1854

Hard Times: Part 17

Charles Dickens
LOUISA awoke from a torpor, and her eyes languidly opened on her old bed at home, and her old room. It seemed, at first, as if all that had happened since the days when these objects were familiar to her were the shadows of a dream; but gradually, as the objects became more real to her sight, the events became more real to her mind.

She could scarcely move her head for pain and heaviness, her eyes were strained and sore, and she was very weak. A curious passive inattention had such possession of her, that the presence of her little sister in the room did not attract her notice for some time. Even when their eyes had met, and her sister had approached the bed, Louisa lay for minutes looking at her in silence, and suffering her timidly to hold her passive hand, before she asked:

"When was I brought to this room?"

"Last night, Louisa."

"Who brought me here?"

"Sissy, I believe."

"Why do you believe so?"

"Because I found her here this morning. I didn't come to my bedside to wake me, as she always does; and I went to look for her. She was not in her own room either; and I went looking for her all over the house, until I found her here, taking care of you and cooling your head. Will you see father? Sissy said I was to tell him when you woke."

"What a beaming face you have, Jane!" said Louisa, as her young sister—timidly still—bent down to kiss her.

"Have I? I am very glad you think so. I am sure it must be Sissy's doing."

The arm Louisa had begun to twine about her neck, unbent itself. "You can tell father, if you will." Then, staying her a moment, she said, "It was you who made my room so cheerful, and gave it this look of welcome?"

"Oh no, Louisa, it was done before I came. It was—"

Louisa turned upon her pillow, and heard no more. When her sister had withdrawn, she turned her head back again, and lay with her face towards the door, until it opened and her father entered.

He had a jaded anxious look upon him, and his hand, usually steady, trembled in hers. He sat down at the side of the bed, tenderly asking how she was, and dwelling on the necessity of her keeping very quiet after her agitation and exposure to the weather last night. He spoke in a subdued and troubled voice, very different from his usual dictatorial manner; and was often at a loss for words.

"My dear Louisa. My poor daughter."

He was so much at a loss at that place, that he stopped altogether. He tried again.

"My unfortunate child." The place was so difficult to get over, that he tried again.

"It would be hopeless for me, Louisa, to endeavour to tell you how overwhelmed I have been, and still am, by what broke upon me last night. The ground on which I stand has ceased to be solid under my feet. The only support on which I leaned, and the strength of which it seemed, and still does seem, impossible to question, has given way in an instant. I am stunned by these discoveries. I have no selfish meaning in what I say; but I find the shock of what broke upon me last night, to be very heavy indeed."

She could give him no comfort herein. She had suffered the wreck of her whole life upon the rock.

"I will not say, Louisa, that if you had by any happy chance undeceived me some time ago, it would have been better for us both; better for your peace, and better for mine. For I am sensible that it may not have been a part of my system to invite any confidence of that kind. I have proved my—my system to myself, and I have rigidly administered it; and I must bear the responsibility of its failures. I only entreat you to believe, my favorite child, that I have meant to do right."

He said it earnestly, and to do him justice he had. In gauging fathomless deeps with his little mean excise-rod, and in staggering over the universe with his rusty still-legged compasses, he had meant to do great things. Within the limits of his short tether he had tumbled about, annihilating the flowers of existence with greater singleness of purpose than many of the blatant personages whose company he kept.
“I am well assured of what you say, father. I know I have been your favorite child. I know you have intended to make me happy. I have never blamed you, and I never shall.”

He took her outstretched hand, and retained it in his.

“My dear, I have remained all night at my table, pondering again and again on what has so painfully passed between us. When I consider your character; when I consider that what has been known to me for hours, has been concealed by you for years; when I consider under what immediate pressure it has been forced from you at last; I come to the conclusion that I cannot but mistrust myself.

He might have added more than all, when he saw the face now looking at him. He did add it in effect perhaps, as he softly moved her scattered hair from her forehead with his hand. Such little actions, slight in another man, were very noticeable in him; and could not do, as if they had been words of contrition.

“But,” said Mr. Gradgrind slowly, and with hesitation, as well as with a wretched sense of helplessness, “if I see reason to mistrust myself for the past, Louisa, I should also mistrust myself for the present and the future. To speak unreservedly to you, I do, I am far from feeling convinced now, however differently I might have felt only this time yesterday, that I am fit for the trust you repose in me; that I know how to answer the appeal you have come home to set you right, my child.”

She had turned upon her pillow, and lay with her face upon her arm, so that he could not see it. All her wildness and passion had subsided; but, though softened, she was not in tears. Her father was changed in nothing at all; nor was she—ignorantly and humbly, my daughter—"for the better, do you think?"

“Father,” she replied, without stirring, “if any harmony has been awakened in her young breast that was mute in mine until it turned to discord, let her thank Heaven for it, and go upon her happier way, taking it as her greatest blessing that she has avoided my way.”

“O my child, my child!” he said, in a forlorn manner, “I am an unhappy man to see you thus! What avails it to me that you do not reproach me, if I so bitterly reproach myself!” He bent his head, and spoke low to her. “Louisa, I have a misgiving that some change may have been slowly working about me in this house, by mere love and gratitude; that what the Head had left unuttered and unconfessed, the Heart may have been doing silently. Can it be so?”

She made him no reply.

“I am not too proud to believe it, Louisa. How could I be arrogant, and you before me! Can it be so! Is it so, my dear?”

He looked upon her, once more, lying cast away to sleep; and without another word went out of the room. He had not been long gone, when she heard a light tread near the door, and knew that some one stood beside her.

She did not raise her head. A dull anger that she should be seen in her distress, and that the involuntary look she had so resented should come to this fulfilment, smothered within her like an unwholesome fire. All closely imprisoned forces rend and destroy. The air that would be healthful to the earth, the water that would enrich it, the heat that would ripen it, tear it when caged up. So in the bosom even now; the strongest qualities she possessed, long turned upon themselves, became a heap of obduracy, that rose against a friend.

It was well that soft touch came upon her neck; and that she understood herself to be supposed to have fallen asleep. The sympathetic hand did not claim her resentment. Let it lie there, let it lie.

So it lay there, warming into life a crowd of gentler thoughts; and she lay still. As she softened with the quiet, and the consciousness of being so watched, some tears made their way into her eyes. The face touched hers, and she knew that there were tears upon it too, and all the cause of them.

As Louisa feigned to rouse herself, and sat up, Sissy retired, so that she stood placidly near the bed-side.

“I hope I have not disturbed you. I have come to ask if you will let me stay with you.

“Why should you stay with me? My sister’s training has been pursued according to—the system,” he appeared to come to that word with great reluctance always, “it has necessarily been modified by daily associations begun, in her case, at an early age. I ask you—ignorantly and humbly, my daughter—for the better, do you think?”

He suggested it very doubtfully, as if he were half unwilling to admit it even now. She made him no answer; lying before him on her bed, still half-dressed, much as he had seen her lying on the floor of his room last night.

“Louisa,” and his hand rested on her hair again, “I have been absent from here, my dear, a good deal of late; and though your
sister will miss you. You are everything to her.”

“Am I?” returned Sissy, shaking her head. “I would be something to you, if I might.”

“What?” said Louisa, almost sternly.

“Whatever you want most, if I could be that. At all events, I would like to try to be as near it as I can. And however far off that may be, I will never tire of trying. Will you let me?”

“My father sent you to ask me.”

“May I try?” said Sissy. “He told me that I might come in now, but he sent me away from the room this morning—or at least—he hesitated and stopped.”

“At least, what?” said Louisa, with her searching eyes upon her.

“I thought it best myself that I should be sent away, for I felt very uncertain whether you would like to find me here.”

“Have I always hated you so much?”

“I hope not, for I have always loved you, and have always wished that you should know it. But you changed to me a little, shortly before you left home. Not that I wondered at it. You knew so much, and I knew so little, so it was natural in many ways, going as you were among other friends that I had nothing to complain of, and was not at all hurt.”

Her color rose as she said it modestly and hurriedly. Louisa understood the loving pretence, and her heart smote her.

“I am so unhappy, and all that should have made me happy, otherwise is so long a waste, that it must be expected for the present.

“First, Sissy, do you know what I am? I am so proud and so hardened, so confused and troubled, so resentful and unjust to every one and to myself, that everything is stormy, dark, and wicked to me. Does not that repel you?”

“No!”

“I am so unhappy, and all that should have made me happy, otherwise is so long a waste, that it must be expected for the present.

“First, Sissy, do you know what I am? I am so proud and so hardened, so confused and troubled, so resentful and unjust to every one and to myself, that everything is stormy, dark, and wicked to me. Does not that repel you?”

“No!”

In the innocence of her brave affection, and the brimming up of her old devoted spirit, the once deserted girl shone like a beautiful light upon the darkness of the other.

Louisa raised the hand that it might clasp her neck, and join its fellow there. She fell upon her knees, and clinging to this stroller’s head. “I would be something to you, if I might.”

“O lay it here!” cried Sissy. “Lay it here, my dear.”

CHAPTER XXX.

Mr. James Harthouse passed a whole night and a day in a state of so much hurry, that the World, with its best glass in its eye, would scarcely have recognised him during that insane interval, as the brother Jem of the honorable and jocular member. He was positively agitated. He several times spoke with an emphasis, similar to the vulgar manner. He went in and went out in an unaccountable way, like a man with an object. He rode like a highwayman. In a word, he was so horribly bored by existing circumstances, that he forgot to go in for boredom in the manner prescribed by the authorities.

After putting his horse at Coketown through the storm, as if it were a leap, he waited up all night: from time to time ringing his bell with the greatest fury, charging the porter who kept watch with delinquency in withholding letters or messages that could not fall to have been entrusted to him, and demanding restitution on the spot. The dawn coming, the morning coming, and the day coming, and neither message nor letter coming with either, he went down to the country house. There, the report was, Mr. Bounderby away, and Mrs. Bounderby in town. Left for town suddenly last evening. Not even known to be gone until receipt of message, importing that her return was not to be expected for the present.

In these circumstances he had nothing for it but to follow her to town. He went to the house in town. Mrs. Bounderby not there. He looked in at the Bank. Mr. Bounderby away, and Mrs. Sparsit away. Mrs. Sparsit away? Who could have been reduced to sudden extremity for the company of that griffin!

“Well! I don’t know,” said Tom, who had his own reasons for being uneasy about it.

“She was off somewhere at daybreak this morning. She’s always full of mystery; I hate her. So I do that white chap; he’s always got his blinking eyes upon a fellow.”

“Where were you last night, Tom?”

“Where was I last night!” said Tom.

“Come! I like that. I was waiting for you, Mr. Harthouse, till it came down as I never saw it come down before. Where was I too? Where were you, you mean.”

“I was prevented from coming—detained.”

“Detained!” murmured Tom. “Two of us were detained. I was detained looking for you, till I lost every train but the mail. It would have been a pleasant job to go down by that on such a night, and have to walk home through a pond. I was obliged to sleep in town after all.”

“Where?”
the carpet, looking out of the window, listening.

Indifference was the genuine high-breeding.

night, and still no communication was made.

coming rather hot when any steps approached.

avoid often walking about in the pattern of.

are going. Very odd beginning. I don't see where we

guess whom I left just now?"

Mr. Harthouse hurried into the gallery. A young woman whom he

he remained in the greatest perplexity, and, as the hours went on, and no kind of explana-

training.

Therefore he rang the bell, and tossing

his perplexity augmented at compound interest.

However, he took affairs as coolly as it was in human nature to do, and entertained himself with the facetious idea of the training more than once.

"It wouldn't be bad," he yawned at one time, "to give the waiter five shillings, and throw him." At another time it occurred to him, "Or a fellow of about thirteen or fourteen stone might be hired by the hour."

But these jests did not tell materially on the afternoon, or his suspense; and, sooth to say, they both lagged fearfully.

It was impossible, even before dinner, to avoid often walking about in the pattern of the carpet, looking out of the window, listening at the door for footsteps, and occasionally becoming rather hot when any steps approached that room. But, after dinner, when the day turned to twilight, and the twilight turned to night, and still no communication was made to him, it began to be, as he expressed it, "like the Holy Office and slow torture."

However, still true to his conviction that indifference was the genuine high-breeding (the only conviction he had), he seized this crisis as the opportunity for ordering candles and a newspaper.

He had been trying in vain, for half an hour, to read this newspaper, when the waiter appeared and said, at once mysteriously and apologetically:

"Beg your pardon, sir. You're wanted, sir, if you please."

A general recollection that this was the kind of thing the Police said to the swell mob, caused Mr. Harthouse to ask the waiter in return, with bristling indignation, what the Devil he meant by "wanted?"

"Beg your pardon, sir. Young lady outside, sir, wishes to see you."

"Outside? Where?"

"Outside this door, sir."

Giving the waiter to the personage beforehand mentioned, as a blockhead duly qualified for that consignment, Mr. Harthouse hurried into the gallery. A young woman whom he had never seen stood there. Plainly dressed, very quiet, very pretty. As he conducted her into the room and placed a chair for her, he observed, by the light of the candles, that she was prettier than he had at first believed. Her face was innocent and youthful, and its expression remarkably pleasant. She was not afraid of him, or in any way disin- concert; she seemed to have her mind entirely pre-occupied with the occasion of her visit, and to have substituted that consideration for herself.

"I speak to Mr. Harthouse?" she said, when they were alone.

"To Mr. Harthouse." He added in his mind, "And you speak to him with the most confiding eyes I ever saw, and the most earnest voice (though so quiet) I ever heard."

"If I do not understand—and I do not, sir"—said Sissy, "what your honor as a gentleman binds you to, in other matters:"

the blood really rose in his face as she began in these words: "I am sure I may rely upon it to keep my visit secret, and to keep secret what I am going to say. I will rely upon it, if you will tell me I may so far trust you."

"You may, I assure you."

"I am young, as you see; I am alone, as you see. In coming to you, sir, I have no advice or encouragement beyond my own hope."

He thought, "But that is very strong," as he followed the momentary upward glance of her eyes. He thought besides, "This is a very odd beginning. I don't see where we are going."

"I think," said Sissy, "you have already guessed whom I left just now?"

"I have been in the greatest concern and uneasiness during the last four-and-twenty hours (which have appeared as many years)," he returned, "on a lady's account. The hopes I have been encouraged to form that you come from that lady, do not deceive me, I trust."
"I left her within an hour."

"At — ?"

"At her father’s."

Mr. Harthouse’s face lengthened in spite of his coolness, and his perplexity increased. "Then I certainly," he thought, "do not see where we are going."

"She hurried there last night. She arrived there in great agitation, and was insensible all through the night. I live at her father’s, and was with her. You may be sure, sir, you will never see her again, as long as you live."

Mr. Harthouse drew a long breath; and, if ever man found himself in the position of not knowing what to say, made the discovery beyond a question that he was so circumstanced. The child-like ingenuousness with which his visitor spoke, her modest fearlessness, her truthfulness which put all artifice aside, her entire forgetfulness of herself in her earnest quiet holding to the object with which she had come; all this, together with her reliance on him. This—right which in itself shamed him—presented something in which he was so inexperienced, and against which he knew any of his usual weapons would fail so powerless; that not a word could he rally to his relief.

At last he said: "So startling an announcement, so confidentially made, and by such lips, is really disconcerting in the last degree. May I be permitted to inquire, if you are charged to permit me to convey that information to me in those hopeless words, by the lady of whom we speak?"

"I have no charge from her."

"The drowning man catches at the straw."

With no disrespect for your judgment, and with no doubt of your sincerity, excuse my saying that I cling to the belief that there is yet hope that I am not condemned to perpetual exile from that lady’s presence:"

"There is not the least hope. The first object of my coming here, sir, is to assure you that you must believe me, that it is not possible you can have any more hope of your ever speaking with her again, than there would be if she had died when she came home last night."

"Must believe! But if I can’t—or if I should, by infirmity of nature, be obstinate—and wrong—?"

"It is still true. There is no hope."

James Harthouse looked at her with an incredulous smile upon his lips; but her mind looked over and beyond him, and the smile was quite thrown away.

He bit his lip, and took a little time for consideration.

"She? If it should unhappily appear," he said, "after due pains and duty on my part, that I am brought to a position so desolate as this banishment, I shall not become the lady’s persecutor. But you said you had no commission from her?"

"I have only the commission of my love for her, and her love for me. I have no other trust, than that I have been with her since she came home, and that she has given me her confidence. I have no further trust, than that I know something of her character and her marriage. O Mr. Harthouse, I think you had that trust too!"

He was touched in the cavity where his heart should have been—in that nest of addled eggs, where the birds of heaven would have lived if they had not been whistled away—by the fervor of this reproach.

"I am not a moral sort of fellow," he said, "and I never make any pretensions to the character of a moral sort of fellow. I am as immoral as need be. At the same time, in bringing any distress upon the lady who is the subject of the present intercession, or in unfortunately compromising her in any way, or in committing myself by any expression of sentiments towards her, not perfectly reconcilable with—in fact with—the domestic hearth; or in taking any advantage of her father’s being a machine, or of her brother’s being a whole-promise of her husband’s being a bear; I beg to have you to assure you that I have had no particularly evil intentions, but have guided on from one step to another with a smoothness so perfectly irresistible, that I had not the slightest idea the catalogue was half so long until I began to turn it over. Whereas I find," said Mr. James Harthouse, in conclusion, "that it is really polished out:"

"After what has been just now represented to me, in a manner I find it impossible to doubt—I know of hardly any other source from which I could have accepted it so readily—I feel bound to say to you, in whom the confidence you have mentioned has been reposed, that I cannot refrain to contemplate the possibility (however unexpected) of my seeing the lady no more. I am solely to blame for the thing having come to this—and—and, I cannot say," he added, rather hard up for a general peroration, "that I have any sanguine expectation of ever becoming a moral sort of fellow, or that I have any belief in any moral sort of fellow whatever."

Sissy’s face sufficiently showed that her appeal to him was not finished.

"You spoke," he resumed, as she raised her eyes to him again, "of your first object. I may assume that there is a second to be mentioned?"

"Yes."

"Will you oblige me by confiding it?"

"Mr. Harthouse," returned Sissy, "with a blending of gentleness and steadiness that quite defeated him, and with a simple con-
fidence in his being bound to do what she required, that held him at a singular disadvanta-
gage in no other way the wrong and harm you have done. I am quite sure that it is the only reparation that remains with you, to leave here immediately and finally. I am quite sure that you can mitig-ate the least doubt or irresolution, or had har-boured for the best purpose any reserve or pretence; if she had shown, or felt, the light-est sense of any wantonness to his ridicule or his astonishing, or any remonstrance he might offer; he would have carried it against her at this point. But he could as easily have changed a clear sky by looking at it in surprise, as affect her.

"But do you know," he asked, quite at a loss, "the extent of what you ask? You probably are not aware that I am here on a public kind of business, preposterous enough in itself, but which I have gone in for, and sworn by, and am supposed to be devoted to in quite a desperate manner? You probably are not aware of that, but I assure you it's the fact.""It wanted this to complete the defeat," said Mr. James Harthouse, sinking, with a resigned air, on the sofa, after standing trans-fixed in musing, "the only reparation that remains must take off myself, I imagine—in short, I engage to do it."

Sissy rose. She was not surprised by the result, but she was happy in it, and her face beamed brightly.

"You will permit me to say," continued Mr. James Harthouse, "that I doubt if any other ambassador, or ambassadress, could have addressed me with the same success. I must not only regard myself as being in a very ridiculous position, but as being van-ished at all points. Will you allow me the privilege of remembering my enemy's name?"

"The only name I could possibly care to know, to-night."

"Sissy Jupe."

"Pardon my curiosity at parting. Related to the family?"

"I am only a poor girl," returned Sissy.

"I was separated from my father—he was only a stroller—and taken pity on by Mr. Gradgrind. I have lived in the house ever since."

She was gone.

"It wanted this to complete the defeat," said Mr. James Harthouse, sinking, with a resigned air, on the sofa, after standing trans-fixed in musing, "the only reparation that remains must take off myself, I imagine—in short, I engage to do it."

He rang the bell.

"Send my fellow here."

"Tell him to get up, and pack up."

He wrote two more notes. One, to Mr. Bounderby, announcing his retirement from that part of the country, and showing where he would be found for the next fortnight. The other, similar in effect, to Mr. Gradgrind. Almost as soon as the ink was dry upon their superscriptions, he had left the tall chimneys of Coketown behind, and was in a railway carriage, tearing and glaring over the dark landscape.

The moral sort of fellows might suppose that Mr. James Harthouse derived some comfortable reflections afterwards, from this present retreat, as one of his few actions that made any amends for anything, and as a token to himself that he had escaped the climax of a very bad business. But it was not so, at all. A secret sense of having failed and been ridiculous—a dread of what other fellows who went in for similar sorts of things, would say at his expense if they knew.
CALLED TO THE SAVAGE BAR.

Or the numerous books that have been published on the colonisation of Canada by the French, there are few more entertaining than a work printed during the last century, which bears the singular title of Adventures of the Sieur Lebeau, Advocate of the Parliament; or, New and Curious Travels among the Savages of North America.*

The Sieur Lebeau was one who, it appears, had not thriven by his profession, and he laboured under the additional disadvantage of having given offence to certain persons of condition; in consequence of which he became desirous of leaving France; and, early in the year seventeen hundred and twenty-nine, exerting what interest he possessed, obtained a letter of recommendation to Monsieur Hoquart, who had just been named Intendant of Canada, and was about to set out for that country. This letter, he was assured, would procure him a situation in one of the Intendant’s offices, and, full of hope, he set out for La Rochelle, where he was to embark. On his way to that port, he fell in with one of those groups which were at that time frequently to be seen on the high road of France. It was a chain of convicts who were being conducted to the vessel destined to transport them to penal servitude among the Savages of North America.*

At Lebeau’s arrival at La Rochelle, he went on board the vessel called the Elephant, where he expected to meet Monsieur Hoquart; but once there, he discovered that his letter of recommendation was only a trap; that he was himself a prisoner, and that he was to proceed to Canada in the same capacity as the nobleman in the chintz dressing-gown and his sixteen friends.

The Elephant made a prosperous voyage until she reached the mouth of the river St. Lawrence, where she was wrecked; the crew and passengers, however, escaped, and were humanely treated by the colonists already settled there. Lebeau’s genteel companions obtained situations as tutors in families; “the ordinary resource,” he observes, “of all the well-born rogues who arrive from Europe;” the others found the means of existence how they could, for the only care the French government took of their convicts was simply to transport them to Canada, and prevent them from coming back again.

In the eyes of the Paris lawyer the colonists presented a rather strange appearance. They followed none of the pursuits of privileged life—did not even cultivate the soil—but addicted themselves entirely to hunting for the sake of the skins of the animals that were abundant. “Every one,” says Lebeau, “wears a robe of fur crossed over the breast, and fastened at the waist by a girdle ornamented with porcupines’ quills; these are made by themselves, as well as their sandals, which are of kid, or the skin of the sea-wolf.” As it would have been lost time to look for clients where there were no courts of law, Lebeau resolved to travel, and, ascending the St. Lawrence, visited Quebec, the settlement of the Three Rivers, and Montreal. In the latter place he enjoyed the spectacle of the great annual fair, to which the Indian tribes always came in great numbers to barter their furs for European manufactures. This fair, which lasted three months, began in May, and was held on the banks of the river, inside the palisades which formed the outer defence of Montreal. The Indians sold their huts, which, for fear of quarrels, the colonists were forbidden to enter by a cordon of sentinels; the sale of spirits was also forbidden, but it took place nevertheless, and gave rise to many disturbances. Lebeau was very much struck with the costume of the Red-skims, who, in addition to their Indian attire, arrayed themselves in gold-laced cocked hats, full-bottomed wigs, and court suits—the spoils of Rag Fair. He took a liking to the aborigines, though perhaps it was more on account of the service they were likely to render him than from admiration of their customs and manners. Lebeau’s chief object in travelling westward was to escape from Canada, and establish himself in the English colonies. With this view he cultivated an intimacy with some baptised Hurons who were established at Lorette, near Quebec, and for once his talents as an advocate appear to have been turned to account; for he succeeded in persuading a French merchant to offer these Hurons the value of a hundred and fifty livres (six pounds), in European merchandise, provided they conducted Lebeau

*Aventures du Sieur Lebeau, Avocat au Parlement, ou Voyages Curieux et Nouveaux parmi les Sauvages de l’Amérique Septentrionale.