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Hard Times: Part 15

Charles Dickens

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Mrs. Sparsit, lying by to recover the tone of her nerves in Mr. Bounderby’s retreat, kept such a sharp look-out, night and day, under her Coriolanian eyebrows, that her eyes, like a couple of lighthouses on an iron-bound coast, might have warned all prudent mariners from that bold rock her Roman nose and the dark and craggy region in its neighbourhood, but for the placidity of her manner. Although it was hard to believe that her retiring for the night could be anything but a form, so severely wide awake were those classical eyes of hers, and so impossible did it seem that her rigid nose could yield to any relaxing influence, yet her manner of sitting, smoothing her uncomfortable, not to say, gritty, mittens (they were constructed of a cool fabric like a meat-safe), or of ambling to unknown places of destination with her foot in her cotton stirrup, was so perfectly serene, that most observers would have been constrained to suppose her a dove, embodied, by some freak of nature, in the earthly tabernacle of a bird of the hook-beaked order.

She was a most wonderful woman for prowling about the house. How she got from story to story, was a mystery beyond solution. A lady so decorous in herself, and so highly connected, was not to be suspected of dropping over the bannisters or sliding down them, yet her extraordinary facility of locomotion suggested the wild idea. Another noticeable circumstance in Mrs. Sparsit was, that she was never hurried. She would shoot with consummate velocity from the roof to the hall, yet would be in full possession of her breath and dignity on the moment of her arrival there. Neither was she ever seen by human vision to go at a great pace.

She took very kindly to Mr. Harthouse, and had some pleasant conversation with him soon after her arrival. She made him her stately curtsey in the garden, one morning before breakfast.

“It appears but yesterday, sir,” said Mrs. Sparsit, “that I had the honor of receiving you at the Bank, when you were so good as to wish to be made acquainted with Mr. Bounderby’s address.”

“An occasion, I am sure, not to be forgotten by myself in the course of Ages,” said Mr. Harthouse, inclining his head to Mrs. Sparsit with the most indolent of all possible airs.

“We live in a singular world, sir,” said Mrs. Sparsit.

“I have had the honor, by a coincidence of which I am proud, to have made a remark, similar in effect, though not so epigrammatically expressed.”

“A singular world, I would say, sir,” pursued Mrs. Sparsit; after acknowledging the compliment with a drooping of her dark eyebrows, not altogether so mild in its expression as her voice was in its dulcet tones; “as regards the intimacies we form at one time, with individuals we were quite ignorant of, at another. I recall, sir, that on that occasion you went so far as to say you were actually apprehensive of Miss Gradgrind.”

“Your memory does me more honor than my insignificance deserves. I availed myself of your obliging hints to correct my timidity, and it is unnecessary to add that they were perfectly accurate. Mrs. Sparsit’s talent for— in fact for anything requiring accuracy— with a combination of strength of mind—and Family—is too habitually developed to admit of any question.” He was almost falling asleep over this compliment; it took him so long to get through, and his mind wandered so much in the course of its execution.

“You found Miss Gradgrind—I really cannot call her Mrs. Bounderby; it’s very absurd of me—as youthful as I described her?” asked Mrs. Sparsit, sweetly.

“You drew her portrait perfectly,” said Mr. Harthouse. “Presented her dead image.”

“Very engaging, sir?” said Mrs. Sparsit, causing her mien to slowly revolve over one another.

“Highly so.”

“It used to be considered,” said Mrs. Sparsit, “that Miss Gradgrind was wanting in animation, but I confess she appears to me considerably and strikingly improved in that respect. Ay, and indeed here is Mr. Bounderby!” cried Mrs. Sparsit, nodding her head a great many times, as if she had been
talking and thinking of no one else. “How do you find yourself this morning, sir? Pray let us see you cheerful, sir!”

Now, these persistent assuagements of his misery, and lightening of his load, had by this time begun to have the effect of making Mr. Bounderby softer than usual towards Mrs. Sparsit; and harder than usual to meet other people from his wife downward. So, when Mrs. Sparsit said with forced lightness of heart, “You want your breakfast, sir, but I dare say Miss Gradgrind will soon be here to preside at the table,” Mr. Bounderby replied, “If I waited to be taken care of by my wife, ma’am! I believe you know pretty well I should wait till Doomsday, so I’ll trouble you to take charge of the teapot.” Mrs. Sparsit complied, and assumed her old position at table.

This again made the excellent woman vastly sentimental. She was so humble within, that when Louisa appeared, she rose, protesting she needed not. She was not the subject of sitting in that place under existing circumstances, often as she had had the honor of making Mr. Bounderby’s breakfast, before Mrs. Gradgrind—she begged pardon, she meant to say, Miss Bounderby—she hoped to be excused, but she really could not get it right yet, though she trusted she would be so by and by—had assumed her present position. It was only (she observed) because Miss Gradgrind happened to be a little late, and Mr. Bounderby’s time was so very precious, and she knew it of old to be so essential that he should breakfast to the moment, that she had taken the liberty of complying with his request: long as his will had been a law to her.

“There! Stop where you are, ma’am,” said Mr. Bounderby, “stop where you are! Mrs. Bounderby will be very glad to be relieved of the trouble, I believe.”

“Don’t say that, sir,” returned Mrs. Sparsit, almost with severity, “because that is very unkind to Mrs. Bounderby. And to be unkind is not to be you, sir.”

“You may set your mind at rest ma’am—You can take it very quietly, can’t you Loo?” said Mr. Bounderby, in a blustering way, to his wife.

“Of course. It is of no moment. Why should it be of any importance to me?”

“Why should it be of any importance to any one, Mrs. Sparsit, ma’am?” said Mr. Bounderby, swelling with a sense of slight.

“You attach too much importance to these things, ma’am. By George, you’ll be corrected in some of your notions here. You are old fashioned, ma’am. You are behind Tom Gradgrind’s children’s time.”

“What is the matter with you?” asked Louisa, coldly surprised. “What has given you offence?”

“Offence!” repeated Bounderby, “Do you suppose if there was any offence given me, I shouldn’t name it, and request to have it corrected? I am a straightforward man, I believe. I don’t go beating about for side-winds.”

“I suppose no one ever had occasion to think you too diligent, or too delicate,” Louisa answered him composedly: “I have never made that objection to you, either as a child or as a woman, I don’t understand what you could have.”

“Have I” returned Mr. Bounderby. “Nothing. Otherwise, don’t you, Loo Bounderby, know thoroughly well that I, Josiah Bounderby of Coketown, would have it?”

She looked at him, as he struck the table and made the teacups ring, with a proud color in her face that was a new change, Mr. Harthouse thought. “You take no further trouble to explain yourself. I am not curious to know your meaning. What does it matter!”

Nothing more was said on this theme, and Mr. Harthouse was soon idly gay on indifferent subjects. The next day, the Sparsit action upon Mr. Bounderby threw Louisa and James Harthouse more together, and strengthened the dangerous alienation from her husband and confidence against him with another, into which she had fallen by degrees so fine that she could not retrace them, even if she had been aware that she was doing it. But, whether she ever tried or no, lay hidden in her own closed heart.

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“This time begun to have the effect of making him ultimately to break
She had seldom been there, since her marriage. Her father was usually sitting and sitting at his parliamentary cinder-heap in London (without being observed to turn up many precious articles among the rubbish), and was still hard at it in the national dustyard. Her mother had taken it rather as a disturbance than otherwise, to be visited, as she reclined upon her sofa; young people, Louisa felt herself all unfit for; Sissy she had never softened to again, since the night when the stroller's child had raised her eyes to look at Mr. Bounderby's intended wife. She had no inducements to go back, and had rarely come.

Neither, as she approached her old home now, did any of the best influences of old home descend upon her. The dreams of childhood—its airy fables; its graceful, beautiful, humane, impossible adornments of the world beyond; so good to be believed in out of doors. So good to be remembered when outgrown, for then the least among them rises to the stature of a great Charity in the heart, suffering little children to come into the midst of it, and to keep with their pure hands a garden in the stony ways of this world, wherein it were better for all the children of Adam that they should thenceforward be simple and trustful, and not worldly-wise—what had she to do with these? Remembrances of how she had journeyed to the little that she knew, by the enchanted roads of what she and millions of innocent creatures had hoped and imagined; of how, first coming upon Reason through the tender light of Fancy, she had seen it a beneficent god, so great as itself: not a grim Idol, cruel and cold, with its victims bound hand to foot, and its big dumb shape set up with a sightless stare, never to be moved by anything but so many calculated tons of leverage—what had she to do with these? Her remembrances of home, were with the remembrances of the drying up of every spring and fountain in her young heart as it gushed out. The golden waters were not there. They were flowing for the fertilisation of the land where grapes are gathered from thorns, and figs from thistles.

She went, with a heavy, hardened kind of sorrow upon her, into the house and into her mother's room. Since the time of her leaving home, Sissy had lived with the rest of the family on equal terms. Sissy was at her mother's side; and Jane, her sister, now ten or twelve years old, was in the room.

There was great trouble before it could be made known to Mrs. Gradgrind, that her eldest child was there. She reclined, propped up, from mere habit, on a couch: as nearly in her old usual attitude, as anything so helpless could be kept in. She had positively refused to take her bed; on the ground that if she did, she would never hear the last of it. It was a long time before she could be coaxed to lie down; so far away in her bundle of shawls, and the sound of another voice addressing her seemed to take such a long time in getting down to her ears, that she might have been lying at the bottom of a well. The poor lady was nearer Truth than she ever had been: which had much to do with it.

On being told that Mrs. Bounderby was there, she replied, at cross-purposes, that she had never called him by that name since he married Louisa; that pending her choice of an unobjectionable name, she had called him J; and that she could not at present depart from that regulation, not being yet provided with a permanent substitute. Louisa had sat by her for some minutes, and had spoken to her often, before she arrived at a clear understanding who it was. She then seemed to come to it all at once.

"Well, my dear," said Mrs. Gradgrind, "and I hope you are going on satisfactorily to yourself. It was all your father's doing. He set his heart upon it. And he ought to know it.

"I want to hear of you, mother; not of myself."

"You want to hear of me, my dear? That's something new, I am sure, when anybody wants to hear of me. Not at all well, Louisa. Very faint and giddy."

"Are you in pain, dear mother?"

"I think there's a pain somewhere in the room," said Mrs. Gradgrind, "but I couldn't positively say that I have got it."

After this strange speech, she lay silent for some time. Louisa, holding her hand, could feel no pulse; but kissing it, could see a slight thin thread of life in fluttering motion. "You very seldom see your sister," said Mrs. Gradgrind. "She grows like you. I wish you would look at her. Sissy, bring her here."

She was brought, and stood with her hand in her sister's. Louisa had observed her with her arm round Sissy's neck, and she felt the difference of this approach.

"Do you see the likeness, Louisa?"

"Yes, mother. I should think her like me. But——"

"Eh? Yes, I always say so," Mrs. Gradgrind cried, with unexpected quickness. "And that reminds me. I want to speak to you, my dear. Sissy, my good girl, leave us alone a minute."

Louisa had relinquished the hand; had thought that her sister's was a better and brighter face than hers had ever been; had seen in it, not without a rising feeling of resentment, even in that place and at that time, something of the gentleness of the other face in the room; the sweet face with the trusting eyes, made paler than watching and sympathy made it, by the rich dark hair.

Left alone with her mother, Louisa saw her lying with an awful lull upon her face, like one who was floating away upon some great water, all resistance over, content to be carried down the stream. She put the shadow of a hand to her lips again, and recalled her.
"You were going to speak to me, mother."
"Eh? Yes, to be sure, my dear. You know your father is almost always away now, and therefore I must write to him about it."
"About what, mother? Don't be troubled. About what?"
"You must remember, my dear, that whenever I have said anything, on any subject, I have never heard the last of it; and consequently, that I have long left off saying anything."
"I can hear you, mother."
"But, it was only by dint of bending down her ear, and at the same time attentively watching the lips as they moved, that she could link such faint and broken sounds into any chain of connexion."
"You learnt a great deal, Louisa, and so did your brother. Ologies of all kinds, from morning to night. If there is any Ology left, of any description, that has not been worn to rags in this house, all I can say is, I hope I shall never hear its name."
"And I can hear you, mother, when you have strength to go on."
"This, to keep her from floating away."
"But there's something—not an Ology at all—that your father has missed, or forgotten, Louisa. I don't know what it is. I have often sat with Sissy near me, and thought about it."
"I shall never get its name now. But your father may, it matters him nothing. I want to write to him, to find out for God's sake, what it is. Give me a pen, give me a pen."
"Even the power of restlessness was gone, except from the poor head, which could just turn from side to side."
"She fancied, however, that her request had been complied with, and that the pen she could not have held was in her hand, it matters little what figures of wonderful no-meaning she began to trace upon her wrappers. The hand soon stopped in the midst of them; the light that had always been feeble and dim behind the weak transparencies went out, and even Mrs. Gradgrind, emerged from the shadow in which man walketh and disquieteth himself in vain, took upon her the dread solemnity of the sages and patriarchs.

CHAPTER XXVI.

MRS. SPARSET's nerves being slow to recover their tone, the worthy woman made a stay of some weeks in duration at Mr. Bounderby's retreat, where, notwithstanding her anchorite turn of mind based upon her becoming consciousness of her altered station, she resigned herself, with noble fortitude, to lodging, as one may say, in clover, and feeding on the fat of the land. During the whole term of this recess from the guardianship of the Bank, Mrs. Sparsit was a pattern of consistency; continuing to take such pity on Mr. Bounderby to his face, as is rarely taken on man, and to call his portrait a Noodle to its face, with the greatest amiability and contempt.

MR. BOUNDERBY, having got it into his explosive composition that Mrs. Sparsit was a highly superior woman to perceive that he had that general cross upon him in his deserts (for he had not yet settled what it was), and further that Louisa would have objected to her as a frequent visitor if it had comported with his greatness that she should object to anything he chose to do, resolved not to lose sight of Mrs. Sparsit easily. So, when her nerves were strung up to the pitch of again consuming sweetbreads in solitude, he said to her at the dinner table, on the day before her departure, "I tell you what, ma'am; you shall come down here of a Saturday while the fine weather lasts, and stay till Monday." To which Mrs. Sparsit returned, in effect, though not of the Mahomedan persuasion: "To hear is to obey."

Now, Mrs. Sparsit was not a poetical woman; but she took an idea, in the nature of an allegorical fancy, into her head. Much watching of Louisa, and much consequent observation of her impenetrable demeanor, which keenly whetted and sharpened Mrs. Sparsit's edge, must have given her as it were a lift, in the way of inspiration. She created in her mind a highly superior woman, to which she gave the name of Louisa, and to which Mrs. Sparsit returned, in effect, though not of the Mahomedan persuasion: "To hear is to obey."

It became the business of Mrs. Sparsit's life, to look up at the staircase, and to watch Louisa coming down. Sometimes slowly, sometimes quickly, sometimes several steps at once, sometimes stopping, never turning back. If she had once turned back, it might have been the death of Mrs. Sparsit in spleen and grief.

She had been descending steadily, to the day, and on the day, when Mr. Bounderby issued the weekly invitation recorded above. Mrs. Sparsit was in good spirits, and inclined to be conversational.

"And pray, sir," said she, "if I may venture to ask a question appertaining to any subject on which you show reserve—which is indeed hardy in me, for I well know you have a reason for everything you do—have you received intelligence respecting the probation?"

"Why, ma'am, no; not yet. Under the circumstances, I didn't expect it yet. Home wasn't built in a day, ma'am."

"Very true, sir," said Mrs. Sparsit, shaking her head.

"Nor yet in a week, ma'am."

"No, indeed, sir," returned Mrs. Sparsit, with an air of melancholy.

"In a similar manner," said Bounderby, "I can wait, you know. If Romulus and Remus could wait, Josiah Bounderby can wait. They were better off in their youth than I was, however. They had a she wolf for a nurse; I had only a she wolf for a grandmother. She didn't give any milk,
ma'am; she gave bruises. She was a regular Alderney at that."

"Ah!" Mrs. Sparsit sighed and shuddered.

"No, ma'am," continued Bounderby, "I have not heard anything more about it. It's in hand, though; and young Tom, who rather sticks to business at present—something new for him; he hadn't the schooling I had—is helping. My injunction to him was, Keep it quiet, and let it seem to blow over. Do what you like under the rose, but don't give a sign of what you're about; or half a hundred of 'em will combine together and get this fellow who has bolted, out of reach for good. Keep it quiet, and the thieves will grow in confidence by little and little, and we shall have 'em."

"Very sagacious indeed, sir," said Mrs. Sparsit. "Very interesting. The old woman you mentioned, sir—"

"The old woman I mentioned, ma'am," said Bounderby, cutting the matter short, "has nothing to boast about, "is not laid hold of; but, she may take her oath she will be, if that is any satisfaction to her villainous old mind. In the mean time, ma'am, I am of opinion, if you ask me my opinion, that the less she is talked about, the better."

That same evening, Mrs. Sparsit, in her chamber window, resting from her packing operations, looked towards her great staircase and saw Louisa still descending.

She sat by Mr. Harthouse, in an alcove in the garden, talking very low. He stood leaning over her, as they whispered together, and his face almost touched her hair. "If not quite!" said Mrs. Sparsit, straining her hawk's eyes to the utmost. Mrs. Sparsit was too distant to hear a word of their discourse, or even to know that they were speaking softly, otherwise than from the expression of their figures; but what she said was this:

"You recollect the man, Mr. Harthouse?"

"Oh, perfectly!"

"And his face, and his manner, and what he said?"

"Perfectly. And an infinitely dreary person he appeared to me to be. Lengthy and prosy in the extreme. It was very knowing to hold forth, in the humble-virtue school of eloquence; but, I assure you I thought at the time, 'My good fellow, you are over-doing what you say.'"

"I almost feel as though it must be bad in me," returned Louisa, after sitting thoughtfully awhile, "to be so ready to agree with you, and to be so lightened in my heart by what you say."

"I only say what is reasonable; nothing worse. I have talked it over with my friend Tom more than once—of course I remain on terms of perfect confidence with Tom—and he is quite of my opinion, and I am quite of his. Will you walk?"

They strolled away, among the lanes beginning to be indistinct in the twilight—she leaning on his arm—and she little thought how she was going down, down, down, Mrs. Sparsit's staircase.

Night and day, Mrs. Sparsit kept it standing. When Louisa had arrived at the bottom and disappeared in the gulf, it might fall in upon her if it would; but, until then, there it was to be, a Building, before Mrs. Sparsit's eyes. And there Louisa always was, upon it. Always gliding down, down, down.

Mrs. Sparsit saw James Harthouse come and go; she heard of him here and there; she saw the changes of the face he had studied; she, too, remarked to a nicety how and when it clouded, how and when it cleared; she kept her black eyes wide open, with no touch of pity, with no touch of compassion, all absorbed in interest; but, in the interest of seeing her, ever dragging with no hand to stay her, nearer and nearer to the bottom of this new Giants' Staircase.

With all her deference for Mr. Bounderby, as contradistinguished from his portrait, Mrs. Sparsit had not the smallest intention of interrupting the descent. Eager to see it
accomplished, and yet patient, she waited for the last fall as for the ripeness and fulness of the harvest of her hopes. Hushed in expectancy, she kept her wary gaze upon the stairs, and seldom so much as daringly shook her right mitten (with her fist in it), at the figure coming down.

HER MAJESTY'S CONSULAR SERVICE.

There are one or two important consulates in the Levant about to become vacant; and as it is a very sensible proverb which tells us that prevention is better than cure, I shall go on to say a few words upon this subject. To understand clearly, however, the duties and precise position of our consuls in this part of the world, it will be necessary to go back a little.

Well as the state of Turkey still is, it was formerly very much worse. The Greeks had given the Turks such an indifferent opinion of the Christian world that they looked upon our race as a species of game it was lawful to hunt. Unbelievers had, therefore, neither justice nor mercy to expect from the followers of the Prophet. Thus, if one Frank did wrong, the cadi not only punished the sinner, but any other Frank who was to be found. Ships were stopped on the high seas in time of peace, and made to deliver up their cargoes and cabin boys; sometimes the ships also were taken. Turkish officers not only exacted arbitrary taxes and customs dues, but they levied them as often as they pleased. They were stopped on the high seas in time of almost every other. He may banish, dishonour, imprison, and fine at pleasure; he is banker, notary, arbitrator, judge, priest, registrar, and administrator of dead men's goods. Untold property is confided to his care; the many interests of travellers and merchants are almost entirely entrusted to him. Finally, he has power to enforce attendance at his office by a fine. He is recommended to prefer summary decisions, and not to give his mind to juries.

The British consul has such weight and authority among the Turks that he may cause almost any amount of mischief unchecked. There is no press to watch his doings; no society to cry shame on him; no means by which an ignorant Maltese or Ionian can make a grievance known or obtain redress; there is, indeed, no control of any kind over your British consul and a very august and singular personage he has become in consequence. If we grant that your British consul is always a high-minded and conscientious man (and I am not doubting it), it must still be borne in mind, he has to deal with a species of game it was lawful to hunt. Unbelievers had, therefore, neither justice nor mercy to expect from the followers of the Prophet. Thus, if one Frank did wrong, the cadi not only punished the sinner, but any other Frank who was to be found. Ships were stopped on the high seas in time of peace, and made to deliver up their cargoes and cabin boys; sometimes the ships also were taken. Turkish officers not only exacted arbitrary taxes and customs dues, but they levied them as often as they pleased. They were stopped on the high seas in time of almost every other. He may banish, dishonour, imprison, and fine at pleasure; he is banker, notary, arbitrator, judge, priest, registrar, and administrator of dead men's goods. Untold property is confided to his care; the many interests of travellers and merchants are almost entirely entrusted to him. Finally, he has power to enforce attendance at his office by a fine. He is recommended to prefer summary decisions, and not to give his mind to juries.

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