1854

Hard Times: Part 12

Charles Dickens

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It was falling dark when Stephen came out of Mr. Bounderby's house. The shadows of night had gathered so fast, that he did not look about him when he closed the door, but plodded straight along the street. Nothing was further from his thoughts than the curious old woman he had encountered on his previous visit to the same house, when he heard a step behind him that he knew, and, turning, saw her in Rachael's company. He saw Rachael first, as he had heard her only.

"Ah Rachael, my dear! Missus, thou wilst her!"

"Well, and now you are surprised to be sure, and with reason I must say," the old woman returned. "Here I am see." "But how wilt Rachael?" said Stephen, falling into their step, walking between them, and looking from the one to the other.

"Why, I come to be with this good lass pretty much as I came to be with you," said the old woman cheerfully, taking the reply upon herself. "My visiting time is later this year than usual, for I have been rather troubled with shortness of breath, and so put it off till the weather was fine and warm. For the same reason I don't make all my journey in one day, but divide it into two days, and get a bed to-night at the Travellers' Coffee House down by the railroad (a nice clean house), and go back, Parliamentary, at six in the morning. Well, but what has this to do with this good lass, says you? I'm going to tell you. I have heard of Mr. Bounderby being married. I read it in the paper, where it looked grand—oh, it looked fine!" the old woman dwelt on it with strange enthusiasm; "and I want to see his wife. I have never seen her yet. Suppose she be? She must be. She's your master's wife," returned the old woman.

"Suppose she be? She must be. She's your master's wife," said Stephen. But with a doubtful glance at Rachael.

"Have you left his work, Stephen?" asked Rachael, anxiously and quickly.

"Why, Rachael," he replied, "whether I ha left n't his work, or whether his work ha left n't me, cooms t' th' same. His work and me are parted. 'Tis as weel so—better, I were thinkin when yo coom up wi' me. It would ha brought n't trouble upon trouble if I had stayed there. Haply 'tis a kindness to monny that I go; haply 'tis a kindness to myseln; anyways it mun be done. I mun turn my face fro Coketown fur th' time, an seek a fort'n, dear, by beginnin fresh."

"Where will you go, Stephen?"

"I denno t'night," said he, lifting off his hat, and smoothing his thin hair with the flat of his hand. "But I'm not a goin t'night, Rachael; nor yet t' morrow. Tan't easy overmuch, t' know wheer t' turn, but a good heart will coom to me."

"Herein, too, the sense of even thinking unselfishly aided him. Before he had so much as closed Mr. Bounderby's door, he had reflected that at least his being obliged to go away was good for her, as it would save her from the chance of being brought into question for not withdrawing from him. Though it would cost him a hard pang to
leave her, and though he could think of no similar place in which his condemnation would not pursue him, perhaps it was almost a relief to be forced away from the endurance of the last four days, even to unknown calamities and distresses.

So he said, with truth, "I'm more leetsome Rachael, under 't, than I couldn ha believed." It was not her part to make his burden heavier. She answered with her comforting smile, and the three walked on together.

Age, especially when it strives to be self-reliant and cheerful, finds much consideration among the poor. The old woman was so decent and contented, and made so light of her infirmities, though they had increased upon her since her former interview with Stephen, that they both took an interest in her. She was so sprightly to allow of their walking at a slow pace on her account, but she was very grateful to be talked to, and very willing to talk to any extent: so, when they came to their part of the town, she was more brisk and vivacious than ever.

They complied, and the three went on to the house where he lodged. When they turned into the narrow street, Stephen glanced at his window with a dread that always haunted his desolate home; but it was open, as he had left it, and no one was there. The evil spirit of his life had flitted away again, months ago, and he had heard no more of her since. The only evidences of her last return were the scantier moveables in his room, and the grayer hair upon his head.

He lighted a candle, set out his little tea-board, got hot water from below, and brought in small portions of tea and sugar, a loaf, and some butter, from the nearest shop. The bread was new and crusty, the butter fresh, and the sugar lump, of course—in fulfilment of the standard testimony of the Coketown magnates, that these people lived like princes, sir. Rachael made the tea (so large a party necessitated the borrowing of a cup), and the visitor enjoyed it mightily. It was the first glimpse of sociability the host had had for many days. He too, with the world a wide heath before him, enjoyed the meal—again in corroboration of the magnates, as exemplifying the utter want of calculation on the part of these people, sir.

"I ha never thowt yet, missus," said Stephen, "o' askin thy name." The old lady announced herself as "Mrs. Pegler."

"A widdier, I think?" said Stephen. "Oh, many long years!" Mrs. Pegler's husband (one of the best on record) was already dead, by Mrs. Pegler's calculation, when Stephen was born.

"Twere a bad job too, to lose so good a one," said Stephen. "Oony children?"

Mrs. Pegler's cup, rattling against her saucer as she held it, denoted some nervousness on her part. "No," she said. "Not now, nor now." "Dead, Stephen," Rachael softly hinted. "I'm sorry I ha spok'n on't," said Stephen. "I ought t' ha hadn in my mind as I might touch a sore place. I—I blame myself."

While he excused himself, the old lady's cup rattled more and more. "I had a son," she said, curiously distressed, and not by any of the usual appearances of sorrow; "and he did well, wonderfully well. But he is not to be spoken of if you please. He is—"

Putting down her cup, she moved her hands as if she would have added, by her action, "dead!" Then, she said, aloud, "I have lost him."

Stephen had not yet got the better of his having given the old lady pain, when his landlady came stambling up the narrow stairs, and calling him to the door, whispered in his ear. Mrs. Pegler was by no means deaf, for she caught a word as it was uttered.

"Bounderby!" she cried, in a suppressed voice, starting up from the table. "Oh hide me! Don't let me be seen for the world. Don't let him come up till I have got away. Pray, pray!" She trembled, and was excessively agitated; getting behind Rachael, when Rachael tried to reassure her; and not seeming to know what she was about.

"But hearken, missus, hearken;" said Stephen, astonished, "'Tis his wife. Yor not fearfo' o' her. Yo was hey-go-mad about her, but an hour sin.'" "But are you sure it's the lady and not the gentleman?" she asked, still trembling. "Certain sure!" "Well then, pray don't speak to me, nor yet take any notice of me," said the old woman. "Let me be quite to myself in this corner."

Stephen nodded; looking to Rachael for an explanation, which she was quite unable to give him; took the candle, went down stairs, and in a few moments returned, lighting Louisa into the room. She was allowed by the wheel.

Rachael had risen, and stood apart with her shawl and bonnet in her hand, when Stephen, himself profoundly astonished by this visit, put the candle on the table. Then he too stood, with his doubled hand upon the table near it, waiting to be addressed.

For the first time in her life, Louisa had come into one of the dwellings of the Coketown Hands; for the first time in her life, she was face to face with anything like individuality in connexion with them. She knew of their existence by hundreds and by thousands. She knew what results in work a given number of them would produce,
Whatever, for an honest workman between them?"

Rachel shook her head in silence.

"He fell into suspicion," said Louisa, "with his fellow-weavers, because he had made a promise not to be one of them. I think it must have been to you that he made that promise. Might I ask you why he made it?"

Rachel burst into tears. "I didn't seek it of him, poor lad. I prayed him to avoid trouble for his own good, little thinking he'd come to it through me. But I know he'd die a hundred deaths, ere he'd break his word. I know that of him well."

Stephen had remained quietly attentive, in his usual thoughtful attitude, with his hand at his chin. He now spoke in a voice rather less steady than usual.

"No one, excepting myself, can ever know what honor, an what love, an respect, I bear to Rachael, or wi' what cause. When I passed that promess, I t owed her true, she were th' Angel o' my life. 'Twere a solemn promess. 'Ts gone fro me, fur ever."

Louisa turned her head to him, and bent it with a deference that was new in her. She looked from him to Rachel, and her features softened. "What will you do?" she asked him. And her voice had softened too.

"Well, manny," said Stephen, making the best of it, with a smile; "when I ha' finished o', I mun quit this part, an' try another. Fortnet or misfortnet, a man can but try; there's nowt to be done wi'out tryin'—cept laying doon an dying."

"How will you travel?"

"Afoot, my kind ledy, afoot."

Louisa colored, and a purse appeared in her hand. The rustling of a bank-note was audible, as she unfolded one and laid it on the table.

"Rachael, will you tell him—for you know how, without offence—that this is freely his, to help him on his way? Will you entreat him to take it?"

"I canna' do that, young lady," she answered, turning her head aside; "bless you for thinking o' the poor lad wi' such tenderness. But 'tis for him to know his heart, and what is right according to it."

Louisa looked, in part incredulous, in part frightened, in part overcome with quick sympathy, when this man of so much self-command who had been so plain and steady through the late interview, lost his composure in a moment, and now stood with his hand before his face. She stretched out hers, as if she would have touched him; then checked herself, and remained still.

"Not e'en Rachael," said Stephen, when he stood again with his face uncovered, "could mak such a kind offerin, by onny words, kinder. T' show that I'm not a man wi'out reason and gratitude, I'll take two pound. I'll borrow't for t' pay't back. 'Twill be the sweetest work as ever I ha'}
done, that puts it in my power to acknowledge once more my lasting thankfulness for this present action."

She was fair to take up the note again, and to substitute the much smaller sum he had named. He was neither courtly, nor handsome, nor picturesque, in any respect; and yet his manner of accepting it, and of expressing his thanks without more words, had a grace in it that Lord Chesterfield could not have taught his son in a century.

Tom had sat upon the bed, swinging one leg, and sucking his walking-stick with sufficient unconcern, until the visit had attained this stage. Seeing his sister ready to depart, he got up, rather hurriedly, and put in a word.

"Just wait a moment, Loo! Before we go, I should like to speak to him a moment. Something comes into my head. If you'll step out on the stairs, Blackpool, I'll mention it. Never, as if you meant anything, if he should see you hanging about there; because I don't put him up to speak to you, unless I find I can do you the service I want to do you. In that case he'll have a note or a message for you, but not else. Now look here! You are sure you understand."

He had wormed a finger, in the darkness, through a button-hole of Stephen's coat, and was screwing that corner of the garment tight up, round and round, in an extraordinary manner.

"I understand, sir," said Stephen.

"Now look here!" repeated Tom. "Be sure you don't make any mistake then, and don't forget. I shall tell my sister as we go home, what I have seen and shall approve, I know. Now look here! You're all right, are you? You understand all about it? Very well then. Come along, Loo!"

He pushed the door open as he called to her, but did not return into the room, or wait to be lighted down the narrow stairs. He was at the bottom when she began to descend, and was in the street before she could take his arm.

Mrs. Pegler remained in her corner until the brother and sister were gone, and until Stephen came back with the candle in his hand, lighted in a state of inexpressible admiration of Mrs. Borderby, and, like an unaccountable old woman, wept, "because she was such a pretty dear." Yet Mrs. Pegler was so flurried lest the object of her admiration should return by any chance, or anybody else should come, that her cheerfulness was ended for that night. It was late too, to people who rose early and worked hard; therefore the party broke up; and Stephen and Rachael escorted their mysterious acquaintance to the door of the Travellers' Coffee House, where they parted from her.

They walked back together to the corner of the street where Rachael lived, and as they drew nearer and nearer to it, silence crept upon them. When they came to the dark corner where their unfrequent meetings always ended, they stopped, still silent, as if both were afraid to speak.

"I shall strive to see thee again, Rachael, afore I go, but if not—"

"Thou wilt not, Stephen, I know. 'Tis better that we make up our minds to be open wi' one another."

"Thou'rt awlus right. 'Tis bolder and better. I ha been thinkin then, Rachael, that as 'tis but a day or two that remains, I t'were better for thee, my dear, not t' be seen wi' me. 'T might bring thee into trouble, fur no good."

"'Tis not for that, Stephen, that I mind. But thou know'st our old agreement. 'Tis for that."

"Well, well," said he. "'Tis better, anyways, to tell the truth."

"Thou'lt write to me, and tell me all that happens, Stephen?"

"Yes. What can I say now, but Heaven be wi' thee, Heaven bless thee, Heaven thank thee and reward thee!"

"May it bless thee, Stephen, too, in all thy wanderings, and send thee peace and rest at last!"

"I t'ould thee, my dear," said Stephen.
Blackfoot—"that night—that I would never
see or think o' anything that angered me,
but thou, so much better than me, shouldst
be beside it. Thou'rt beside it now. Thou
mak'st me see it wi' a better eye. Bless thee. Good night. Good bye!"

It was but a hurried parting in the com-
mon street, yet it was a sacred remem-
brance to these two common people. Utili-
tarian economists, skeletons of schoolmasters,
Commissioners of Fact, genteel and used-up
infidels, gabbler's of many little dog's-eared
creeds, the poor you will have always with
you. Cultivate in them, while there is yet time,
the utmost graces of the fancies and affec-
tions, to adorn their lives so much in need
of ornament; or, in the moment of your
victory, when romance is utterly driven
out of their souls, and they and a bare exist-
tence stand face to face, Reality will take a
wolfish turn, and make an end of you!

Stephen worked the next day, and the
next, uncheered by a word from any one,
and shunned in all his coming and going as
before. At the end of the second day, he
saw land; at the end of the third, his loom
stood empty.

He had over-stayed his hour in the street
outside the Bank, on each of the two first
evenings; and nothing had happened there,
good or bad. That he might not be remiss
in his part of the engagement, he resolved to
wait full two hours, on this third and last
night.

There was the lady who had once kept
Mr. Bounderby's house, sitting at the first
floor window as he had seen her before; and
there was the light porter, sometimes talking
with her there, and sometimes looking over
the blind below which had Bank upon it, and
sometimes coming to the door and standing on
the steps for a breath of air. When he first
came out, Stephen thought he might be look-
 ing for him, and passed near; but the light
porter only cast his winking eyes upon him
slightly, and said nothing.

Two hours were a long stretch of lounging
about, after a long day's labor. Stephen sat
upon the step of a door, leaned against a wall
under an archway, strolled up and down, lis-
tened for the church clock, stopped and
watched children playing in the street. Some
purpose or other is so natural to every one,
that a mere loiterer always looks and feels
remarkable. When the first hour was out,
Stephen even began to have an uncomforta-
table sensation upon him of being for the
time a disreputable character.

Then came the lamplighter, and two length-
ing lines of light all down the long perspec-
tive of the street, until they were blended
and lost in the distance. Mrs. Sparsit closed
the first floor window, drew down the blind,
and went up stairs. Presently, a light went
up stairs after her, passing first the fanlight
of the door, and afterwards the two staircase
windows, on its way up. By and by, one
corner of the second floor blind was dis-
turbed, as if Mrs. Sparsit's eye were
there; also the other corner, as if the
light porter's eye were on that side. Still,
no communication was made to Stephen.
Much relieved when the two hours were
at last accomplished, he went away at a
slow pace, as a recompense for so much
loitering.

He had only to take leave of his landlady,
and lie down on his temporary bed upon the
door; for his bundle was made up for to-mor-
row, and all was arranged for his departure.
He meant to be clear of the town very early:
before the Hands were in the streets.

It was barely daybreak, when with a part-
ing look round his room, mournfully wonder-
ning whether he should ever see it again, he went
out. The town was as entirely deserted as
if the inhabitants had abandoned it, rather
than hold communication with him. Every-
thing looked wan at that hour. Even the
coming sun made but a pale waste in the
sky, like a sad sea.

By the place where Rachael lived, though
it was not in his way; by the red brick
streets; by the great silent factories, not
trembling yet; by the railway, where the
danger-lights were waning in the strengthen-
ing day; by the railway's crazy neigh-
bourhood, half pulled down and half
built up; by scattered red brick villas, where
the besmoked evergreens were sprinkled with
a dirty powder, like untidy snuff-takers;
by coal-dust paths and many varieties of
ugliness; Stephen got to the top of the hill,
and looked back.

Day was shining radiant upon the town
then, and the bells were going for the morn-
ning work. Domestic fires were not.
yet lighted, and the high chimneys had the sky
to themselves. Puffing out their poisonous
volumes, they would not be long in hiding it;
but, for half an hour, some of the many win-
dows were golden, which showed the Coke-
town people a sun eternally in eclipse, through
a medium of smoked glass.

So strange to turn from the chimneys to
the birds. So strange to have the road-dust on
his feet instead of the coal-grit. So strange
to have lived to his time of life, and yet to be
beginning like a boy this summer morning!
With these musings in his mind, and his
bundle under his arm, Stephen took his atten-
tive face along the high road. And the trees
arched over him, whispering that he left a
true and loving heart behind.

MAN AS A MONSTER.

Strange things might be written in a
chapter upon Supernatural Zoology, being
an authentic description and history of
dragons, unicorns, basilisks, and other curi-
osities that once belonged, as properly as
owls or lions, to a history of animals. From
histories of plants, dating three centuries ago