Hard Times: Part 05

Charles Dickens

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HARD TIMES.
BY CHARLES DICKENS.

CHAPTER IX.

Sissy Jupe had not an easy time of it, between Mr. M'Choakumchild and Mrs. Gradgrind, and was not without strong impulses, in the first months of her probation, to run away. It hailed facts all day long so very hard, and life in general was opened to her as such a closely-ruled cyphering-book, that assuredly she would have run away, but for only one restraint.

It is lamentable to think of; but this restraint was the result of no arithmetical process, was self-imposed in defiance of all calculation, and went dead against any table of probabilities that any Actuary would have drawn up from the premises. The girl believed that her father had not deserted her; she lived in the hope that he would come back, and in the faith that he would be the happier by her remaining where she was.

The wretched ignorance with which Jupe clung to this consolation, rejecting the superior comfort of knowing, on a sound arithmetical basis, that her father was an unnatural vagabond, filled Mr. Gradgrind with pity. Yet, what was to be done? M'Choakumchild reported that she had a very dense head for figures; that, once possessed with a general idea of the globe, she took the smallest conceivable interest in its exact measurements; that she was extremely slow in the acquisition of dates, unless some pitiful incident happened to be connected therewith; that she would burst into tears on being required (by the mental process) immediately to name the cost of two hundred and forty-seven muslin caps at fourteenpence halfpenny; that she was as low down, in the school, as low could be; that after eight weeks of induction into the elements of Political Economy, she had only yesterday been set right by a prattler three feet high, for returning to the question, “What is the first principle of this science?” with the absurd answer, “To do unto others as I would that they should do unto me.”

Mr. Gradgrind observed, shaking his head, that all this was very bad; that it showed the necessity of infinite grinding at the mill of knowledge, as per system, schedule, blue book, report, and tabular statements A to Z; and that Jupe “must be kept to it.” So Jupe was kept to it, and became very low-spirited, but no wiser.

“It would be a fine thing to be you, Miss Louisa!” she said, one night, when Louisa had endeavoured to make her perplexities for next day something clearer to her.

“Do you think so?”

“I should know so much, Miss Louisa. All that is difficult to me now, would be so easy then.”

“You might not be the better for it, Sissy.”

Sissy submitted, after a little hesitation, “I should not be the worse, Miss Louisa.” To which Miss Louisa answered, “I don’t know that.”

There had been so little communication between these two—both because life at Stone Lodge went monotonously round like a piece of machinery which discouraged human interference, and because of the prohibition relative to Sissy’s past career—that they were still almost strangers. Sissy, with her dark eyes wonderingly directed to Louisa’s face, was uncertain whether to say more or to remain silent.

“You are more useful to my mother, and more pleasant with her than I can ever be,” Louisa resumed. “You are pleasanter to yourself, than I am to myself.”

“But, if you please Miss Louisa,” Sissy pleaded, “I am—O so stupid!”

Louisa, with a brighter laugh than usual, told her she would be wiser by and by.

“You don’t know,” said Sissy, half crying, “what a stupid girl I am. All through school hours I make mistakes. Mr. and Mrs. M’Choakumchild call me up, over and over again, regularly to make mistakes. I can’t help them. They seem to come natural to me.”

“Mr. and Mrs. M’Choakumchild never make any mistakes themselves, Sissy?”

“O no!” she eagerly returned. “They know everything.”

“Tell me some of your mistakes.”

“I am almost ashamed,” said Sissy, with reluctance. “But to-day, for instance, Mr. M’Choakumchild was explaining to us about Natural Prosperity.”
the father wished you to be well-laugh too,

head, as it drooped abashed before her, until

learn," said Sissy. "And the worst of all is, that

Sissy?

it was raised again to glance at her face.

although I am so anxious to

although my poor father wished me so much

I don't like it.

 wasn't that a prosperous nation, and

What did you say?" asked Louisa.

"You had better say, National, as he said

so," returned Louisa, with her dry reserve.

"National Prosperity. And he said, Now,

this schoolroom is a Nation. And in this

nation, there are fifty millions of money.

Isn't this a prosperous nation? Girl number

twenty, isn't this a prosperous nation, and

aren't you in a thriving state?"

"What was it?" asked Louisa.

"Nothing, Sissy?"

"Did your father know so much himself,

Louisa stood looking at the pretty modest

face. "I hope so, and father said I was. It

was because he grew so scared and trembling,

and because he felt himself to be a poor,

weak, ignorant, helpless man (those used to

his words), that he wanted me so much to

be his words), that he wanted me so much to

learn because he wished me so much to

learn, and although I am so anxious to

learn because he wished me to, I am afraid I

do n't like it."

Louisa stood looking at the pretty modest

head, as it drooped abashed before her, until

it was raised again to glance at her face.

Then she asked:

"Did your father know so much himself,

that he wished you to be well taught too,

Sissy?"
I want you to come into the drawing-room. Father has brought old Bounderby home, and I must say, Tom dear, to go away; but don't interrupt us for a moment, whatever it was, and look for the story, or would have her head cut off before dying. Then the thought must have come upon him, poor poor father! of going away to try something for my sake; for, when I came back, he was gone."

"I say! Look sharp, for old Bounderby, Lou!" Tom remonstrated.

"There's no more to tell, Miss Louisa. I keep the nine oaks ready for him, and I know he will come back. Every letter that I see in Mr. Gradgrind's hand takes my breath away and blinds my eyes, for I think it comes from father, or from Mr. Sleary about father. Mr. Sleary promised to write as soon as ever father should be heard of, and I trust to him to keep his word."

"Do look sharp for old Bounderby, Lou!" said Tom, with an impatient whistle. "He'll be off, if you don't look sharp!"

After this, whenever Sissy dropped a curtsey to Mr. Gradgrind in the presence of his family, and said in a faltering way, "I beg your pardon, sir, for being troublesome—but—have you had any letter yet about me?" Louisa would suspend the occupation of the moment, whatever it was, and look for the reply as earnestly as Sissy did. And when Mr. Gradgrind regularly answered, "No, Jupe, nothing of the sort," the trembling of Sissy's lip would be repeated in Louisa's face, and her eyes would follow Sissy with compassion to the door. Mr. Gradgrind usually improved these occasions by remarking, when she was gone, that if Jupe had been properly trained from an early age she would have demonstrated to herself on sound principles the baselessness of these fantastic hopes. Yet it did seem (though not to him, for he
saw nothing of it) as if fantastic hope could take as strong a hold as Fact.

The observation must be limited exclusively to his daughter. As to Tom, he was becoming that not unprecedented triumph of calculation which is usually at work on number one. As to Mrs. Gradgrind, if she said anything on the subject, she would come a little way out of her wrappers, like a feminine dormouse, and say:

"Good gracious bless me how my poor head is vexed and worried by that girl Jupe's so perseveringly asking, over and over again, about her tiresome letters! Upon my word and honour I seem to be fated, and destined, and ordained, to live in the midst of things that I am never to hear the last of. It really is a most extraordinary circumstance that it appears as if I never was to hear the last of anything!"

At about this point, Mr. Gradgrind's eye would fall upon her; and under the influence of that wintry piece of fact, she would become torpid again.

CHAPTER X.

I ENTERTAIN a weak idea that the English people are as hard-worked as any people upon whom the sun shines. I acknowledge to this ridiculous idiosyncrasy, as a reason why I would give them a little more play.

In the hardest working part of Coketown; in the innermost fortifications of that ugly citadel, where Nature was as strongly bricked out as killing airs and gases were bricked in; at the heart of the labyrinth of narrow courts upon courts, and close streets upon streets, which had come into existence piecemeal, every piece in a violent hurry for some one man's purpose, and the whole an unnatural family,shouldering, and trampling, and pressing one another to death; in the last close nook of this great exhausted receiver, where the chimneys, for want of air to make a draft, were as stunted and crooked shapes, as though every figure in advance of him, at which he looked, was distinctly reflected on the wet pavement—if he could have seen it without the figure itself moving along from lamp to lamp, brightening and fading as it went—would have been enough to tell him who was there. Old Stephen was standing in the street, with the odd sensation upon him which the stoppage of the machinery always produced—the sensation of its having worked and stopped in his own head.

"Yet a last—see Rachael, still!" said he.

It was a wet night, and many groups of young women passed him, with their shawls drawn over their bare heads and held close under their chins to keep the rain out. He knew Rachael well, for a glance at any one of these groups was sufficient to show him that she was not there. At last, there were no more to come; and then he turned away, saying in a tone of disappointment, "Why, then, I ha' missed her!"

But, he had not gone the length of three streets, when he saw another of the shawled figures in advance of him, at which he looked so keenly that perhaps its mere shadow was distinctly reflected on the wet pavement—if he could have seen it without the figure itself moving along from lamp to lamp, brightening and fading as it went—would have been enough to tell him who was there.

Making his pace at once much quicker and much softer, he darted on until he was very near this figure, then fell into his own walk, and called " Rachael!" She turned, being then in the brightness of a lamp; and raising her hood a little, showed a quiet oval face, dark and rather delicate, irradiated by a pair of very gentle eyes, and the ends of a hair, which her broken intervals of leisure through many years, had masterd difficult sciences, and acquired a knowledge of most unlikely things. He held no station among the Hands who could make speeches and carry on debates. Thousands of his comppeers could talk much better than he, at any time. He was a good power-loom weaver, and a man of perfect integrity. What more he was, or what else he had in him, if anything, let him show for himself.

The lights in the great factories, which looked, when they were illuminated, like Fairy palaces—or the travellers by express-train said so—were all extinguished; and the bells had rung for knocking off for the night, and had ceased again; and the Hands, men and women, boy and girl, were clattering home. Old Stephen was standing in the street, with the odd sensation upon him which the stoppage of the machinery always produced—the sensation of its having worked and stopped in his own head.

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"I thought thou wast alin'd me, Rachael?"

"No."

"Early t'night, lass?"

"Times I'm a little early, Stephen; 'times a little late, I'm never to be counted on, going home."

"Nor going t'other way, neither, 't seems to me, Rachael?"

"No, Stephen."

He looked at her with some disappointment in his face, but with a respectful and patient conviction that she must be right in whatever she did. The expression was not lost upon her; she laid her hand lightly on his arm a moment, as if to thank him for it.

"We are such true friends, lad, and such old friends, and getting to be such old folk, now."

"No, Rachael, thou'rt as young as ever thou wast."

"One of us would be puzzled how to get old, Stephen, without t'other getting so too, both being alive," she answered, laughing;

"but, any ways, we're such old friends, that though t'other was so purposeless in trying to push away her tangled hair from her face, that it only stained, and splashes, but so much fouler than the one poor ghastly lump of the neighbour-hood kept a black ladder, in order that those who had done their daily grooping up and down the narrow stairs might slide out of this working world by the windows. She stopped at the corner, and putting her hand in his, wished him good night.

"Good night, dear lass; good night."

She went, with her next figure and her sober womanly step, down the dark street, and he stood looking after her until she turned into one of the small houses. There was not a flutter of her coarse shawl, perhaps, but had its interest in this man's eyes; not a tone of her voice but had its echo in his innermost heart.

When she was lost to his view, he pursued his homeward way, glancing up sometimes at the sky, where the clouds were sailing fast and wildly. But, they were broken now, and the rain had ceased, and the moon shone—looking down the high chimneys of Coketown on the deep furnaces below, and casting Titanic shadows of the steam engines at rest, upon the walls where they were lodged. The man seemed to have brightened with the night, as he went on.

His home, in such another street as the first, saving that it was narrower, was over a little shop. How it came to pass that any people found it worth their while to sell or buy the wretched little toys, mixed up in its window with cheap newspapers and pork (there was a leg to be raffled for to-morrow night), matters not here. He took his end of candle from a shelf, lighted it at another end of candle on the counter, without disturbing the mistress of the shop who was asleep in her little room, and went up stairs into his lodging.

It was a room, not unacquainted with the black ladder under various tenants; but as near, at present, as such a room could be. A few books and writings were on an old bureau in a corner, the furniture was decent and sufficient, and, though the atmosphere was tainted, the room was clean.

Going to the hearth to set the candle down upon a round three-legged table standing there, he stumbled against something. As he recoiled, looking down at it, it raised itself in a corner, the furniture was decent and sufficient, and, though the atmosphere was tainted, the room was clean.

"Heaven's mercy, woman!" he cried, falling farther off from the figure. "Hast thou come back again!"

Such a woman! A disabled, drunken creature, barely able to preserve the sitting posture by steadying herself with one begrimed hand on the floor, while the other was so purposeless in trying to push away her tangled hair from her face, that it only blinded her the more with the dirt upon it. A creature so foul to look at, in her tatters, stains, and splashes, but so much fouler than that in her moral infamy, that it was a shameful thing even to see her.

After an impatient oath or two, and some stupid clawing of herself with the hand not necessary to her support, she got her hair
away from her eyes sufficiently to obtain a sight of him. Then she sat swaying her body to and fro, and making gestures with her unnerved arm, which seemed intended as the accompaniment to a fit of laughter, though her face was stolid and drowsy.

"Eigh lad! What, ye' re there!" Some hoarse sounds meant for this, came mockingly out of her at last; and her head dropped forward on her breast.

"Back again?" she screeched, after some minutes, as if he had that moment said it. "Yes! And back a gen. Back a gen ever and ever so often. Back? Yes, back. Why not?"

Roused by the unmeaning violence with which she cried it out, she scrambled up, and stood supporting herself with her shoulders against the wall; dangling in one hand by the string, a dunghill-fragment of a bonnet, and trying to look scornfully at him.

"I'll sell thee off again, and I'll sell thee off again, and I'll sell thee off a score of times!" she cried, with something between a furious menace and an effort at a defiant dance. "Come away from th' bed!" He was sitting on the side of it, with his face hidden in his hands. "Come away from th' bed. Tis mine, and I've a right to t'!"

As she staggered to it, he avoided her with a shudder, and passed—his face still hidden—to the opposite end of the room. She threw herself upon the bed heavily, and soon was snoring hard. He sunk into a chair, and moved but once all that night. It was to throw a covering over her; as if his hands were not enough to hide her, even in the darkness.

BUSY WITH THE PHOTOGRAPH.

It may be as well, just now, to "take stock" in respect to our photographic and stereoscopic knowledge; to see how far the photograph and the stereoscope, up to the present time, have been rendered available for useful purposes. The principles involved in the processes and apparatus, with an account of explanatory details, occupied two papers in former volumes. The present article may be considered in some sense supplementary to those. Let us first say a little concerning these beautiful arts in their artistic applications.

How astonishing that the sun's light should be made to engrave a steel plate! We know that electricity can do something of this kind, on copper if not on steel; but really it seems even yet more marvelous and beautiful that such deeds can be achieved by the agency of light. Attempts have been made, during many years, to complete the photographic process by engraving the plate impressed with the image; that is, by causing the photographic image to engrave itself, by chemical aid alone, without requiring it to be touched in any way by the hand of artist or engraver. It was a bold thing to hope, but seemingly not too bold; for just about a year ago Mr. Talbot announced that he had actually succeeded in the attempt. To understand the mode of proceeding, it may be necessary to bear in mind that Mr. Talbot gives the name of positive etching to an etching of such a kind that the impressions struck off from it represent the objects positively, or as they are in nature. Well, then; the objects most successfully engraved are said to be such as can be placed in position with the metallic plate—the leaf of a fern, the light, feathery flowers of a grass, a piece of lace, and so forth. Objects which cast a broad and uniform shadow, such as the opaque leaf of a fern or other plant, produce an etching, which, when printed off, delineates the original in a manner something between an aquatint engraving and an Indian ink drawing. Even a photograph on paper can be made to engrave itself on steel. The minute chemistry of the matter we need say nothing about; but the processes are somewhat as follow:—A salt of potash is dissolved in a solution of isinglass, and is spread over the steel plate; it is dried by artificial warmth; the selected object is laid on the prepared plate, and is pressed down close to it by a piece of plate glass; the sun's rays are allowed to act through the glass upon the object and upon the steel plate. The part of the steel plate covered by the object is protected from the action of the solar rays, and remains yellow and unaltered; but those portions which are not covered by the object become to some extent chemically acted upon, and assume a brownish hue. The glass and the object being removed, the plate is steeped in water, by which most of the unchanged layer or film of potash and isinglass is washed off, leaving the metallic steel more nearly exposed than in the other parts. Another chemical solution, prepared from platinum, then has the effect of etching the plate in those exposed parts. Mr. Talbot describes the etching as being so complete, that it appears almost as if the shadow of the object had itself corroded the metal. If a veil of black crape be laid upon the metal plate, every thread of it becomes engraved or etched with wonderful precision and distinctness; and if two thicknesses of the crape are placed upon the metal, with the crape of each one, the resulting engraving offers us confusion, but with the help of a lens the lines belonging to each of the folds can be distinguished from those of the other. An analogous process was discovered by some French photographers; and there can hardly be a doubt that, great results will be produced by and by, in the production of engraved copies by these means.

Mighty Sol, portrait painter and artist in general, seems to be pretty nearly indifferent to the material on which he works, provided...