

LADY BOUNTIFUL.

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

CHAPTER VIII.

WHAT HE GOT BY IT.

A dress-maker's shop without a dress-maker to manage it, would be, Angela considered, in some perplexity, like a ship without a steersman. She therefore waited with some impatience the promised visit of Rebekah Hermitage, who she was to 'get cheap,' according to Mr. Bunker, on account of her Sabbatarian views.

She came in the evening, while Angela was walking on the Green with the sprightly Cabinet-maker. It was sunset, and Angela had been remarking to her companion, with a sort of irrational surprise, that the phenomena coincident with the close of the day are just as brilliantly colored and lavishly displayed for the squalid East as for the luxurious West. Perhaps, indeed, there are not many places in London where sunset does produce such good effects as at Stepney Green. The narrow strip, so called, in shape resembles too nearly a closed umbrella or a thickish walking stick; but there are trees in it, and beds of flowers, and seats for those who wish to sit, and walks for those who wish to walk. And the better houses of the Green—Bormalack's was on the west, or dingy side—are on the east, and face the setting sun. They are of a good age, at least a hundred and fifty years old; they are built of warm red brick, and some have doors ornamented with the old-fashioned shell, and all have an appearance of solid respectability, which makes the rest of Stepney proud of them. Here, in former days, dwelt the aristocracy of the parish; and on this side was the house take by Angela for her dress-making institution, the house in which her grandfather was born. The reason why the sunsets are more splendid and the sunrises brighter at Stepney than at the opposite end of London, is, that the sun sets behind the great bank of cloud which forever lies over London town. This lends his departure to the happy dwellers of the East strange and wonderful effects. Now, when he rises, it is naturally in the East, where there is no cloud of smoke to hide the brightness of his face.

The Green this evening was crowded; it is not so fashionable a promenade as White-chapel Road, but, on the other hand, it possesses the charm of comparative quiet. There is no noise of vehicles, but only the shouting of children, the loud laughter of some galliard apprentice, the coy giggle of the young lady to whom he has imparted the latest merry jape, the loud whispers of ladies who are exchanging confidences about their complaints and the complaints of their friends, and the musical laugh of girls. The old people had all crept home; the mothers were at home putting their children to bed; the fathers were mostly engaged with the evening pipe, which demands a chair within four walls and a glass of something; the Green was given up to youth; and youth was principally given up to love-making.

'In Arcadia,' said Harry, 'every nymph is wooed, and every swain—'

He was interrupted by the arrival of his uncle, who pushed his way through the crowd with his usual important bustle, followed by a 'young person.'

'I looked for you at Mrs. Bormalack's,' he said to Angela, reproachfully, 'and here you are—with this young man, as usual. As if my time was no object to you!'

'Why not with this young man, Mr. Bunker?' asked Angela.

He did not explain his reasons for objecting to her companion, but proceeded to introduce his companion.

'Here she is, Miss Kennedy,' he said. 'This is Rebekah Hermitage; I've brought her with me to prevent mistakes. You may take her on my recommendation. Nobody in the neighborhood of Stepney wants a better recommendation than mine. One of Bunker's, they say, and they ask no more.'

'What a beautiful, what an enviable reputation!' murmured his nephew. 'Oh, that I were one of Bunker's!'

Mr. Bunker glared at him, but answered not; never, within his great experience, had he found himself at a loss to give indignation words. On occasion, he had been known to swear 'into shudders' the immortal gods who heard him. To swear at his nephew, however, this careless sniggering youth, who looked and talked like a 'swell,' would, he felt, be more than useless. The boy would only snigger more. He would have liked knocking him down, but there were obvious reasons why this was not to be seriously contemplated.

He turned to the girl who had come with him.

'Rebekah,' he said, with condescension, 'you may speak up; I told your father I would stand by you, and I will.'

'Do not, at least,' said Angela, in her staliest manner, 'begin by making Miss Hermitage suppose she will want your support.'

She saw before her a girl of two or three-and-twenty years of age. She was short of stature and sturdy. Her complexion was dark, with black hair and dark eyes, and these were bright. A firm mouth and square chin gave her a pugnacious appearance. In fact, she had been fighting all her life, more desperately even than the other girls about her, because she was heavily handicapped by the awkwardness of her religion.

'Mr. Bunker,' said this young person, who certainly did not look as if she wanted any backing up, 'tells me you want a forewoman.'

'You want a forewoman,' echoed the agent, as if interpreting for her.

'Yes, I do,' Angela replied. 'I know, to begin with, all about your religious opinions.'

'She knows,' said the agent, standing between the two parties, as if retained for the interests of both—she knows already your religious opinions.'

'Very well, miss,' Rebekah looked disappointed at losing a chance of expounding them. 'Then I can only say, I can never give way in the matter of truth.'

'In truth,' said the agent, 'she's as obstinate as a pig.'

'I do not expect it,' replied Angela, feeling that the half-a-crown-an-hour man was really a stupendous nuisance.

'She does not expect it,' echoed Mr. Bunker, turning to Rebekah. 'What did I tell you?—now you see the effect of my recommendations.'

'Take it off the wages,' said Rebekah, with an obvious effort, which showed how vital was the importance of the pay. 'Take it off the wages, if you like; and of course I can't expect to labor for five days and be paid for six; but on the Saturday, which is the Sabbath day, I do no work therein, neither I, nor my man-servant, nor my maid-servant, nor my ox nor my ass.'

'Neither her man servant, nor her maid-servant, nor her ox, nor her ass,' repeated the agent, solemnly.

'There is the Sunday, however,' said Angela.

'What have you got to say about Sunday now?' asked Mr. Bunker, with a change of front.

'Of all the days that's in the week,' interpolated the sprightly one, 'I dearly love but one day—and that's the day—'

Rebekah, impatient of this frivolity, stopped it at once.

'I do as little as I can,' she said, 'on Sunday, because of the weaker brethren. The Sunday we keep as a holiday.'

'Well—Angela began rather to envy this young woman, who was a clear gainer of a whole day by her religion—'well, Miss Hermitage, will you come to me on trial? Thank you, we can settle about deductions afterward, if you please. And if you will come to-morrow—That is right. Now, if you please to take a turn with me, we will talk things over together. Good-night, Mr. Bunker!'

She took the girl's arm and led her away, being anxious to get Bunker out of sight. The aspect of this agent annoyed and irritated her almost beyond endurance; so she left him with his nephew.

'One of Bunker's!' Harry repeated, softly.

'You here!' growled the uncle, 'dangling after a girl when you ought to be at work! How long I should like to know, are we hard working Stepney folk to be troubled with an idle, good-for-nothing vagabond? Eh, sir? How long? And don't suppose that I mean to do anything for you when your money is all gone. Do you hear sir? do you hear?'

'I hear, my uncle!' As usual, the young man laughed; he sat upon the arm of a garden seat, with his hands in his pockets, and laughed an insolent, exasperating laugh. Now, Mr. Bunker in all his life had never seen the least necessity or occasion for laughing at anything at all, far less at himself. Nor, hitherto, had any one dared to laugh at him.

'Sniggerin' peacock!' added Mr. Bunker, fiercely, rattling a bunch of keys in his pocket.

Harry laughed again, with more abandon. This uncle of his, who regarded him with so much dislike, seemed a very humorous person.

'Connection by marriage,' he said—'there is one question I have very much wished to put to you. When you traded me away, now three-and-twenty years ago, or thereabouts—you remember the circumstances, I dare say, better than I can be expected to do—what did you get for me?'

Then Bunker's color changed, his cheeks became quite white. Harry thought it was the effect of wrath, and went on.

'Half a crown an hour, of course, during the negotiations, which I dare say took a week—that we understand; but what else? come, my uncle, what else did you get?'

It was too dark for the young man to perceive the full effect of this question—the sudden change of color escaped his notice; but he observed a strange and angry light in his uncle's eyes, and he saw that he opened his mouth once or twice as if to speak, but shut his lips again without saying a word; and Harry was greatly surprised to see his uncle presently turn on his heel and walk straight away.

'That question seems to be a facer; it must be repeated whenever the good old man becomes offensive. I wonder what he did get for me?'

As for Mr. Bunker, he retired to his own house in Beaumont Square, walking with quick steps and hanging head. He let himself in with his latch-key, and turned into his office, which, of course, was the first room of the ground floor.

It was quite dark now, save for the faint light from the street gas; but Mr. Bunker did not want any light.

He sat down and rested his face on his hands, with a heavy sigh. The house was empty, because his housekeeper and only servant was out.

He sat without moving for half an hour or so; then he lifted his head and looked about him—he had forgotten where he was and why he came there—and he shuddered.

Then he hastily lighted a candle, and went upstairs to his own bedroom. The room had one piece of furniture not always found in bedrooms; it was a good-sized fire-proof safe, which stood in the corner. Mr. Bunker placed his candle on the safe, and stooping down, began to grope about with his keys for the lock. It took some time to find the key-hole; when the safe was opened, it took longer to find the papers which he wanted, for these were at the very back of all. Presently, however, he lifted his head, with a bundle in his hand.

Now, if we are obliged to account for everything, which ought not to be expected, and is more than one asks of scientific men, I should account for what followed by remarking that the blood is apt to get into the brains of people, especially elderly people, and above all, stout, elderly people, when they stoop for any length of time; and that history records many remarkable manifestations of the spirit world which have followed a posture of stooping too prolonged. It produces, in fact, a condition of brain beloved by ghosts. There is the leading case of the man at Cambridge, who, after stooping for a book, saw the ghost of his own bed-maker at a time when he knew her to be in the bosom of her family eating up his bread and butter and drinking his tea. Rats have been seen by others—troops of rats—as many rats as followed the Piper, where there were no rats; and there is even the recorded case of a man who saw the ghost of himself, which prognosticated dissolution, and, in fact, killed him exactly fifty-two years after the event. So that, really, there is nothing at all unusual in the fact that Mr. Bunker saw something when he lifted his head. The remarkable thing is that he saw the very person of whom he had been thinking ever since his nephew's question—no other than his deceased wife's sister; he had never loved her at all, or in the least desired to marry her, which makes the case more remarkable still; and she stood before him, just as if she were alive, and gazed upon him with reproachful eyes.

He behaved with great coolness and presence of mind. Few men would have shown more bravery. He just dropped the candle out of one hand and the papers out of the other, and fell back upon the bed with white face and quivering lips. Some men would have run—he did not; in fact, he could not. His knees instinctively knew that it is useless to run from a ghost, and refused to aid him.

'Caroline!' he groaned.

As he spoke the figure vanished, making no sign and saying no word. After awhile, seeing that the ghost came no more, Mr. Bunker pulled himself together. He picked up the papers and the candle, and went slowly down-stairs again, turning every moment to see if his sister-in-law came too. But she did not, and he went to the bright gaslit back parlor, where his supper was spread.

After supper he mixed a glass of brandy and water, stiff. After drinking this, he mixed another, and began to smoke a pipe while he turned over the papers.

'He can't have meant anything,' he said. 'What should the boy know? What did the gentleman know? Nothing. The will was witnessed by Mr. Messenger and Bob Coppin. Well, one of them is dead, and as for the other—he paused and winced—as for the other, it is five-and-twenty years since he was heard of, so he's dead, too; of course he's dead.'

Then he remembered the spectre and he trembled. For suppose Caroline mean coming often; this would be particularly disagreeable. He remembered a certain scene where, three-and-twenty years before, he had stood at a bedside while a dying woman spoke to him; the words she said were few, and he remembered them quite well, even after so long a time, which showed his real goodness of heart.

'You are a hard man, Bunker, and you think too much of money; and you were not kind to your wife. But I'm going too, and there is nobody left to trust my boy to, except you. Be good to him, Bunker, for your dead wife's sake.'

He remembered, too, how he had promised to be good to the boy, not meaning much by the words, perhaps, but softened by the presence of death.

'It is not as if the boy were penniless,' she said; 'his houses will pay you for his keep; and to spare. You will lose nothing by him. Promise me again.'

He remembered that he had promised a second time that he would be good to the boy; and he remembered, too, how the promise seemed then to involve great expenses in cases.

'If you break the solemn promise,' she said, with feminine prescience, 'I warn you that he will do you an injury when he grows up. Remember that.'

He did remember it now, though he had quite forgotten this detail a long while ago. The boy had returned; he was grown up; he could do him an injury, if he knew how. Because he had only to ask for an account of those houses. Fortunately, he did not know. Happily there was no one to tell him. With his third tumbler Mr. Bunker became quite confident and reassured; with his fourth he felt inclined to be merry, and to slap himself on the back for wide-awakeness of the rarest kind. With his fifth he resolved to go upstairs and tell Caroline that unless she went and told her son, no one would. He carried part of this resolution into effect; that is to say, he went to his bedroom, and his house-keeper, unobserved herself, had the pleasure of seeing her master ascending the stairs on his hands and feet, a method which offers great advantages to a gentleman who has had five tumblers of brandy and water.

When he got there, and had quite succeeded in shutting the door—not always so easy a thing as it looks—Caroline was no longer visible. He could not find her anywhere, though he went all round the room twice, on all-fours, in search of her.

The really remarkable part of this story is, that she has never paid a visit to her son at all.

Meantime, the strollers on the Green were grown few. Most of them had gone home; but the air was warm, and there were some who still lingered. Among them were Angela and the girl who was to be her forewoman.

When Rebekah found that her employer was not apparently of those who try to cheat, or bully, or cajole her subordinates, she lost her combative air, and consented to talk about things. She gave Angela a great deal of information about the prospects of her venture, which were gloomy, she thought, as the competition was so severe. She also gave her an insight into details of a practical nature concerning the conduct of a dress-makery, into which we need not follow her.

Angela discovered before they parted that she had two sides to her character: on one side she was a practical and practised woman of work and business, on the other she was a religious fanatic.

'We wait,' she said, 'for the world to come round to us. Oh! I know we are but a little body and a poor folk. Father is almost alone; but what a thing it is to be the appointed keepers of the truth! Come and hear us, Miss Kennedy. Father always converts any one who will listen to him. Oh, do listen!'

Then she too went away, and Angela was left alone in the quiet place. Presently she became aware that Harry was standing beside her.

'Don't let us go home yet,' he said; 'Bormalack's is desperately dull—you can picture it all to yourself. The professor has got a new trick; Daniel Fagg is looking as if he had met with more disappointment; her ladyship is short of temper, because the Case is getting on so slowly; and Josephus is sighing over a long pipe; and Mr. Maliphant is chucking to himself in the corner. On the whole, it is better here. Shall we remain a little longer in the open air, Miss Kennedy?'

He looked dangerous. Angela, who had been disposed to be expansive, froze.

'We will have one more turn, if you please, Mr. Goslett.' She added stiffly, 'Only remember—so long as you don't think of 'keeping company.'

'I understand perfectly, Miss Kennedy. 'Society' is a better word than 'company'; let us keep that, and make a new departure for Stepney Green.'

CHAPTER IX.

THE DAY BEFORE THE FIRST.

Mr. Bunker, en bon chretien, dissembled his wrath, and continued his good work of furnishing and arranging the house for Angela, inasmuch that before many days the place was completely ready for opening.

In the meantime Miss Kennedy was away—she went away on business—and Bormalack's was dull without her. Harry found some consolation in superintending some of the work for her house, and in working at a grand cabinet which he designed for her; it was to be a miracle of wood-carving; he would throw into his work all the resources of his art and all his genius. When she came back, after the absence of a week, she looked full of business and of care. Harry thought it must be money worries, and began to curse Bunker's long bill; but she was gracious to him in her queenly way. Moreover, she assured him that all was going on well with her, better than she could have hoped. The evening before the 'Stepney Dress-makers' Association' was to open its doors, they all gathered together in the newly furnished house for a final inspection—Angela, her two aids, Rebekah and Nelly, and the young man against whose companionship Mr. Bunker had warned her in vain. The house was large, with rooms on either side the door. These were show-rooms and work-rooms. The first floor Angela reserved for her own purposes, and she was mysterious about them.

At the back of the house stretched a long and ample garden. Angela had the whole of it covered with asphalt; the beds of flowers or lawns were all covered over. At the end she had caused to be built a large room of glass, the object of which she had not yet disclosed.

As regards the appointments of the house, she had taken one precaution—Rebekah superintended them. Mr. Bunker, therefore, was fain to restrict his enthusiasm, and could not charge more than twenty or thirty per cent. above the market value of the things. But Rebekah, though she carried out her instructions, could not but feel disappointed at the lavish scale in which things were ordered and paid for. The show-rooms were as fine as if the place were Regent Street; the work-rooms were looked after with as much care for ventilation as if, Mr. Bunker said, workgirls were countesses.

'It is too good,' Rebekah expostulated, 'much too good for us. It will only make other girls discontented.'

'I want to make them discontented,' Angela replied. 'Unless they are discontented, there will be no improvement. Think, Rebekah what it is that lifts men out of the level of the beasts. We find out that there are better things, and we are fighting our way upward. That is the mystery of Discontent—and perhaps Pain, as well.'

'Ah!' Rebekah saw that this was not a practical answer. 'But you don't know, yet, the competition of the East End, and the straits we are put to. It is not as at the West End.'

The golden West is ever the Land of Promise. No need to undecieve; let her go on in the belief that the three thousand girls who wait and work about Regent Street and the great shops are treated generously, and paid above the market value of their services. I make no doubt myself, that many a great mercer sits down when Christmas warms his heart, in his mansion at Finchley, Campden Hill, Fitz John's Avenue, or Stoke Newington, and writes great checks as gifts to the uncomplaining girls who build up his income.

'She would learn soon,' said Rebekah, hoping that the money would last out till the ship was fairly launched.

She was not suspicious, but there was something 'funny,' as Nelly said, in a girl of Miss Kennedy's stamp coming among them. Why did she choose Stepney Green? Surely, Bond Street or Regent Street would be better fitted for a lady of her manners. How would customers be received and orders be taken? By herself, or by this young lady, who would certainly treat the ladies of Stepney with little of that deferential courtesy which they expected of these dress-makers? For, as you may have remarked, the lower you descend, as well as the higher you climb, the more deference do the ladies receive at the hands of their tender folk. No duchess sweeps into a milliner's show-room with more dignity than her humble sister at Clare Market on a Saturday evening displays when she accepts the invitation of the butcher to rally up, ladies, and selects her Sunday piece of beef. The Ladies of Stepney and the Mile End Road, thought Rebekah, looked for attention. Would Miss Kennedy give it to them? If Miss Kennedy herself did not attend to the show-room, what would she do?

(To be Continued.)

The receipts and expenditures of the United States for the month of November were \$26,917,162 and \$27,911,002 respectively against \$28,986,124 and 42,570,022 for the same period in 1890.