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Hard Times: Part 16

Charles Dickens

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HARD TIMES.
BY CHARLES DICKENS.

CHAPTER XXVII.

The figure descended the great stairs, steadily, steadily; always verging, like a weight in deep water, to the black gulf at the bottom.

Mr. Gradgrind, apprised of his wife's decease, made an expedition from London, and buried her in a business-like manner. He then returned with promptitude to the national cinder-heap, and resumed his sifting for the odds and ends he wanted, and his throwing of the dust about into the eyes of other people who wanted other odds and ends—in fact, resumed his parliamentary duties.

In the meantime, Mrs. Sparsit kept unwinking watch and ward. Separated from her staircase, all the week, by the length of iron road dividing Coketown from the country house, she yet maintained her cat-like observation of Louisa, through her husband, through her brother, through James Harthouse, through the outsides of letters and packets, through everything animate and inanimate that at any time went near the stairs. "Your foot on the last step, my lady," said Mrs. Sparsit, apostrophising the descending figure, with the aid of her threatening mitten, "and all your art shall never blind me."

Art or nature though, the original stock of Louisa's character or the graft of circumstances upon it,—her curious reserve did bailie, while it stimulated, one as sagacious as Mrs. Sparsit. There were times when Mr. James Harthouse was not sure of her. There were times when he could not read the face he had studied so long; and when this lonely girl was a greater mystery to him, than any woman of the world with a ring of satellites to help her.

So the time went on; until it happened that Mr. Bounderby was called away from home by business which required his presence elsewhere, for three or four days. It was on a Friday that he intimated this to Mrs. Sparsit at the Bank, adding: "But you'll go down to-morrow, ma'am, all the same. You'll go down just as if I was there. It will make no difference to you."

"Pray, sir," returned Mrs. Sparsit, pron Gouldly, "let me beg you not to say that. Your absence will make a vast difference to me, sir, as I think you very well know."

"Well, ma'am, then you must get on in my absence as well as you can," said Bounderby, not displeased.

"Mr. Bounderby," returned Mrs. Sparsit, "your will is to me a law, sir; otherwise, it might be my inclination to dispute your kind commands, not feeling sure that it will be quite so agreeable to Miss Gradgrind to receive me, as it ever is to your own munificent hospitality. But you shall say no more, sir. I will go, upon your invitation."

"Why, when I invite you to my house, ma'am," said Bounderby, opening his eyes, "I should hope you want no other invitation."

"No indeed, sir," returned Mrs. Sparsit, "I should hope not. Say no more, sir. I would, sir, I could see you gay again!"

"What do you mean, ma'am?" blustered Bounderby.

"Sir," rejoined Mrs. Sparsit, "there was wont to be an elasticity in you which I sadly miss. Be buoyant, sir!"

Mr. Bounderby, under the influence of this difficult adjuration, backed up by her compassionate eye, could only scratch his head in a feeble and ridiculous manner, and afterwards assert himself at a distance, by being heard to bully the small-fry of business all the morning.

"Bitzer," said Mrs. Sparsit that afternoon, when her patron was gone on his journey, and the Bank was closing, "present my compliments to young Mr. Thomas, and ask him if he would step up and partake of a lamb chop and walnut ketchup, with a glass of India ale."

Young Mr. Thomas being usually ready for anything in that way, returned a gracious answer, and followed on its heels. "Mr. Thomas," said Mrs. Sparsit, "these plain viands being on table, I thought you might be tempted."

"Thank you, Mrs. Sparsit," said the whelp. And gloomily fell to.

"How is Mr. Harthouse, Mr. Tom?" asked Mrs. Sparsit.

"Oh he is all right," said Tom.

"Where may he be at present?" Mrs. Sparsit asked in a light conversational manner, after mentally devoting the whelp to the Furies for being so uncommunicative.
traffic of the street, revolving many things in
postmen, keeping an eye on the general
her window all day long: looking at the
station by which
in a furtive way about the station by which
put on her bonnet and shawl, and went
this agreeable compliment, he relapsed into a
trouble her with my society this week; being
pillars and corners, and out of ladies' wait­
Sparsit, I must be off!" and went off.

"Mr. Harthouse is a great favourite of
mine," said Mrs. Sparsit, "as indeed he is of
most people. May we expect to see him
again shortly, Mr. Tom?"

"Why, I expect to see him to-morrow,"
returned the whelp.

"Good news!" cried Mrs. Sparsit, blandly.
"I have got an appointment with him to
meet him in the evening at the station here,"
said Tom, "and I am going to dine with him
afterwards, I believe. He is not coming
down to Nicks's for a week or so, being due
somewhere else. At least, he says so; but I
shouldn't wonder if he was to stop here over
Sunday, and stray that way."

"Which reminds me!" said Mrs. Sparsit.
"Would you remember a message to your
sister, Mr. Tom, if I was to charge you with
one?"

"Well! I'll try," returned the reluctant
whelp, "if it isn't a long un."

"It is merely my respectful compliments,"
said Mrs. Sparsit, "and I fear I may not
trouble her with my society this week; being
still a little nervous, and better perhaps by
myself."

"Oh! If that's all," observed Tom, "it
wouldn't matter much, even if I was to forget
it, for Loo's not likely to think of you unless
she sees you."

Having paid for his entertainment with
this agreeable compliment, he released into a
handsome silence until there was no more
India ale left, when he said, "Well, Mrs.
Sparsit, I must be off!" and went off.

Next day, Saturday, Mrs. Sparsit sat at
her window all day long: looking at the
customers coming in and out, watching the
postmen, keeping an eye on the general
traffic of the street, revolving many things in
her mind, but, above all, keeping her atten­
tion on her staircase. The evening came,
she put on her bonnet and shawl, and went
quietly out: having her reasons for hovering
in a furtive way about the station by which
a passenger would arrive from Yorkshire,
and for preferring to peep into it round
pillars and corners, and out of ladies' wait­
ing-room windows, to appearing in its pro­
cincts openly.

Tom was in attendance, and loitered about
until the expected train came in. It brought
no Mr. Harthouse. Tom waited until the
crowd had dispersed, and the bustle was
over; and then referred to a posted list of
trains, and took counsel with porters. That
done, he strolled away idly, stopping in the
street and looking up it and down it, and
lifting his hat off and putting it on again,
and yawning, and stretching himself, and
exhibiting all the symptoms of mortal weari­
ness to be expected in one who had still to
wait until the next train should come in,
an hour and forty minutes hence.

"That is a device to keep him out of the
way," said Mrs. Sparsit, starting from the
dull office window whence she had watched
him last. "Hartzey is with his sister
now!"

It was the conception of an inspired mo­
ment, and she shot off with her utmost swif­
tness to work it out. The station for the
country house was at the opposite end of the
town, the time was short, the road not easy;
but she was so quick in pouncing on a dis­
engaged coach, so quick in darting out of it,
producing her money, seizing her ticket, and
diving into the train, that she was borne
along the arches spanning the land of coal­
shales past and present, as if she had been
caught up in a cloud and whisked away.

All the journey, immovable in the air
though never left behind; plain to the dark
eyes of her mind, as the electric wires which
ruled a colossal strip of music-paper out of
the evening sky, were plain to the dark
eyes of her body; Mrs. Sparsit saw her staircase,
with the figure coming down. Very near
the bottom now. Upon the brink of the
abyss.

An overcast September evening, just at
nightfall, saw beneath its drooping eyelid
Mrs. Sparsit glide out of her carriage, pass
down the wooden steps of the little station
into a stony road, cross it into a green lane,
and become hidden in a summer-growth of
leaves and branches. One or two late birds
sleepily chirping in their nests, and a bat
heavily crossing and recrossing her, and the
reek of her own tread in the thick
undergrowth, so intent upon her object that
she probably would have done no less, if the
wood had been a wood of adders.
Sparsit saw with delight that his arm embraced her; "will you not bear with my inambuscade had seen her sit, at any period that has warmed me into life, and to be his mistress. To look for your sunny welcome received in your frozen manner, is heartrending.

"My dearest love," said he, "what could I do! Knowing you were alone, was it possible that I could stay away?"

"You may have heard how to make yourself the more attractive; I don't know what they see in you when you hold it up," thought Mrs. Sparsit; "but you little think, my dearest love, whose eyes are on you!"

That she hung her head, was certain. She urged him to go away, she commanded him to go away, but she neither raised her face to him, nor raised it. Yet it was remarkable that she sat as still, as ever the amiable woman of, and I have come so far, and am altogether impossible that I could stay away?"

"Nothing," said Harthouse; Mrs. Sparsit saw with delight that his arm embraced her; "will you not bear with my society for a little while?"

"Not here."

"Where, Louisa?"

"Not here."

"But we have so little time to make so much of, and I have come so far, and am altogether so devoted, and distracted. There never was a slave at once so devoted and ill-used by his mistress. To look for your sunny welcome that has warned me into life, and to be received in your frozen manner, is heart-rending."

"Am I to say again, that I must be left to myself here?"

"But we must meet, my dear Louisa. Where shall we meet?"

They both started. The listener started guiltily, too; for she thought there was another listener among the trees. It was only rain, beginning to fall fast, in heavy drops.

"Shall I ride up to the house a few minutes hence, innocently supposing that its master is at home and will be charmed to receive me?"

"No!

"Your cruel commands are implicitly to be obeyed; though I am the most unfortunate fellow in the world, I believe, to have been insensible to all other women, and to have fallen prostrate at last under the foot of the most beautiful, and the most engaging, and the most impetuous. My dearest Louisa, I cannot go myself, or let you go, in this hard abuse of your power."

Mrs. Sparsit saw him detain her with his encircling arm, and hear him then and there, within her (Mrs. Sparsit's) greedy hearing, tell her how he loved her, and how she was the stake for which he ardently desired to play away all that he had in life. The objects he had lately pursued, turned worthless beside her; such success as was almost in his grasp, he flung away from him like the dirt it was, compared with her. His pursuit, nevertheless, if it kept him near her, or its remuneration if it took him from her, or flight if she shared it, or secrecy if she commanded it, or any fate, or every fate, all was alike to him, so that she was true to him,—the man who had seen how cast away she was, whom she had inspired at their first meeting with an admiration and interest of which he had thought himself incapable, whom she had received into her confidence, who was devoted to her and adored her. All this, and more, in his hurry, and in hers, in the whirl of her own gratified malice, in the dread of being discovered, in the rapidly increasing noise of heavy rain among the leaves, and a thunder-storm rolling up—Mrs. Sparsit received into her mind; set off with such an unavoidable halo of confusion and indistinctness, that when at length he climbed the fence and led his horse away, she was not sure where they were to meet, or when, except that they had said it was to be that night.

But one of them yet remained in the darkness before her; and while she tracked that one, she must be right. "Oh, my dearest love," thought Mrs. Sparsit, "you little think how well attended you are."

Mrs. Sparsit saw her out of the wood, and saw her enter the house. What to do? It rained now, in a sheet of water. Mrs. Sparsit's white stockings were of many colors, green predominating; prickly things were in her shoes; caterpillars slung themselves, in hammocks of their own making, from various parts of her dress; rills ran from her bonnet, and her Roman nose. In such condition Mrs. Sparsit stood hidden in the density of the shrubbery, considering what next? Lo, Louisa coming out of the house! Hastily cloakcd and muffled, and stealing away. She elopes! She falls from the lowest stair, and is swallowed up in the gulf! Indifferent to the rain, and moving with a quick determined step, she struck into a side-path parallel with the ride. Mrs. Sparsit followed in the shadow of the trees, at but a short distance; for, it was not easy to keep a figure in view going quickly through the unconscious darkness.

When she stopped to close the side-gate without noise, Mrs. Sparsit stopped. When
The tremendous rain occasioned infinite confusion, when the train stopped at its destination. Gutters and pipes had burst, drains overflowing, coaches, which were in great request, had been destroyed, and streets were under water. The seizure of the station with a tit of thunder, a crash, a bell, and a shriek; Louisa put into one carriage, Mrs. Sparsit put into another; the little station a desert speck in the thunder-storm.

The thunder was rolling into distance, and the rain was pouring down like a deluge, when the door of his room opened. He looked round the lamp upon his table, and saw with amazement, his eldest daughter.

"Louisa!"

"Father, I want to speak to you."

"What is the matter? How strange you look! And good Heaven," said Mr. Gradgrind, wondering more and more, "have you come here exposed to this storm?"

She put her hands to her dress, as if she hardly knew. "Yes." Then she uncovered her head, and letting her cloak and hood fall, said: "Louisa!"

"Yes, Louisa."

"I curse the hour in which I was born to such a destiny."

He looked at her in doubt and dread, vacantly repeating, "Curse the hour? Curse the hour!"

"How could you give me life, and take from me all the inappreciable things that raise it from the state of conscious death? Where are the graces of my soul where they might, stood looking at him: so colorless, so dishevelled, so defiant and despairing, that he was afraid of her.

"What is it? I conjure you, Louisa, tell me what is the matter."

She dropped into a chair before him, and put her cold hand on his arm. "Father, you have trained me from my cradle."

"Yes, Louisa."

"I curse the hour in which I was born to such a destiny."

She struck herself with both her hands upon her bosom.

"If it had ever been here, its ashes alone..."
I have almost repulsed, and crushed my better not quite absolute; I have grown up, battling with an ardent impulse towards some region looking fixedly in his face. every inch of my way.

where rules, and figures, and definitions werether: she with a hand upon his shoulder, the eyes T have. Now, hear what I have human in all good respects, than I am with loving, more contented, more innocent and been a million times wiser, happier, more

them, and to hope in my little sphere to make them better 

father. What you have never nurtured in me, you have never nurtured in yourself; but O! if you had only done so long ago, or if you had only neglected me, what a much better and happier creature I should have been this day!"

On hearing this, after all his care, he bowed his head upon his hand and groaned aloud.

Father, if you had known, when we were last together here, what even I feared while I strove against it—as it has been my task from infancy to strive against every natural prompting that has arisen in my heart; if you had known that there lingered in my breast, sensibilities, affections, weaknesses capable of being cherished into strength, defying all the calculations ever made by man, and no more known to his arithmetic than his Creator is,—would you have given me to the husband whom I am now sure that I hate?"

He said, "No. No, my poor child.

"If you had never love me, if you had doomed me, at any time, to the frost and blight that have hardened and spoiled me? Would you have robbed me—for no one's enrichment—only for the greater desolation of this world—of the immaterial part of my life, the spring and summer of my belief, my refuge from what is sordid and bad in the real things around me, my school in which I should have learned to be more humble and more trusting with them, and to hope in my little sphere to make them better?"

"O no, no. No, Louisa."

"Yet father, if I had been stone blind; if I had groped my way by my sense of touch, and had been free, while I knew the shapes and surfaces of things, to exercise my fancy somewhat, in regard to them; I should have been a million times wiser, happier, more loving, more contented, more innocent and human in all good respects, than I am with the eyes I have. Now, hear what I have
come to say."

He moved, to support her with his arm. She rising as he did so, they stood close togethershe with a hand upon his shoulder, looking fixedly in his face.

"With a hunger and thirst upon me, father, which have never been for a moment appeased; with an ardent impulse towards some region where rules, and figures, and definitions were not quite absolute; I have grown up, battling every inch of my way."

"I never knew you were unhappy, my child."

"Father, I always knew it. In this strife I have almost repulsed and crushed my better
know of the story of my marriage, he soon knew, just as well. Her father's face was ashy white, and he held her in both his arms.

"I have done no worse, I have not disgraced you. But if you ask me whether I have loved him, or do love him, I tell you plainly, father, that it may be so. I don't know!"

She took her hands suddenly from his shoulders and pressed them both upon her side; while in her face, not like itself—and in her figure, drawn up, resolute to finish by a last effort what she had to say—the feelings long suppressed broke loose.

"This night, my husband being away, he has been with me, declaring himself my lover, and by my express command, I am to release myself of his presence by no other means. I do not know that I am sorry, I do not know that I am ashamed, I do not know that I am degraded in my own esteem. All that I know is, your philosophy and your teaching will not save me. Now, father, you have brought me to this. Save me by some other means!"

He tightened his hold in time to prevent her sinking on the floor, but she cried out in a terror: "I shall die if you hold me! Let me fall upon the ground!" And he laid her down there, and saw the pride of his heart and the triumph of his system, lying, an insensible heap, at his feet.

SEA VIEWS.

The lodgings provided in the Regent's Park for the small people of the sea, first called the Aquarium, now the Marine Aquarium—for a new thing there was a new name wanted, and the first name is not always the best—have given satisfaction to their tenants. The Aquarium is now an established institution, and Mr. Gosse, the naturalist, who was most active in its establishment, and by whom it was most actively stocked, has just published a little book descriptive of his lodgers—hunting in the Bay of Weymouth, and of the characters of the lodgers usually to be met with in apartments furnished like those of the fishes in the Zoological Gardens.

Every man, woman, or child, may establish a private aquarium upon any scale that may be found convenient. An aquarium may be made in a doctor's bottle or a pudding-basin. The first thing requisite is a comprehension of the principle on which such a little institution is founded.

The main idea hangs upon the fact that, by a wise ordinance of nature, the vegetable and animal worlds are made to play into each other's hands. Animals take oxygen, and carbonize it, making carbonic acid; plants take the carbonic acid, and de-carbonize it, making oxygen. This, plants are doing all day long, under the influence of light. Growing plants, under water, while the light shines upon them, are to be seen hung with minute pearls—airy bubbles that detach themselves, and make fairy balloon-ascent towards the surface. These are bubbles of pure oxygen; we see here with our eyes what goes on unseen every summer in our fields and forests. As fast, indeed, as oxygen is spoiled by animals it is restored by plants. This maintains a right balance of life on land. This maintains nearly a right balance under water. The sea is full of creatures that require, as well as the land animals, to breathe air containing oxygen enough for the support of life. There must be in the water, air sufficient in quantity and quality, otherwise the swimmers and creepers of the river and the ocean would creep no more—they must all die, and make the ocean putrid.

Therefore, partly, it is that the sea includes not only a realm of its own animals, but also a realm of its own plants. The plants, besides furnishing nutritious pastureage, carry on a wholesome chemical process. Animals take oxygen, and carbonize it, making carbonic acid; plants take the carbonic acid, and de-carbonize it, making oxygen. This maintains a right balance of life on land. This maintains nearly a right balance of life under water. The sea is full of creatures that require, as well as the land animals, to breathe air containing oxygen enough for the support of life. There must be in the water, air sufficient in quantity and quality, otherwise the swimmers and creepers of the river and the ocean would creep no more—they must all die, and make the ocean putrid.

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