

[COPYRIGHT SECURED FOR THE DOMINION.]

BY CELIA'S ARBOUR.

A NOVEL.

BY WALTER BESANT AND JAMES RICE, AUTHORS OF "READY-MONEY MORTIMER,"
"THE GOLDEN BUTTERFLY," &c.

CHAPTER VII.

AUGUSTUS IN THE LEGAL.

I had one short experience of the way in which other people work for money. It lasted three months, and happened when Mr. Tyrrell, out of pure kindness, proposed that I should enter his office. He said many handsome things about me, in making this offer, especially in reference to his daughter, and pledged himself to give me my articles if I took to the work.

I accepted on the condition that I kept my afternoons free for Celia, and began the study of the law.

Well, suffice it to say that after three months the Captain became my ambassador to convey my resignation. And the only good thing I got out of my legal experience was the friendship of the Bramblers.

Augustus Brambler, the head of the family, was one of Mr. Tyrrell's clerks. Not the head clerk, who was a man of consideration, and had an office to himself, but one of half a dozen who sat in the room built for them at the side of the house, and drove the quill for very slender wage from nine in the morning to eight at night. Augustus was no longer young when I first met him, being then past forty years of age. And although the other clerks were little more than boys, Augustus sat among them with cheerful countenance and contented heart. He was short of stature, and his face was innocent of whisker, and as smooth as any woman's; his features were sketchy, his eyes were large and bright, but his expression, in office hours, was maintained at a high pressure of unrelenting zeal. Nature intended him to be stout, but with that curious disregard for her colleague which Fate often shows, his income prevented the carrying out of Nature's intention. So that he remained thin, and, perhaps, in consequence, preserved his physical activity, which was that of a schoolboy. I was placed under his charge, and received papers to copy, while the chief clerk gave me books to read. I did copy the papers, to my infinite disgust, and I tried to read the books, but here I failed.

Augustus Brambler, I soon discovered, did the least responsible work in the office, enjoying a certain consideration by reason of the enormous enthusiasm which he brought into the service. He magnified his humble office: saw in it something great and splendid; beheld in himself the spring of the whole machine; and identified himself with the success of the House. You would think, to listen to him, that he had achieved the highest ambition of his life in becoming a clerk to Mr. Tyrrell, and that his weekly stipend of thirty shillings was a large and magnificent income, and that the firm was maintained by his own personal exertions.

Certainly these were not wanting. He was in the office first in the morning, and left it the last in the evening. He kept the other clerks to their work, not only by example but by precept, admonishing them by scraps of proverbial philosophy, such as—in the case of one who longed to finish and be gone—

Hurry and haste are worse than waste.

or of one who was prone to scamp the work in order to talk,

Sure and slow is the way to go;

while in the case—too common among lawyers' clerks—of one who came too late to office, he had a verse as apt as if it had been a Shakespearean quotation, though I have never seen it in Shakespeare.

"What," he would say, "do we learn from the poet?"

Get up betimes, and at the dawn of day.

For health and strength to serve your Master pray.

Sharp at clock striking, at the point of eight,

Present yourself before the office gate.

"It should have been nine," he would add, "but for the sake of the rhyme."

His eagerness to work was partly counterbalanced by his inability to do anything. He knew nothing whatever, after years of law work, of the most ordinary legal procedure; he could not even be trusted to copy a document correctly. And yet he was never idle, never wasting his employer's time. Mostly he seemed to be ruling lines laboriously in red ink, and I often wondered what became of the many reams beautified by Augustus with such painful assiduity. At other times he would take down old office books, ledgers and so forth, and, after dusting them tenderly, would turn over the leaves, brows bent, pencil in hand, as if he was engaged in the research of the most vital importance. At all events, he did not allow the juniors to waste their time, and, as I afterwards found out, was only continued in the service of Mr. Tyrrell because he earned his weekly stipend by keeping the youngsters at their work, carrying with him wherever he went an atmosphere of zeal.

He had not been always in the present profession.

"I have been," he would say, grandly, "in the clerical, in the scholastic, and in the legal.

Noble professions all three. I began in the clerical—was a clerk at Grant and Gumption's, where we had—ah! a Royal business, and turned over cool thousands. Thought nothing of thousands in that wholesale house. Mr. Gumption, the junior partner—he was an affable and kind-spoken man—once took me aside, after I had been there two years or so, and spoke to me confidentially. 'Brambler,' he said, 'the fact is this work is not good enough for you. That's where it is: you're too good for the work we give you. I should say you ought to change it for something superior—say in the Commercial Academy line, where your abilities would have full scope—full scope.' I thought that advice was very kindly meant, and I took it, though it really was a blow to give up sharing in those enormous profits. However, he seemed to know best what was to my advantage, and so I retired from Grant & Gumption's with the best recommendations, and joined Mr. Hezekiah Ryler, B.A., in his select academy for young gentlemen. Perhaps the salary was not so good as might have been desired, but the work—there was the great advantage—the work was splendid. There you are, you know, that's what it is, in that line—there you are. Dozens of possible Shakespeares learning their Latin grammar under your direction: posterity safe to read about you. 'This great man,' the biographer says, 'was educated at the Select Academy of Mr. Hezekiah Ryler, B.A., one of whose assistants was the zealous Augustus Brambler.' That thought was enough to reconcile me to much that was disagreeable, for there are things about the work of an ush—I mean the assistant of a Commercial Academy, which some men might not like. I was with Mr. Ryler, B.A., for a year, I think, when he suggested, his manner was kindness itself—that perhaps I should find a more congenial sphere for my talents. I gave up the scholastic, and tried some other line. He was so good as to suggest the legal, and so I tried it. That was twenty years ago. Since then I've been going backwards and forwards between the scholastic, the legal, and the clerical. It's a very remarkable thing, if you come to think of it, to be born with a genius fit for all three professions."

He firmly believed himself endowed by Nature with exceptional qualities, which fitted him equally for the positions of commercial clerk, legal clerk, or schoolmaster, and regarded the numerous dismissals which rewarded his labours as so many compliments to his energy and worth. In the sense I have already explained he was invaluable: his honesty and enthusiasm were contagious, and he never, I am sure, understood that, owing to some strange fogging of his enthusiastic brain, he could do nothing at all in the way it ought to be done. When he was in the employment of a merchant his figures always came out wrong; when he was a teacher the boys never learned anything; and when he was a lawyer's clerk he could only be trusted to rule lines in red ink, copy letters in the press, serve a writ, and make a show, with a pile of paper, of doing important work. Yet, because the man was well known in the town for his breezy enthusiasm, for his integrity, and for the honesty which characterized all he did, Augustus Brambler had never been long without a place. He was now, however, a fixture at Mr. Tyrrell's.

One evening, after I had been a month or so in the office, he invited me, in the finest manner, to take supper at his house. Had he bidden me to a lordly banquet, the invitation could not have been conveyed more grandly. I accepted, and walked home with him, presently finding myself in a back parlour lighted by a single candle, multiplied by two on our arrival. The cloth was laid for supper, and half-a-dozen children, from ten or twelve downwards, crowded round the bread-winner, and noisily welcomed him home. They were all absurdly like their father, their eyes were as twinkling, the faces as full of eager enthusiasm, their figures as stout. And there was exactly the same regularity of diminution in their size that may be remarked in a set of Pandian pipes.

The mother, on the other hand, was thin and anxious-looking. It was easy to see that this poor wan-cheeked and careworn creature shared none of her husband's golden joy in the present.

We sat down at once to the meal, Augustus Brambler saying grace in an impressive manner. It was a rich, and even unctuous grace, such a grace as might be pronounced before a city dinner, thanking the Lord for the many and various good things He had provided for His creatures. And then, the hearts of all attuned to the solemnity of the occasion, he seized the knife, and looked round him with the air of one who is about to commence an important work. "Bread, my children, bread and cheese. Your mother will carve the cheese. Mr. Pulaski—I should say, perhaps, Count Pulaski?—No. My dear Mr. Pulaski takes supper with us incognito, like a foreign prince. It is not often that we receive a nobleman at our simple table. Pray assist Mr. Pulaski from the green corner,

which is more tasty. Crust, Mr. Pulaski! Forty-seven, your elbows are on the table. Forty-six, calm your impatience. That boy, Mr. Pulaski, will carry through life the effects of the fatal year in which he was born."

I ventured to ask if the children had no Christian names.

"It is only their father's way," said the mother. "They have names like any other Christians, but I don't think they know them, themselves."

Augustus—the children being now all helped—sat back in his chair and waved his hand with importance.

"My own theory," he explained: "formed even before I was married, while I was in the Clerical. Matured while in the Scholastic, where I had access to works of philosophy, including the first book of Euclid, and to works of biography, including Cornelius Nepos. Published, if I may use the expression, while in the Legal. It is this, Mr. Pulaski. Childhood catches measles and whooping-cough, and shakes them off; but a child never shakes off the influences—Forty-eight, if you do not obey your sister you shall go to bed—of the year in which it was born. My eldest," he said, pointing to the tallest of the family, a girl, "was born in '44. She is therefore predisposed to poetry."

I did not ask why, but the girl, a pretty child of twelve, blushed and looked pleased.

"Her brother, Forty-five," Augustus continued, "is restless and discontented. That is easily explained if you think of the events of that year. A tendency, my boy, which you will have to combat during life. Take asthma."

"When we come to Forty-six," he went on, "what can we expect? The famine year. The appetite of that boy would strain the finances of a Rothschild."

Forty-six, who was a healthy, rosy-cheeked boy, with no outward marks of the great famine upon his fat little figure, was working his way diligently through a great crust of bread and cheese. He looked up, laughed, and went on eating.

"Forty-seven,"—pointing to a little girl,— "the year of calm. The calm before the storm. The next boy is Forty-eight. Ah! the year of rebellion. He is a boy who questions authority. If that boy does not take care to struggle with his tendency, I should not be surprised, when he grows up, to find him throwing doubt upon the Thirty-Nine Article."

"Oh! Augustus," cried his wife.

"I should not, indeed, my dear. Forty-nine is gone to bed. So is Fifty. So is Fifty-two."

I was afraid to ask after Fifty-one, for fear there had been a loss, but I suppose the question showed in my face, because the family faces instantly clouded over.

"We never had a Fifty-one," said Augustus, sorrowfully.

His wife sighed, and the little girls put their handkerchiefs to their eyes. Forty-six took advantage of the general emotion to help himself to another piece of bread.

"No Fifty-one," Augustus sighed. "It was our unlucky fate. What a boy that Fifty-one would have been! All the wealth and genius of the world came to the front that year. I even wish, sometimes, that he had been twins."

We were all deeply touched, nor did it occur to me till afterwards that we were lamenting over a mere solution in the chain of annual continuity.

"But talking is dry work," resumed Augustus, taking up a brown jug, one of those jolly jugs, with a hint upon them in relief, that are only now to be seen in the National Club, and bestowing an Anacreontic smile upon his family.

"What have we here, boys and girls, eh? What have we?" as if there was an infinite choice of drinks in that house. He poured out a glass, holding it up to the light, turning it about, and critically catching the colour at the proper angle. "Clear as a bell—sparkling as champagne. Let us taste it. Toast and water, my children,—ah! Toast and water—and—the very best I ever tasted."

We had glasses round, and all snacked our lips over the nasty concoction, and he went on in his enthusiastic strain.

"It is a splendid business, the Legal. We are making, not to betray the confidence of the house, only we are here all friends, we are actually making more than two hundred pounds a month. Fifty pounds a week—eight pounds six shillings and eightpence every working day. Nearly fifteen shillings an hour—threepence a minute."

All the children gave a great gasp. At the moment they firmly believed their father to be personally in receipt of this splendid income. Poor little shabby boys and girls, with their darned and patched clothes, their bread and cheese banquets, their toast and water. It was indeed, a splendid income that their father enjoyed.

Supper ended, the children went off to bed. Then we put out the candles, not to waste light and sat round the open window for half an hour, for it was a warm night, talking.

At least Augustus Brambler talked. And I began to see in what an atmosphere of imaginary ease the man lived and moved. His social position was, in his own eyes, an enviable one; his abilities were recognised; his future was one of steady advance; his children were well fed, well dressed and well educated; his poor wife as happy as himself.

From time to time I heard a footstep overhead.

"It is Herr Rämmer. We allow him to occupy our first floor," Augustus explained grand-

ly. He was not by any means anxious to hide the fact that he had a lodger who paid the whole of the rent, only it was his way of putting it.

I knew Herr Rämmer by sight, because he came a good deal to Mr. Tyrrell's office. He was a German—a very big man, tall and stout, with a white moustache—a great mass of perfectly white hair, of the creamy whiteness which does not convey the impression of age or decay, and had a tread like a cat for lightness. He walked upright as a soldier, wore blue spectacles out of doors, and had a curious voice, very deep with a rasp in it. But as yet I had never spoken to him.

"He is our lodger," said Mrs. Brambler. "And he gives us a deal of trouble with his vocal outlets."

"Eds them with prunes," said Augustus.

"And complains of his tea. But he pays his bill every week, and what we should do without him I am sure I do not know. He is a very regular man. He has dinner at six, and smokes his pipe till half-past ten. Then he goes to bed. Where is Ferdinand, my dear?"

"At work in his room. But it is almost his time."

As he spoke, the door opened, and Ferdinand and Brambler came in. It was almost too dark to see him, but I knew his face, having seen it about the streets as long as I could remember. He was very much like his brother, being short, smooth-cheeked, and inclined to be stout, but he had not the same look of eager zeal. That was replaced by an expression of the most profound wisdom. And he had a habit of throwing his head backwards, and gazing into the sky, which I understood later on.

I rose to go, because it was past ten. As Augustus led me out of the room I heard Mrs. Brambler ask anxiously,

"What have you done to-day, Ferdinand?"

"A leg of mutton," he replied in a sepulchral voice. "And I think heeling and soiling for one of the children's boots besides."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE UNFORTUNATE YOUNG SCHOLAR.

I continued my acquaintance with Augustus Brambler after I left Mr. Tyrrell's office. The atmosphere of that place very soon, as I have explained, became unbearable to me. The tips of my fingers began to feel as if they were made of parchment, which, as I have confessed, would be bad for playing. In those days, the pens always stuck their pens behind their ears, a practice to which I could never reconcile myself. The association of that beautiful and delicate organisation of the ear, the only avenue of the sixth sense, the appreciation of music, with quills and legal forms was revolting. Then what harmonies can be got out of the snapping of pens upon paper? The wind in the trees one can understand; and the waves by the shore; and the purring of a brook; but the scratching of steel, which you hardly perceive at first, but which makes itself heard with a strident noise which after a time becomes out of all proportion to the size of the instrument, who is to become reconciled to that? As an instrument of torture, I can conceive nothing worse than a room full of pens all at work together.

Old Wassielewski, who after nearly effacing himself during the school-days was beginning to take a new interest in my proceedings, approved of my giving up the law. That a Pulaski should be a clerk in a lawyer's office was a blot on the scutcheon; that he should become an actual practising lawyer was an abandonment of everything. When my destiny came to me in the shape of music-lessons, he was good enough to signify approval, on the ground that it would do for the short time I should want to work for money. I paid small attention to his purely theoretical way of looking at life: all the Poles lived in this kind of parenthesis, waiting for the downfall of Russia, carrying on their little occupations, which lasted them till death allowed their souls to return to Poland, under the belief that it was only for a time. The Captain, however, deserved more respectful attention. He had small admiration for writing in any form: was accustomed to confound the highest works of genius with the commonest quill-driving; quoted an old acquaintance of the work-room who once wrote a novel, and never held his head afterwards: "Sad business, Laddy. Half-pay at forty."

As for giving music lessons, the Captain was perplexed. To play on any instrument whatever seemed to him a waste of a man—at the same time there was no doubt in his own mind that I was only half a man. And when he clearly understood that I did not propose to lead a procession of drunken sailors like poor old Wassielewski, or to play the fiddle to a soldier's free-and-easy, he gave in.

"Have your own way, Laddy. Jingle the keys and make other people jingle. There's sense in a song like 'The Death of Nelson,' or 'Wapping Old Stairs'—and those you never care to play. But have your own way."

Gradually, the Captain came to see some of the advantages of the profession. "You give your lesson, take your money, and go. So much work and so much play. No obligation on either side. And your time to yourself."

It was evident to me, as soon as I began to give lessons, that I was engaging myself for the rest of my life to become a music-master. I became a music-master because there was really