between the lips. There is, indeed, so little difference between the rich and the poor; can even Hyde Park in the season go beyond the flower and the cigar? In certain tropical lands, the first step in civilization is to buy a mosquito curtain, though your dusky epidermis is as impervious as a crocodile's to the sting of the mosquito. In this realm of England the first step toward gentility is the twopenny smoke, to which we cling, though it is made of medicated cabbage, though it makes the mouth raw, the tongue sore, the lips cracked, the eyes red, the nerves shaky, and the temper short. Who would not suffer in such a cause?

It began with a remark of Angela's about his continued laziness. He replied, evasively, that he had intended to take a long holiday, in order to look round and consider what was best to be done; that he liked holidays; that he meant to introduce holidays into the next trade dispute; that his holidays enabled him to work a little for Miss Kennedy, without counting his lordship, whose Case he had now drawn up; that he was now ready for work whenever, he added airily, work was ready for him; and that he was not, in fact, quite sure that Stepany and its neighborhood would prove the best place for him to work out his life.

'I should think,' said Angela, 'that it would be as good a place as any you would find in America.'

'If you tell me to stay, Miss Kennedy,' he replied, with a sudden earnestness, 'I will stay.'

She instantly froze, and chillingly said that if his interests required him to go, of course he would go.

Therefore Harry, after a few moments' silence, during which he battled with the temptation to 'have it out' there and then, before all the happy shepherds and shepherdesses of Bethnal Green, returned to his original form, and made as if those words had not been spoken and that effect not been produced. You may notice the same thing with children who have been scolded.

'Did you ever consider, Miss Kennedy, the truly happy condition of the perfect cabinet maker?'

'No I never did. Is he happy above his fellows?'

'Your questions betray your ignorance. Till lately—till I returned from America—I never wholly realized what a superior creature he is. Why, in the first place, the cabinet-maker is perhaps the only workman who never scamps his work; he is a responsible man; he takes pride in producing a good and honest thing. We have no tricks in our trade. Then, if you care to hear—'

'Pray go on; let me learn all I can.'

'Then we were the first to organize ourselves. Our society was founded eighty years ago. We had no foolish strike, but we just met the employers and told them we were going to arrange with them what our share should be; and we made a book about wages—I do not think so good a book has been put together this century. Then, we are a respectable lot; you never hear of a cabinet-maker in trouble at a police court; very few of us get drunk; most of us read books and papers, and have opinions. My cousin Dick has very strong opinions. We are critical about amusements, and we prefer Henry Irving to a music-hall; we do not allow rough talk in the workshops; we are mostly members of some Church, and we know how to value ourselves.'

'I shall know how to value your craft in future,' said Angela, 'especially when you are working again.'

'Yes. I do not want to work in a shop, you know; but one may get a place, perhaps, in one of the railway-carriage depots, or a hotel, or a big factory, where they always keep a cabinet-maker in regular pay. My cousin Dick—Dick the Radical—is cabinet-maker in a mangle factory. I do not know what he makes for his mangles, but that is what he is.'

'I have seen your cousin Tom, when he was rolled in the mud and before he led off the hymn and the procession. You must bring me your cousin Dick.'

'Dick is better fun than Tom. Both are terribly in earnest; but you will find Dick interesting.'

'Does he walk about on Sunday afternoon? Should we be likely to meet him here?'

'Oh, no. Dick is forging his speech for to-night. He addresses the Advanced Club almost every Sunday evening on the House of Lords, or the Church, or the Country Bumpkin's Suffrage, or the Cape question, or Protection, or the Nihilists, or Ireland, or America, or something. The speech must be red-hot, or his reputation would be lost. So he spends the afternoon sticking it into the furnace, so to speak. It doesn't matter what the subject is, always provided that he can lug in the bloated aristocrat and the hated Tory. I assure you, Dick is a most interesting person.'

'Do you ever speak at the Advanced Club?'

'I go there; I am a member; now and then I say a word. When a member makes a red-hot speech, brimful of insane accusations, and sits down amid a round of applause, it is pleasant to get up and set him right on matters of fact, because all the enthusiasm is killed when you come to facts. Some of them do not love me at the Club.'

'They are real and in earnest, while you—'

'No, Miss Kennedy, they are not real, whatever I may be. They are quite conventional. The people like to be roused by red-hot, scorching speeches; they want burning questions, intolerable grievances; so the speakers find them or invent them. As for the audience, they have had so many sham grievances told in red-hot words that they have become callous, and don't know of any real ones. The indignation of the speakers is a sham; the enthusiasm of the listeners is a sham; they applaud the eloquence, but as for the stuff that is said, it moves them not. As for his politics, the British workman has got a vague idea that things go better for him under the Liberals. When the Liberals came in, after making promises by the thousand, and when, like their predecessors, they have made the usual mess, confidence is shaken. Then he allows the Conservatives, who do not, at all events, promise oranges and beer all round, back again, and gives them another show. As if it matters which side is in to the British workman!'

'And they are not discontented,' asked Angela, 'with their own lives?'

'Not one bit. They don't want to change

their own lives. Why should they?'

'All these people in the park to-day,' she continued, 'are they workingmen?'

'Yes, some of them; the better sort. Of course—Harry looked round and surveyed the crowd—'of course, when you open a garden of this sort for the people, the well-dressed come, and the ragged stay away and hide. There is plenty of ragged stuff round and about us, but it hides. And there is plenty of comfort which walks abroad and shows itself. This end of London is the home of little industries. Here, for instance, they make the things which belong to other things.'

'That seems a riddle,' said Angela.

'I mean things like card-boxes, pill-boxes, ornamental boxes of all kinds, for confectioners, druggists, and drapers; they make all kinds of such things for wholesale houses. Why, there are hundreds of trades in this great neglected city of East London, of which we know nothing. You see the manufacturers. Here they are with their wives, and their sons, and their daughters; they all lead a hand, and between them the thing is made.'

'And are they discontented?' asked Angela, with persistence.

'Not they; they get as much happiness as the money will run to. At the same time, if the Palace of Delight were once built—'

'Ah!' cried Angela, with a sigh. 'The Palace of Delight; the Palace of Delight; we must have it—if it is only to make the people discontented.'

They walked home presently, and in the evening they played together, one or two of the girls being present, in the 'drawing-room.' The music softens; Angela repented her coldness of the afternoon. When the girls were gone, and they were walking side by side beneath moonlight on the quiet green, she made shyly a little attempt at compensation.

'If,' she said, 'you should find work here in Stepany, you would be willing to stay?'

'I would stay,' he replied, 'if you bid me stay—or go, if you bid me go.'

'I would bid you stay,' she replied, speaking as clearly and as firmly as she could, 'because I like your society and because you have been, and will still be, I hope, very helpful to us. But if I bid you stay,' she laid her hand upon his arm, 'it must be on no misunderstanding.'

'I am your servant,' he said, with a little agitation in his voice. 'I understand nothing but what you wish me to understand.'

CHAPTER XV.

A SPLENDID OFFER.

It was a strange coincidence that only two days after this conversation with Miss Kennedy, Harry received his first offer of employment.

It came from the Brewery, and was in the first instance a mere note sent by a clerk, inviting 'H. Goslett' to call at the Accountant's Office at ten in the morning. The name, standing bare and naked by itself, without any preliminary title of respect, Mister, Master, or Sieur, presented, Harry thought, a very miserable appearance. Perhaps it would be difficult to find a readier method of insulting a man than to hurl his own name at his head. One may understand how Louis Capet must have felt when thus reduced to a plain simplicity.

'What on earth,' Harry asked, forgetting his trade, 'can they want with me?'

In business houses, workmen, even of the gentle craft of cabinet-making, generally carry with them tools, sometimes wear an apron, always have their trousers turned up, and never wear a collar—using, instead, a red muffler, which keeps the throat warmer, and does not so readily show the effect of London fog and smoke. Also some of their garments are made of corduroy and their jackets have bulging pockets, and their hats not unfrequently have a pipe stuck into them. This young workman repaired to the trusting-place in the easy attire in which he was wont to roam about the bowers of the East End. That is to say, he looked like a carelessly dressed gentleman.

Harry found at the office his uncle, Mr. Bunker, who snorted when he saw his nephew.

'What are you doing here?' he asked. 'Can't you waste your time and bring disgrace on a hard-working uncle outside the place where he is known and respected?'

Harry sighed.

'Few of us,' he said, 'sufficiently respect their uncles. And with such an uncle—ah! What more might have passed between them, I know not. Fortunately, at this point, they were summoned to the presence of the Chief Accountant.'

He knew Mr. Bunker and shook hands with him.

'Is this your nephew, Mr. Bunker?' he asked, looking curiously at the very handsome young fellow who stood before him with a careless air.

'Yes; he's my nephew; at least, he says so,' said Mr. Bunker, surlily. 'Perhaps, sir, you wouldn't mind telling him what you want, and letting him go. Then we can get to business.'

'My business is with both of you.'

'Both of us?' Mr. Bunker looked uneasy. What business could that be in which he was connected with his nephew?

'Perhaps I had better read a portion of a letter received by me yesterday from Miss Messenger. That portion which concerns you, Mr. Bunker, is as follows.'

Rather a remarkable letter had been received at the Brewery on the previous day from Miss Messenger. It was remarkable, and indeed, disquieting, because it showed a disposition to interfere in the management of the Great Concern, and the interference of a young lady in the Brewery boded ill.

The Chief Brewer and the Chief Accountant read it together. They were a grave and elderly pair, both in their sixties, who had been regarded by the late Mr. Messenger as mere boys. For he was in the eighties.

'Yes,' said the Chief Brewer, as his colleague read the missive with a sigh, 'I know what you would say. It is not the thing itself; the thing is a small thing; the man may even be worth his pay; but it is the spirit of the letter, the spirit that concerns me.'

'It is the spirit,' echoed the Chief Accountant.

'Either,' said the Chief Brewer, 'we rule here, or we do not.'

'Certainly,' said the chief Accountant, 'and well put.'

'If we do not'—here the Chief Brewer rapped the middle knuckle of the back of his left hand forefinger with the tip of his right hand forefinger—'if we do not, what then?'

They gazed upon each other for a moment in great sadness, having before their eyes a hozy vision in which Miss Messenger walked through the Brewery, putting down the mighty and lowering salaries. A grateful reward for long and faithful services! At the thought of it, these two servants in their own eyes became patriarchal, as regards the length of years spent in the Brewery, and their long services loomed before them as so devoted and so faithful as to place them above the rewarding power of any salary.

The Chief Accountant was a tall old gentleman, and he stood in a commanding position on the hearth-rug, the letter in one hand and a pair of double eyeglasses in the other.

'You will see from what I am about to read to you, Mr. Bunker,' he began, 'that your services, such as they were, to the late Mr. Messenger, will not go unrewarded.'

'Very good, so far; but what had his reward to do with his nephew?'

'You were a good deal with Mr. Messenger at one time, I remember, Mr. Bunker.'

'I was; a great deal.'

'Quite so—quite so—and you assisted him, I believe, with his house property and tenants, and so forth.'

'I did.' Mr. Bunker cleared his throat.

'I did, and often Mr. Messenger would talk of the reward I was to have when he was took.'

'He left you nothing, however; possibly because he forgot. You ought, therefore, to be more grateful to Miss Messenger for remembering you; particularly as the young lady has only heard of you by some kind of chance.'

'Has she—has she—sent something?' he asked.

The Chief Accountant smiled graciously.

'She has sent a very considerable present indeed.'

'Ah!' Mr. Bunker's fingers closed as if they were grappling with bank-notes.

'Is it,' he asked, in trembling accents—'is it a check?'

'I think, Mr. Bunker, that you will like her present better than a check.'

'There can be nothing better than one of Miss Messenger's checks,' he replied, gallantly. 'Nothing in the world, except perhaps one that's bigger. I suppose it's notes then?'

'Listen, Mr. Bunker:

'Considering the various services rendered to my grandfather by Mr. Bunker, with whom I believe you are acquainted, in connection with his property in Stepany and the neighborhood, I am anxious to make him some substantial present. I have therefore caused inquiries to be made as to the best way of doing this. I learn that he has a nephew named Henry Goslett, by trade a cabinet-maker; here Mr. Bunker made violent efforts to suppress emotion, 'who is out of employment. I propose that he should be received into the Brewery, that he should be fitted up for him, and that he attend daily until anything better offers, to do all that may be required in his trade, I should wish him to be independent as regards time of attendance, and that he should be paid at the proper rate for piece-work. In this way, I hope Mr. Bunker may feel that he has received a reward more appropriate to the friendly relations which seem to have existed between my grandfather and himself than a mere matter of money, and I am glad to be able to gratify him in finding honorable employment for one who is, I trust, a deserving young man.'

'There, Mr. Bunker, there is this—Why, good heavens! man, what is the matter?'

For Mr. Bunker was purple with wrath. Three times he essayed to speak, three times he failed. Then he put on his hat and fled precipitately.

(To be Continued.)