DARE HE?

OR, A SAD LIFE STORY

CHAPTER I.

"If you will allow me, I shall have the pleasure of reading aloud to you some passages from 'Mrs. Lirriper's Lodgings,' by Charles Dickens. I do not know much about the book myself, as I have never read it. I daresay that you know more about it than I do; but I am given to understand" (with a glance at the page before him) "that Mrs. Lirriper was a lodging-house keeper, that she kept lodgings in London. She was a very good sort of woman. I believe" (another hasty glance), "but she sometimes had trouble with her servants. I am told that servants are troublesome sometimes" (a slight nervous laugh, the more nervous because it does not seem to be followed by any echo from the audience). "If you will allow me, then, as I say, and if you think it will amuse you, I will read you a little of what she says about these troubles."

The foregoing remarks are uttered in a loud, shy, dogged voice by James Burgoyne, to the "Oxford Women's Provident Association." His voice is loud because, being quite unused to public reading, he does not know how to modulate it; it is shy, from the same cause of unaccustomedness; it is dogged because he is very much displeased with his present occupation, and has not been successful in concealing that displeasure. When a man runs down to Oxford for a couple of nights, to see how the six years that have passed since he turned his undergraduate back upon the old place have treated her—runs down to a college chum unseen for the same six years—this is certainly not the way in which he expects to spend one of his two evenings.

"I hope you will not mind, Jim"—ominous phrase—the college friend has said; "but I am afraid we shall have to turn out for half an hour after dinner. It is rather a nuisance, particularly as it is such a wet night; but the fact is, I have promised to read to the 'Oxford Women's Provident Association.' Ah, by-the-bye, that is new since you were here—we had no Provident Women in your day!"

"On the other hand, we had a great many improvident men," returns Jim dryly.

"Well, the fact is, my wife is on the committee, and a good deal interested in it, and we give them a sort of entertainment once a month through the winter terms—tea and buns, that kind of thing, sixpence a head; they enjoy it far more than if we gave it them for nothing; and after tea we get people to recite and read and sing to them. I am sure I wish them joy of my reading tonight, for I do not see how I am to make myself audible; I am as hoarse as a crow."

"I know those Oxford colds of old," returns Burgoyne with that temperate compassion in his voice which we accord to our neighbor's minor diseases. He is sorry that his friend has a cold; but he little knows how much sorrier he will be in the course of the next hour, as he adds, "Do not distress yourself about me. I shall be quite happy in your den with a book and a cigarette. Mrs. Brown does not object, does she? And I daresay you will not be very long away."

As he speaks he realizes, with a sort of pang—the pang we pay sometimes to our dead pasts—that, though it is only three hours since he was reunited to his once inseparable Brown, he is already looking forward with relief to the prospect of an hour's freedom from his society—so terribly far apart is it possible to grow in six years. But, before his half-fledged thought has had time to do more than traverse his brain, Brown has broken into it with the eager remonstrances of a mistaken species of hospitality.

"Leave you behind? Could not hear of such a thing! Of course you must come too! It will be a new experience for you, a wholesome change. Ha! ha! and we can talk all the way there and back; we have had no talk worth speaking of yet."

Again it flashes across the other's mind, with the same pensive regret as before, that talk worth speaking of is forever over between them; but, seeing that further attempts at evasion will seriously hurt the good-natured Brown, he acquiesces, with as fair a grace as he may.

While putting on his own mackintosh, he watches, with a subdued wonder, his friend winding himself into a huge white woollen comforter, and stepping into a pair of goloshes (he had been rather a smart undergraduate in his day), while outside the opened hall door the rain is heard to swish, and the wind to bellow.

"Had not we better have a hansom?" suggests Burgoyne, blinking, as the slant gusts sends two or three stinging drops into his eyes.

"A hansom! nonsense!" returns the other, laughing, and with difficulty unfurling an umbrella in the teeth of the blast. "It is all very well for a bloated bachelor like you; but a man whose family is increasing at the rate mine is cannot afford himself such luxuries; come along, you are not sugar or salt."

Burgoyne feels that at this moment he can at all events conscientiously disclaim affinity with the first of the two.

It is indeed a wet night, wet as the one immortalized by Browning in "Christmas Eve and Easter Day;" and who ever brought a wet night and wet umbrellas "wry and flapping" so piercingly home to us as he? The talk so cheerfully promised by Burgoyne's sanguine friend is rendered absolutely impossible by the riot of the elements. It is a good step from the suburban villa, which is the scene of Brown's married joys, to the room in the heart of the town where the Provident Matrons hold their sabbat; and by the time that the two men have reached that room there is, despite his mackintosh, little of Burgoyne left dry except his speech. They are under shelter at last, however, have entered the building, added their umbrellas to many other streaming wrecks of whalebone huddled in a corner, and exchanged the dark blustering drench for a flare of gas, a reek of tea, and a sultry stream of wet clothes and humanity. The tea indeed is a thing of the past—all its apparatus has been removed. The rows of chairs are all set to face the platform, and on those chairs the Provident Women sit, smiling if damp, with here and there a little boy, evidently too wicked to be left at home, comfortably wedged between a couple of matronly figures.

The entertainment has already begun, and an undergraduate—damp, like every one else—is singing, in a booming bass voice, something of a vaguely boastful nature about what he once did "In Bilboa's Bay." Burgoyne has for a moment lost sight of his chaperon, and remains standing near the door, looking upon the scene around him with an eye from which philanthropy is all too criminally absent. About him are grouped a few ladies and gentlemen—more of the former than the latter—who are obviously about to give their services, judging by their rolls of music and the books in their hands. His look passes over them indifferently—he has no acquaintance among them. He had never known many of the Oxford householders, and there is no place where a man becomes superannuated after so short a lapse of years.

Here are new arrivals. He turns his head mechanically as the opening door reveals the advent of more umbrellaed and mackintoshed waterfalls. Two men and a lady. As his eye alights on the woman, he does not start—we Anglo-Saxons are not apt to make our slow grave bodies the indexes of our emotions—but he is conscious of an odd and puzzling sensation. Where has he seen that face before?

"Bilboa's Bay" has come to an end without his perceiving it. He is putting his memory through her paces, trying to find some niche in his three happy Oxford years in which to place that strangely known yet unknown figure. There is no such niche. It is not an Oxford memory at all. What is it then? An earlier or a later one? His eyebrows are drawn together in the effort of recollection, making him look, if possible, crosser than before, when he is made aware of the return of Brown by finding his arm seized, and his friend's voice—a good deal hoarser even than when they left home—in his ear, "Jim, do you feel inclined to do a very good-natured thing?"

"Not in the least," replies Burgoyne promptly; "if any one wishes to borrow £5 from me, I should advise him to choose a moment when I am drier about the legs."

Burgoyne has very often stood up to and over his knees in water for hours, watching for ducks among whistling reeds on winter mornings, and never thought himself at all to be pitied; but he is thoroughly vexed now at his moist trousers. Brown, however, is not so easily rebuffed.

"I should be awfully obliged to you," he says croakily; "you would be laying me under a very real obligation if you would——" He stops to cough.

"If I would what?" returns the other curtly, and looking apprehensively at a book which Brown is expanding before his eyes.

"If you would read instead of me."

"I!"

"Why, the fact is"—coughing noisily again as if to show that there is no imposition—"I suppose the fog must have got down my throat; but I find I cannot speak above a whisper. I should not be heard beyond the front row; come, old man, do a good-natured thing for once in your life."

There is a pause; Burgoyne is not very fond of being asked to do a good-natured thing. He can do a big one every now and then, but he is not particularly fond of being asked to do a small one.

"Surely there must be many people here much better suited for it than I am," he says presently, looking uncomfortably around in search of the little group of booked and musicked persons whom he had seen but now standing near him, but it had melted.

"That is just what there are not," rejoins Brown, pressing his point with the more eagerness, as he thinks he sees signs of yielding; "we are very short of hands to-night, and my wife has just heard that the girl upon whom she was counting for a couple of songs is in bed with influenza."

"Happy girl! I wish I too was in bed with influenza," says Jim sardonically, for he sees his fate about to overtake him.

And so it comes to pass that, five minutes later, as described at the opening of this chapter, he is seated on the platform with "Mrs. Lirriper's Lodgings" before him, rows of Provident Matrons' eyes fastened expectantly upon him, and horrid qualms of strange shyness racing over him.

Brown has indicated by a dog's ear the page at which he is to begin; so he is spared indecision on this head. But has Brown indicated the page at which he is to stop? He is gnawed by a keen anxiety as to this point all through his performance. It is hot upon the platform, the smell of tea potent, and the naked gas-jets close above his head throw an ugly yellow glare upon his book.

Having offered his prefatory observations in the manner I have indicated, he rushes in medias res. "Girls, as I was beginning to remark, are one of your first and your lasting troubles, being like your teeth, which begin with convulsions, and never cease tormenting you from the time you cut them till they cut you, and then you do not want to part with them, which seems hard, but we must all succumb, or buy artificial." (Do his ears deceive him? Is there already a slight titter? Have the simile of the convulsions and the necessity for a ratelier already struck a chord in the matrons' breasts?) "And, even where you get a will, nine times out of ten you get a dirty face with it, and naturally lodgers do not like good society to be shown in with a smear of black across the nose, or a smudgy eyebrow!" (Is he managing his voice right? Is he mumbling or is he bellowing? He rather inclines to be suspicious of the latter. Why did not they laugh at the "smudgy eyebrow?" They ought to have done so, and he had paused to give them the opportunity. Perhaps it is among them too familiar a phenomenon to provoke mirth.) "Where they pick the black up is a mystery I cannot solve, as in the case of the willingest girl that ever came into a house, half-starved, poor thing; a girl so willing that I called her 'Willing Sophy;' down upon her knees scrubbing early and late, and ever cheerful, but always with a black face. And I says to Sophy, 'Now, Sophy, my good girl, have a regular day for your stoves, and do not brush your hair with the bottoms of the saucepans, and do not meddle with the snuffs of the candles, and it stands to reason that it cannot be.'" (Ah! what welcome sound is this? "Willing Sophy" has produced an undoubted giggle, which Burgoyne hears spreading and widening through the room. Heartened by this indication, he goes on in a more emphatic and hilarious voice:) "Yet there it was, and always on her nose, which, turning up, and being broad on the end, seemed to boast of it, and caused warning from a steady gentleman, an excellent lodger, with breakfast by the week."

There can be no mistake about it now; the giggle has changed into a universal, resonant laugh, which goes on swelling and rising, until, in the final roar of approbation which greets the concluding paragraph, the reader's voice is drowned. The matrons have all along been ready to be amused; it is only that, owing to the gravity of his face and solemnity of his manner, it was some time before they recognized that his intention was comic. As soon as they do so, they rewarded that intention with more than adequate mirth. Burgoyne has reached the second dog's ear, that dog's ear which his eye has been earnestly searching for throughout. His task then is ended. He heaves a deep sigh of relief, and, with a reflection that, after all, he is glad he was obliging, is preparing to shut the volume, when he feels the inevitable Brown's hand on his shoulder, and his husky voice in his ear.

"Capital! you got on capitally! Could not be better; but you will not mind going on a little longer, will you? You have only read for ten minutes. I want you to try something different this time—a little pathos, for a change. I have marked the page. Here!"

What is there to do but acquiesce? Burgoyne, complying, finds himself at once in the middle of a melancholy tale of a poor young woman left ruined and deserted in Mrs. Lirriper's Lodgings, and only rescued from suicide by the efforts of that good lady, who, however, is unable to save her from a tragic and premature death. The reader has reached the point at which Mrs. Lirriper has met the poor creature on her way to the river.

"'Mrs. Edson, I says, my dear, take care! However did you lose your way, and stumble in a dangerous place like this? No wonder you're lost, I'm sure.'" What is this sound? Is it possible that the giggle is rising again? the giggle which he was so glad to welcome a while ago, but which is so disastrously out of place here. He redoubles his efforts to put an unmistakably serious and pathetic tone into his voice.) "She was all in a shiver, and she so continued till I laid her on her own bed, and up to the early morning she held me by the hand and moaned, and moaned, 'Oh, wicked, wicked, wicked!——'"

What can the Provident Matrons be made of? They are laughing unrestrainedly. Too late Burgoyne realizes that he had not made it sufficiently clear that his intention is no longer comic. The idea of his being a funny man has so firmly rooted itself in his hearer's minds, that nothing can now dislodge it. Such being the case he feels that the best thing he can do is to reach the end as quickly as possible. He begins to read very fast, which is taken for a new stroke of facetiousness, the result of which is that the last sigh of the poor young would-be suicide is drowned in a storm of hilarity even heartier and more prolonged than that which greeted "Willing Sophy's" smudged nose. In much confusion, greatly abashed by the honors so mistakenly heaped upon him, Burgoyne hastily leaves the platform. Twenty thousand Browns shall not keep him there!

(To be continued).

POISON IN THE POT.

Some Nations Are Ruined By Nature's Bounty.

It is a most peculiar fact that the very food upon which a whole nation has come to subsist sometimes proves the bane and eventual destruction of that country. Look at Ireland and the potato! The Irish nation learnt to live upon the potato, growing the tubers in such enormous abundance that a very small acreage was sufficient to keep a whole family in food. Living, in fact, became too easy. Besides, the potato is not a complete food. It weakened the physique of the Irishman.

When the potato disease made its sudden appearance, and blackened and destroyed the crops of the whole island, the people had nothing else to fall back upon. The result was the ghastly famine which killed directly or indirectly nearly a million persons, and from which the Green Isle has never to this day recovered.

In much the same way the yam or sweet potato is destroying the negro race in the Southern States of America. The yam grows so easily that a half-acre patch, with a little fish and bacon, will feed a family for a year. Consequently, Sambo won't work, and after a time all ambition will disappear, and the colored man of the South will sink to a lower level than he has at present reached.

The banana has done much harm in Central America in exactly the same way. When a man has nothing to do but scratch a few holes and plant slips of bananas which go on growing and bearing year after year, it is only natural that he takes life a great deal too easily for either his own or his country's good.

In Corfu the staple food of the islanders is maize, which they frequently gather before it is ripe, and which is carelessly stored in damp cellars. Consequently, the death-rate rom that horrible disease, "pellagra," is terrible. Science has definitely proved that pellagra is due to eating damaged maize. The disease begins by a peculiar rash which appears in the spring, and which it is almost impossible to cure. With each successive spring it returns with increased virulence, until the patient's whole skin turns yellow, or even black. The nervous system is destroyed, and eventually the unhappy sufferer becomes delirious, mad, and eventually dies. At one time pellagra was the curse of Northern Italy, but great, and to some extent successful efforts have been made to stamp it out and teach the people not to live on maize only.

Sleeping sickness has for centuries ravaged Burmah and other hot countries where rice is the staple food. It is now definitely ascertained that this terrible disease is caused by feeding upon damaged rice. It was once epidemic in the Japanese army, but has been entirely got rid of by a change of diet.

In Northern India a sort of millet, which is the chief food of some millions of natives, has had the effect of steadily diminishing the population. There is some obscure poison in this grain which causes a peculiar disease. Professor Dunstan, of the Imperial Institute, has been conducting researches into the nature of this poison.

It is more than probable that future generations will truthfully declare that white bread has been the ruin of the English people. Our teeth are going rapidly, and it is more than suspected that the cause is the steel roller mill white flour which has been substituted for the good old-fashioned "seconds" of former days.

Mrs. Flynn—There you go—lendin' O'Hagan foive dollars after always sayin' you'd never trust a mon wid black hair and a red mustache.

Mr. Flynn—T's all right, darlint. Oi made him shave it off before Oi handed over the money.—Life.

ENGLISH TIPPING HABIT

EMPLOYEES OF HOTELS AND RAILWAYS ARE UNDERPAID.

American Tourist Writes a Scathing Indictment to a London Paper.

An impressive letter, in which the system of giving and receiving "tips" is criticised as debasing in its nature, has been written to the London Daily Mail by an American tourist, Mr. M. F. Steele, from Liverpool, on the eve of his return to the United States. He says:

The average American "tips," but he has a profound contempt for any grown and able-bodied man or woman who accepts a "tip," and he despises a condition of society and business which allows hotel proprietors and railway and other companies to count upon the "tips" of their patrons to supplement the wages of their underpaid servants to a living scale.

In America the only able-bodied men who are habitually "tipped" are the waiters in hotels and restaurants. The first are, without exception, negroes, and the second are either negroes or foreigners. A "tip" offered to a native-born white American railway or other employe for a simple performance of his duty or a mere act of courtesy would be refused with scorn.

PETTY BRIBES.

How different here; it has been remarked that everyone in England below the rank of a lord or a bishop will accept a tip. My short experience pretty nearly confirms the remark. I have handed a "tip" to every person who has done me the slightest service or answered an inquiry, and in not a single instance has my "tip" been declined or been unexpected.

It seems to me that the average Englishman carries his hand back down, cupped and in position to receive "tips," and I cannot believe that any person who can bring himself to accept a "tip" has any sense of pride or self-respect.

In America the "tip" is regarded both by the giver and the receiver as a petty bribe. In its most innocent aspect, it is a bribe for more or better attention than the servant is paid for by his employer; or for a special service not accorded to other patrons. Undoubtedly a large class of Americans, especially those of the nouveau riche order, is striving to introduce the despicable practice of general "tipping" into America; and already it is notorious that some New York restaurant keepers have taken advantage of the practice to reduce the wages of their waiters below the living scale.

DIVIDES CASTE.

If the practice ever becomes general in America it will fix the division of caste there as rigidly as it is fixed in England to-day, and it will no longer be possible for such men as Andrew Jackson, Andrew Johnson, Abraham Lincoln and Andrew Carnegie to rise from the lowest stratum to the highest positions in the land.

A man must first possess self-respect before he can command the respect of others; no man can possess his own respect who has accepted the petty bribery of a "tip."

Every American of breadth and education wants to come to England to see the wonders of the past age and life, of which we can never have a counterpart in our country. There are few modern things that an American wants to see in England—the best he finds are importations from America; he wants to see your old castles and your cathedrals, relics of an age of religious superstition and civil vassalage. Every American who can spare enough or save enough money for the journey comes to see these things; and he is willing to suffer considerable inconvenience and discomfort in order to come.

DESERVED TO SUCCEED.

A late matrimonial engagement is said to be the outcome of a daring little piece of repartee on the part of a young woman who has enjoyed the reputation of being not only a wit, but a beauty and belle as well. Although quite young, she was known to have declined the honor of matrimonial alliance with several so-called "catches," and it began at last to be rumored that her mind and heart were set on one of her admirers who had not as yet the temerity to come to the point.

However that may be, the young man in question was her partner in an assembly, and during the intermission for supper was seated with her in a sequestered nook, "far from the madding crowd." Apropos of something that had been said, he asked her laughingly if the report was true that she had refused all the eligible men in her set. She blushed vividly for a moment, then suddenly raised her head, looked him full in the face, and said, pointedly:—

"Yes, it is true—present company excepted."

It is, perhaps, needless to state that they remained in the "sequestered nook" some time. Rumor also has it that the above conversation was overheard by one of the discarded suitors, who forthwith "gave it away."

Hawkshaw Holmes: "I wish to be vaccinated." Dispensary Surgeon: "What's your business?" Hawkshaw Holmes: "I'm a detective." Dispensary Surgeon: "Stand out of the line, please, and give somebody else a place. There's no danger of your ever catching anything."