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The Broken Law

By J. B. Harris—Burland.

XVI—Continued.

YET it was a vow that could never be kept. How could he, Sir Richard Gaunt, serve God till the end of his days? The best he could do would be merely a negative service. He could lead a clean life, but this would be a purely selfish atonement for the past. It would benefit no one but himself. If a man has stolen a hundred pounds he can hardly make reparation by resolving to steal nothing more.

God had no use for him. It was clear that he had lived his life and that nothing more was required of him. The shipwreck cutting him off from civilization, the temptation of Hamil driving him out from the society of his fellow men, the sand storm which had prevented his letter from reaching England, the death of the camel, which had kept him a prisoner on a few acres of herbage set like some island in the midst of an impassable ocean, all these were details in a definite plan. He was an outcast left to die in the wilderness, a thing of no account in the great scheme of the universe.

Day after day these thoughts whirled through his brain in chaos. But, like the nebulous matter that once resolved itself into the solid earth, they gradually materialized into a single thought.

"I must get out of this," he said to himself, "and I must try to do some good in the world."

But it was evident that relentless justice was going to pursue him to the last. At the end of six months of loneliness and self-examination and self-reproach he was taken ill. For a few days he was strong enough to walk about, and eat his food, and sit on the edge of the oasis staring into the desert. Then he became weak and dizzy and he was seized with a great fear.

Gaunt did not know the precise nature of the disease which had attacked him, but he felt that he was very near to death. All the strength of his mind and body seemed to be slowly dying.

Once before he had been face to face with death, and then there had seemed no possible chance of escape. Now he was to die in comparative comfort. Food and water lay close to him. On the soft carpet of herbage by the spring he could die almost as comfortably as on a bed. Yet this fact did not make the reality of death less terrible. On the contrary, he had more time to think about death. His mind was not occupied with any struggle for life. He had merely to await the end.

"Give me the future," he murmured, "and I will serve Thee to the end of my days."

There was no answer to his prayer but the faint sound of a breeze among the palm leaves and the gurgling of the stream. Through a gap in the trees he could see the yellow wastes of the desert, that impassable ocean which cut him off from all chance of doing either good or evil in the world.

On the third day he became delirious and talked incessantly to himself. And then, in the evening, he passed into the rest of sleep.

When he awoke it was dark and he could see nothing but a few stars overhead. His body was almost lifeless, and he could not move a finger. But his brain was so clear and active that it seemed to be able to grasp the whole scheme of the universe.

He not only saw himself as he really was, and as he might be, but he saw the whole social life of England as it was and as it might be. He saw the lusts, the tyranny, the greed, the deceit, the hollow joys, the awful sufferings of modern life. And as he saw them, he realized how small a thing he was in this ghastly jumble of civilization, and yet how great a thing a man might be, if he could fight against the evil in the world. Such a work might atone for all the worst sins of a man's life.

"Give me the future," he whispered, "and I will serve Thee till the end of my days."

There was no answer, but the whole darkness seemed to quiver like the lips of one who is going to speak.

"My life is forfeit," he cried again. "If there is no work for me to do, no means of atonement, take my life and have mercy on my soul."

Still there was silence, but the agony and fear of the man passed from him, and once more life seemed to be returning to his limbs.

And in the darkness he saw the splendid vision of a new world.

BOOK II.

I.

A Home of Rest.

"I can't make them come right, Lady Betty, I really can't."

The speaker, a pretty, demure little girl of twenty, pressed her hands to her forehead and frowned at a long row of figures in front of her.

"Never mind, dear. How much are you out?"

"One pound thirteen shillings and sevenpence. I've never been so much out before."

"Well, don't worry about it, dear. I dare say you'll find out the mistake in the morning. You've had a hard day."

"They're bewitched; Lady Betty, the figures are bewitched. They seem to dance up and down and laugh at me."

"Shut up the book," said Lady Betty, sternly.

The girl closed it with a sigh and smoothed her hair, which had become sadly ruffled in the contest with the problems of simple addition.

Lady Betty leant over a large desk covered with papers, and picked up an envelope bearing the advertisement of a well known firm of perruquiers.

"Are you doing anything tonight, Alice?" she asked.

A tinge of color came to the girl's white cheeks.

"No," she replied. "Nothing much, your ladyship."

"Alice! I think I've told you—don't speak to me as if you were a servant."

"Yes, Lady Betty."

"You're not a servant. You're a helper in my work. Well, here are two stalls—no, dress-circle seats for the 'Pink Walnut,' if you would care to go—with a friend."

"Oh, thank you, Lady Betty, so much. It is sweet of you."

Lady Betty handed across the tickets with a smile.

"I don't think the piece will improve your mind, Alice, but it may amuse you, and if you have nothing to do——"

"No, nothing much," stammered the girl; "at least, this will fit in nicely with our plans. We were going for a walk."

"We? Oh, yes, Alice. Well, you can go to the 'Pink Walnut' now. Are there any more letters to answer?"

"No, your—Lady Betty, I mean."

"That is good. You can go in five minutes, Alice. Are you happy here?"

"Oh, yes, Lady Betty."

"In spite of the sums that won't come right?"

"Oh, yes, Lady Betty. I'll find out the mistake tomorrow. I think I am tired tonight."

"You are not thinking of leaving me?"

"No—o," stammered the girl. "Not yet, Lady Betty."

"But some day, eh? Well, I hope he's worthy of you. But wait for a year, Alice. You are very young. I want you for this next year. I intend to give you another pound a week."

"Another pound a week!" murmured the girl. "Oh, Lady Betty!"

"Yes, another pound a week, Alice."

"Why, I shall be earning more than——" She paused and blushed furiously.

"More than you were before, Alice," said Lady Betty, with a sad smile. "But you'll have to earn it. There is a hard time before us both this winter, Alice—work from morning to night. They say that there are one hundred and fifty thousand people starving in London. And it's a cruel winter—but there, child, go out and see the play, and don't think about work till you come back tomorrow."

The girl rose to her feet and put on her hat and cloak, which were hanging on a peg by the door.

"Good night, Lady Betty, and thank you so much."

"Good night, dear, and be sure you have a good evening. Later on we may have to work in the evenings. But you mustn't think of marriage just yet. And when you do, you mustn't leave me. You must bring him round some day—perhaps I can keep you both with me. I don't want to lose you."

The girl's eyes glittered and, though she did not speak, the look on her face was eloquent of gratitude. Then she left the room and softly closed the door behind her.

Five years had left their mark on the face and character of Lady Betty Drake. She was no longer young when Sir Richard left England, but a healthy open-air life had given her all the glow and strength of youth. Now she was white-faced and distinctly middle-aged. For five years she had spared neither body nor brain in her work among the poor of London.

Down in one of the worst quarters of the East End she built a home of refuge for the lowest and most miserable of her own sex, and there she started a work that was destined to place her name among the list of those women who have left their mark on the world.

Lady Betty only allowed herself a few seconds of reverie after the departure of Alice Carter. The episode of the two sweethearts had for the moment disturbed her mental balance. But she soon regained her businesslike composure and, rising from her seat, took down a letter file from the shelf. Then she drew out a piece of pale blue hand-made paper, and opened the letter out on the desk before her. She read it through carefully again and again. It ran as follows:

"Dear Madam: Failing the discovery of a certain person within the next two months we shall have a large sum of money at our disposal to devote to the cause which you have so much at heart. We have been debating whether to use it in a fresh venture on similar lines to the one which you have started, or whether to apply it to the enlargement of a scheme which is already a working concern and which has an organization to deal with those who are to benefit by the legacy. Although nothing definite can yet be settled, as the term named in the will has not yet expired, we should like to have the pleasure of a few words with you. If convenient to you, Mr. John Sarl, jr., who is one of the trustees, will call on you at 3 o'clock on Thursday next.

"We have the honor to remain, yours obediently,

"JOHN SARL & SON."

In reply to this Lady Betty had written to say that she would be pleased to see Mr. John Sarl, jr., at 6:30 p.m.

She was now awaiting his arrival. She had no intention of falling in with any scheme which would take the reins out of her own hands, but she was well aware that her own income was quite insufficient for the great task that lay before her, and she shrank from an appeal to public charity. It was possible that she might be able to accept this money, or else be of assistance to those who had the handling of it.

At 6:30 to the minute Mr. John Sarl, jr., was announced. He was a small, thin-faced man, and Lady Betty was relieved to find that he was well advanced in years. The term "junior" had suggested to her a smart young sprig of a lawyer, with whom it would be difficult to discuss matters at all freely. This man, however, could not have been a day under fifty, and was probably nearer sixty. His hair was almost white, and there were deep lines about his mouth and eyes.

"This is a great honor, I assure you," he said, after the preliminary greetings had passed between them, "a great honor to have the privilege of talking to you, Lady Betty. I think we explained ourselves in the letter we ventured to send to you. It occurred to us that something might be done—yes, certainly something might be done."

"I understand you have not got this money yet?"

"No, no. I fear not—that is to say, I hope not. A most unfortunate case, Lady Betty, most unfortunate. It was left by our late client to his sister, if she could be found. At the time of his death he had not seen her for ten years. She had left home—the old, sad story, I fear. You have heard it often——"

"Very often."

"We have advertised every day for five years; we have employed detectives—a sad waste of money, I fear—so much gone out of the estate, but necessary and proper expenditure. We have heard nothing of the missing woman. I fear she is dead, but perhaps not, perhaps not. The world is a large place, and even London—so much might have happened to her in these fifteen years."

"How terrible!" said Lady Betty, slowly. "Perhaps the poor thing is starving, and with all this money waiting for her."

"Yes, but we have done all in our power. We could do no more. Yes, there is half a million pounds waiting for her."

"Half a million?"

"Yes, nearly that. A lot of good could be done with it, Lady Betty. Perhaps it is all for the best. If this poor thing came into it, or some drunken husband—well, maybe, it is all for the best. But to come to the point, Lady Betty. I think we expressed our views in the letter. Now, what do you say to our proposal?"

"The money would be very useful," Lady Betty replied. "My own money is tied up and I can only use the income. There is so much work to be done. It frightens me to think of it. This home, as perhaps you know, is only a center. We have others in the country—even abroad in the colonies. Eventually they will become self-supporting. At least, that is what I hope. But at present they require money. There is room for ten times as many. I take the women from their surroundings, give them something to live for, teach them how to earn an honorable living, and when they leave they are strong enough to fight against evil."

"Good, very good, but the past—the stain cannot be washed out, Lady Betty."

"It is washed out, Mr. Sarl, at least, so far as the world is concerned. Our homes are not branded with any name. They are refuges for the destitute, even social clubs, but they are not known as being homes for a particular class. The woman who enters our doors leaves her past behind her. Often she emerges with another name. She becomes a good worker, an honorable woman, sometimes even a faithful wife."

"A wife? You do not mean to say——"

"Yes," she interrupted, sharply, "why not? Is only a man to be given a chance of true happiness?" And as the words came from her lips she thought of Sir Richard Gaunt.

"Of course, of course," Mr. Sarl replied, gently. "Very proper—ah, you are the sort of woman we want in the world, Lady Betty. If we could only pull together. You ought to have the handling of this money. Now, can't we fix up something?"

"Are you willing to place it absolutely in my hands—to use as I like?"

The lawyer looked on the carpet and traced out a pattern with his umbrella.

"Not quite that, I'm afraid," he said, after a pause. "No, that would hardly be proper or businesslike, Lady Betty, would it? It would be unusual, and I don't think quite acording to the testator's ideas. But, if we could combine—if, say, you would consent to a trustee whom we would appoint——"

"It would hamper me considerably, Mr. Sarl. I have my own ideas on these matters and like to work without hindrance——"

"Oh, there would be nothing of that sort, nothing, I can assure you. I thought of suggesting that two trustees should be appointed, and that you should be one, and that the money should be advanced to buy houses and land, or for any good purpose that you both approved of, but that you should have sole authority to spend the money so advanced, without control, entirely as you pleased. But we can talk over the details another time. Is the main idea acceptable to you?"

"The money would be a great help. I should like to have another talk with you, Mr. Sarl, when it is certain that the money can be used for this purpose. Is there any objection to letting me know the name of the man who has left the money?"

"None at all, Lady Betty," said the lawyer, rising to his feet. "This money is left under the will of the late Mr. George Crawshay."

"Crawshay," said Lady Betty. "Crawshay—I seem to remember——"

"Ah, yes; ah, yes—a sad case; a most painful case. Poor fellow, it was done in a moment of passion, I've no doubt. Yes, yes. Well, I must be off, Lady Betty; late hours these for a business man, and my wife——"

"Mr. Crawshay was a friend of Sir Richard Gaunt's."

"Yes, left him thirty thousand pounds in his will—why, heaven only knows. Did you know poor Sir Richard?"

"Yes," Lady Betty replied, slowly. "I knew him very well. Good night, Mr. Sarl. Please come and see me again—in two months' time—I will try and work out a scheme."

"Good night, Lady Betty. I hope we shall be able to work together."

When the lawyer had left the room Lady Betty reseated herself in the chair before her desk and dipped her pen in the ink. But although she had several private letters to write, she did not put the pen to paper and the ink dried on the nib. She placed the end of the penholder in her mouth and stared at one of the windows.

"Thirty thousand pounds," she said to herself. "He must have been a great friend of Dick's."

She recalled the unpleasant incident of Lord Carfax's death, and her mind went back to the days at Gaunt Royal. Then she began to think of Sir Richard Gaunt, and at once pulled up her thoughts with a sharp jerk. This was a matter that she never allowed to obtrude itself in business hours.

She dipped her pen in the ink again and commenced to write, and in a few seconds she was only thinking of the recipient of her letter, a woman who was a shorthand writer in Winnipeg, and who had been literally rescued from the gutter, where she had been found lying in a drunken sleep. Her mind resembled a highly trained horse, which can be checked in the middle of a headlong gallop, turned round and sent off in another direction.

When she had finished the letter she sealed it up, addressed it and commenced another. And she occupied herself in this way for an hour and a half. These letters were not strictly business letters. They were written as from one friend to another, but they were all part of a great scheme for keeping in touch with those who had left the home.

Then a servant came in with a tray, and the lifted covers revealed a chop, some boiled potatoes and spinach. Lady Betty stamped her letters and handed them to the girl to post; then she ate her frugal meal and read an evening paper which the servant had brought in on the tray. Never for a moment did she leave herself time to think about the past.

Then she left the table and seated herself in an easy chair which was close to the fire. She allowed herself ten minutes' rest before resuming her work, and this was spent in a way which would have jarred on the feelings of most charitable women. She took a cigarette out of a box which lay on the mantelpiece, placed it in a tortoiseshell holder and lit it. It was a real pleasure to her, for it was the only one she allowed herself in the day. During these ten minutes she refused to see any one, for she was accustomed to interview women who looked on smoking as the accompaniment of a fast and vicious life.

When she had finished the cigarette she rose to her feet and opened the window to let the smell of smoke out of the room. It was a cold night and a north wind blew fiercely down the street. The view from the window was similar to that which may be seen in many of the slum thoroughfares of London. The houses were mean, ugly and dilapidated. They rose straight from the edge of the pavement, without any intervening rail or strip of garden. The home itself was like its neighbors in this respect. The tide of human misery flowed up to its very doors.

The cold air would have sent many women shivering back to the warmth of the fire, but Lady Betty, regardless of consequences, drew in deep breaths of it and looked down the street. There were few people to be seen, but from the hideous wall of houses came all the sounds of human life—the wailing of children, the coarse laughter of women, the shouts of men, now and then the distant sound of a blow, followed by a scream. Through broken window panes and ill-fitting doors the noises of humanity filtered out into the night.

A wider thoroughfare ran at right angles to the end of the street and this was a vivid blaze of light. Black figures passed to and fro against the flare of paraffin torches, a confused murmur of voices formed an obligato accompaniment to the nearer and more distinct sounds. A barrel organ tinkled far away in the distance.

Then, from the other end of the street, which seemed to vanish in darkness, as a path loses its way in the wilderness, there came a few derisive yells and shrieks of laughter.

A moment later Lady Betty saw a man walking slowly along the middle of the road. A few yards behind him marched a dozen gutter urchins, pushing and jostling each other. It was not an uncommon sight, but the man in such cases usually lurches from side to side and turns round to pour out a torrent of filthy language.

This man, however, walked straight on and appeared to be perfectly sober. It was only when he came nearer that the reason for the little crowd became apparent. He was dressed in some long dark garment that reached to his ankles. His feet and head were bare. Possibly he was some foreigner from the oriental exhibition at Earl's Court.

As he came still closer and the glare of a gas lamp fell upon his face Lady Betty saw that he was lean and dark skinned. His black hair descended almost to his shoulders, and his beard and mustache and whiskers were shaggy and unkempt. He moved along slowly, apparently unconscious of the train of derisive followers. His arms were folded and his head bowed on his breast.

Then he suddenly stopped, and raised his face to the sky and stretched out both hands toward the east.

"Woe unto you, accursed city!"

His voice rang out like a clarion, above all the mean noises of the night. The boys fell back from him and giggled. Doors and windows opened down the street and towsled heads were thrust out.

"Woe unto you, accursed city!" Again the voice rang out, clear and distinct as a bugle call for battle.

"Go it, darkie!" shouted a man, huskily, from the vantage point of an upper window. "Give it 'em 'ot, Moses!"

And the little boys danced and shrieked with laughter.

Then a policeman appeared, mysteriously, from nowhere, as they do in the worst quarters of London. His burly form moved steadily toward the tall figure with the outstretched hands.

"Move along, guv'nor," he said, roughly. "We can't 'ave this 'ere, you know. You're obstructin'."

The man slowly dropped his hands to his side and returned down the street into the darkness. One of the little boys, emboldened by the protection of the law, threw a lump of mud at the retreating figure. Then the policeman threatened and the crowd dispersed.

Lady Betty shut down the window and returned to her letter writing.

But as she went to sleep that night she still heard the ringing tones of the voice. She could not understand why the words of a religious fanatic should have left so deep an impression upon her mind.

II.

The Idealist.

Over a fireless grate in the tiny back room of an East End lodging house sat the man who hoped to reform the social and moral conditions of the world.

The furniture of the room consisted of a sugar box, which was being used as a chair, a cracked jug and basin sat on the floor in the corner, and three coarse brown rugs, one of which was rolled up to form a pillow. On the window sill stood a loaf of bread, a knife and two bottles, one of them filled with water and the other converted into a useful candlestick.

The whole scene suggested abject poverty, but no one could have called it squalid. It was rather the encampment of a soldier on the field of battle. The necessities of life were reduced to a minimum.

The figure of the man himself would have redeemed any scene from the commonplace squalor which characterizes the homes of the very poor in London. His thin brown face, his long black hair and shaggy beard suggested some prophet of the Old Testament. His chin rested upon his hands, and his eyes, fierce and dark, seemed to look through the bare walls of his dwelling place to the great city that encompassed him on every side like a sea.

Sir Richard Gaunt, after an absence of five years, had returned to England. Apart from the change in his personal appearance, due largely to the growth of his hair and beard, his whole manner had so altered that no one could have ever identified him with the man who had left for Australia on the Santigan.

Save that all changes in a man's life are due to the power of a Supreme Being, no supernatural agency had been necessary for this change. The hours of agony on the raft, the new life lived among the simple workers of the desert, the long days spent in a journey across the wilderness, the illness which had reduced all physical resistance to the lowest ebb, the repentance, the knowledge of how a man's life should be lived—all these had been the seeds which might one day grow into a forest of sturdy trees. The physical change had prepared the ground for the mental, and the mental for the spiritual.

Then, after the recovery from an illness which had brought the man near to death, there had come another year of solitude, in which he had been given time to grapple with the new problems that had arisen before his mind. And then nearly two years of wandering in the desert with a band of Tuaregs scarcely less savage than nature itself.

And during those years the seeds of thought grew fiercely in a fertile soil. The new ideas, at first small and indeterminate, gradually formulated themselves into a definite plan of action. The uncertain hopes and desires grew into a fixed purpose.

And when at last he reached a port he resolved to return to England and do the work that he had been called upon to do.

He worked his passage to London on a tramp steamer and landed with four pounds in his pocket. It was a small amount for the campaign that lay before him, but he thought that it would serve. His creed was founded on the idea that a great reformer should be content with the barest necessities of life.

But money would be wanted.

There lay the essence of the whole scheme, the one practical difficulty in a campaign which had its motives in the highest aspirations of heart and intellect. It was a confession of weakness, but it was the truthful confession of a man who realizes the strength of his enemy.

A thousand years ago no money would have been required. Eloquence, fierce religious fervor, perhaps even the help of fire and sword—all these would have sufficed. But not in the twentieth century, when the huge and hideous idol of money dominated the whole world, there could be no victory without the means of organizing a great campaign. At the present time the word "means" denotes one thing and one thing alone—money.

Sir Richard was practically penniless. Two days after his return he had seriously considered the advisability of declaring his true identity. The declaration would have placed him in the possession of money. And anything he had to say would come more forcibly from the lips of a large landed proprietor than from the mouth of an itinerant beggar. But the record of his past rose up before him like a wall. He had no wish to pose as a converted sinner. His conversion was too deep for that. He wished to be regarded as the man who had come from the deserts of the east, and who had brought with him the truths that a man can find in great solitudes.

Yet money must be found—a gigantic sum of money. A thousand preachers must be provided with their daily bread. There must be no begging by the wayside. And for yet another reason money must be found. It must be shown that those who have the handling of great wealth can yet live the simple and austere life of an anchorite.

He picked up a copy of a halfpenny paper and read a short paragraph which concerned him intimately. It ran as follows:

"DISORDERLY, BUT NOT DRUNK.

"A curious scene was witnessed in Piccadilly last night. A wild-eyed, long-haired man, whose garb and appearance suggested the desert of Earl's Court, thought it a fitting place to give vent to his views on the evils of wealth and the general decadence of modern society. He collected a large crowd and for a few moments the street was blocked. But the police, unmindful of the ideal, but fortunately careful of realities, haled him off to the nearest police station, where the state of his mind was inquired into. We understand that the doctor said he was not drunk and he was dismissed with a caution. He looked like some prophet of the Old Testament, but he must have felt smaller than that."

Sir Richard Gaunt's face darkened as he read the paragraph. Then his eyes caught the heading of the next paragraph, and it was a curious contrast to the one which preceded it.

"THE RICHEST MAN IN THE WORLD SAYS LIFE IS A BURDEN."

The ironical contrast of this headline to the paragraph which preceded it arrested Sir Richard Gaunt's attention, and he read the half-playful, half-enthusiastic words of the journalist who had obtained an interview with "the richest man in the world."

"Mr. Harry K. Lampirthy," wrote the reporter, "is the richest man in the world. At least, he says so, and he ought to know. He has just arrived in London and has taken half the Carlton Hotel. His private cook has a motor car of his own. His valet is sleeping in a room that was occupied last week by one of England's proudest nobles.

"In the course of a conversation, which lasted for seventy-five seconds, or nearly a quarter of a minute longer than Mr. Lampirthy usually accords to interviewers, we gathered that the richest man in the world finds life a burden almost too hard to be borne, that he yearns for the simple life, that he hates public libraries and charities of all kinds. We suggested an obvious remedy, and that closed the interview, which was meteoric in its brevity and brilliance.

"His first secretary, however, who has the salary of a prime minister, told us that he puts a thousand begging letters in the waste-paper basket every day."

Sir Richard Gaunt's lips tightened as he read these few words or the irresponsible retailer of interesting rubbish. This man Lampirthy was the fastest runner in a race for which the whole world had entered. He was the strongest man in a contest which was waged through every minute of time in almost every quarter of the globe. He had come out on top. He had more power for good or evil than any emperor, or president or king. He was the apotheosis of the gospel of wealth.

And yet he was not happy and he found life a burden to him. This was probably true, in spite of the allowance that had to be made for the pose which millionaires assume before representatives of the press. The very rich men find pleasure in shouting about the evils of riches. But, in spite of this theatrical attitude, there is bound to be an element of truth in their repeated denunciation of wealth. The child who eats too many sweets is sure to feel sick.

Private appeals for help and requests for subscriptions to charities would fail to touch the heart of a man like Lampirthy. He would be doubtful of the value of his gifts, he would look on them as a mere tax exacted from a man in his position. The result, too, would be indefinite. The money, directed into a thousand channels, would do little more than swell the current which flowed through each. And when the man died there would be nothing to point to as the single-handed accomplishment of a single great worker.

But if such a man were given the chance of regenerating the whole of his country, of equipping a vast crusade against the evil which was threatening to destroy the soul of a nation, of overthrowing the god of wealth and beating the image into dust, would he not be inclined to take it? Whether he succeeded or failed his name would be carved for all time on the history of the world. Even if his heart was not in the work the scheme might appeal to him. It would gratify his desire for fame, his lust for power, his longing to be something greater than the "richest man in the world."

And in that mean little back room, as poor a scene as could be imagined for the birth of an idea that might regenerate the world, Sir Richard Gaunt sat with his chin on his hands and wondered how far it would be lawful to ask help of the mammon of unrighteousness.

After a while he rose to his feet and paced up and down the room, his dark eyes alight with eagerness, his thin, muscular body aglow with the desire for action.

The poor man suffered because he could not get what he wanted. The rich man because he had got all that he wanted. The two extremes met in a common bond of unhappiness. Neither had any worthy object in life, any pleasure that was independent of all external circumstances. It is the hideous decree of the money god that those who serve him shall serve him alone, whether they succeed or fail, whether they struggle for a mere pittance or whether they are the possessors of millions. There is no room for anything else in their hearts.

These thoughts stung Sir Richard Gaunt to fierce enthusiasm. If he could only shatter this idol, if he could break down the whole social system, in which every one takes his place according to his financial position; if he could give rich and poor something that neither wealth nor poverty could destroy, something which would make them secure against all the chances of fortune; if he could only do this, he would bring happiness into the world.

He knew that only one power would bring about so stupendous a result and that was the power of religion. This alone could raise men above all the accidents of birth and shield them from all the blows of circumstance.

The bitter irony of the whole situation lay in the fact that two things were absolutely necessary for the work that lay before him, and both were in themselves mean and despicable. The first was money and the second was self-advertisement.

A new movement can only be started by attracting attention. Even the appearance in a police court was a means to an end.

The movement can only be carried on by money, whether in the shape of chance subscriptions or solid financial support.

And Harry K. Lampirthy was the richest man in the world.

III.

The Richest Man in the World.

Mr. Harry Kinbolt Lampirthy was "not at home" to any one.

He was comfortably ensconced in a large armchair before a blazing fire. He gripped a briarwood pipe in his teeth and puffed out clouds of smoke across the handsomely furnished room. The tobacco was strong, and the scent of it was sure to cling to the curtains for many days.

Mr. Lampirthy was the most finished example of a type which is entirely the product of the modern commercial spirit. He was no happier than the white-faced toiler in the East End. Both were entangled in the same remorseless machinery which crushes out all that is best in human nature. The life-blood had been squeezed from their hearts; nerve, brain and body had been cruelly injured. The one had only asked for the bare necessities of life, the other for all the wealth that he could lay hands on. But the result had been the same. Both had been granted existence, but nothing which might make existence endurable. The one had no time for pleasure, the other found no pleasure in anything. It was impossible to say that the millionaire was the happier of the two.

At the age of forty-seven Harry Lampirthy was an old man. His face was lined and furrowed with care. He was almost bald and the tufts of hair by his ears were a dirty white. His body seemed all nerves and bones. He started at the fall of a coal in the grate. He was the richest man in the world, but he had worn out body, heart and brain in the struggle for that "bad eminence."

Millionaires are popularly supposed to be troubled by the possession of great wealth. But it is not that which troubles them. It is the getting of it which is the constant anxiety. For it is the peculiar curse of these men that they are forbidden to rest, that the desire for more gold becomes a disease, that they are bound to go on working until they die. There is nothing left for them in life but the piling up of one million on the top of another. It is, indeed, the only thing that keeps them alive.

Some men can start a new life in directing the fortunes of their children. But Harry Lampirthy was denied this blessing. He was childless. A little stepdaughter, the child of his wife by a former husband, was the ultimate heir to the Lampirthy millions. She promised to be as vain and empty headed as her mother.

The great millionaire stared at the fire, and wondered whether he would ever be able to find in life some absorbing interest which would destroy and take the place of a desire for more money. He was tired of everything. Neither art nor literature appealed to him. Mere bodily pleasures had no attraction for the man who could purchase anything he desired. He had not even a craving for self-advertisement. He had made up his mind that the giving of money for charitable purposes was not at all satisfactory.

"Charity," he once said to a bishop in reply to a request for money, "is all very well for the giver, if it makes him feel pleased with himself. But it doesn't have that effect on me. I feel that the money is wasted. It will not remove, and will scarcely alleviate, the poverty and misery which are inseparable parts of our social system. Bring me a scheme which will strike at the root of the whole evil, which will alter the system itself, and I will listen to you. The transference of money from the rich to the poor is but the tossing to and fro of a ball. It all comes back to us again, every cent of it."

"Yet the mere holding of the ball for a little while," the prelate had replied, "may bring happiness."

"Illusory, vain, useless. It does no real good. It only makes it all the harder to throw it back again."

Such were Mr. Lampirthy's views on charity, and, as he sat before the fire and gazed at the red-hot coals, he saw no opening for his energies in the field of charity. He knew that he could endow all the charities in England, but the giving of the money would afford him no pleasure, and could not in any way take the place of the desire for more wealth which was still the ruling passion of his life.

After a while he rose to his feet and rang the bell.

"Please tell Mr. Dixon that I wish to see him," he said, as a man-servant entered.

In less than a minute Mr. Dixon, first secretary and confidential manager of Mr. Lampirthy's business affairs, entered the room. He opened the door swiftly and silently, as though to show his eagerness. And he closed it softly, as though he were in a church. He was a young man of about twenty-eight, keen and alert as a hawk, pitiless and cruel as the oldest fighter in the great arena of finance.

"Sit down, Dixon, and take a cigar," said Mr. Lampirthy. The young man sat down, but he refused the offer of anything to smoke.

"How's the big job?" asked Mr. Lampirthy, after a short pause.

"I've bought fifty more paper mills on the terms you instructed me to offer."

"Good. Are any standing out?"

"Yes, sir. Some are standing out for higher terms. Shall I bring you their letters?"

"No, not now. That can all be arranged. What of the others?"

"A few won't sell at any price."

"Is that so?" Mr. Lampirthy smiled.

"One of them was very rude."

"Who was that?"

"Purl & Stanton."

"Good. I will remember. Who are the others?"

The secretary reeled off a list of names and Mr. Lampirthy seemed to be making a mental note of them.

"They don't matter," said the millionaire. "We'll ruin them, undersell them till they'll be glad to get rid of their mills at any price. That will be easy enough. What percentage of the trade is certain?"

"About 94 per cent."

"That is good. But, of course, we are offering exceptional terms."

"There will be only 3 per cent on most of the money."

"Oh, well, Dixon, we shall soon be able to improve on that. Of course, none of them know with whom they are dealing?"

"Oh, no, sir," of course not. We've a dozen nominees."

"That's good—that's very good. When this is through, Dixon, you'd better take a holiday. I'd go to Madeira, if I were you. It's sunny and pleasant at this time of the year."

Then the door suddenly burst open and a slip of a girl, cloaked to the eyes with costly sables, danced into the room, clapping her hands with childish glee.

"Papa, papa!" she cried. "Look at my new motor coat! Isn't it beautiful?"

The little girl paused in an attitude which would have been called theatrical in a woman. Both men looked at her, but the expression on their faces was very different.

Gus Dixon thought he had never seen anything more beautiful than the flushed flowerlike face of this child.

Mr. Lampirthy, on the other hand, regarded his stepdaughter with a glare of disapproval. The price of the new coat was nothing to him and he never gave it a thought. But he was annoyed at the look of pleasure in the child's face. It was unnatural, according to his ideas of how children ought to behave. His face was like an ugly mask as he looked on a picture that would have delighted the eyes of an artist.

"Sibyl," he said, quietly, "how often have I told you not to rush into the room like a mad dog?"

The child looked at him and her lips quivered with vexation. Then she moved swiftly to his side and leant over him.

"I'm so sorry, papa," and she kissed him lightly on the forehead.

"Ah, Miss Sibyl," said Dixon, "you know how to manage men already."

Mr. Lampirthy frowned. "I think you'd better write those letters now, Dixon," he said, coldly. "You'll miss the country post."

Gus Dixon said nothing, but left the room with a shrug of the shoulders and a smile.

When he had gone little Sibyl Lampirthy sat down on the arm of her stepfather's chair and nestled herself against his bony shoulder.

"You're cross, papa," she said, plaintively.

"Not cross, Sibyl, but tired."

"Are you always tired, papa? Mother says you are."

The man did not answer and the little girl looked wistfully at his stern face.

"You haven't said that you liked my coat yet," she persisted. "I don't believe you've looked at it."

"It's nice and warm," he replied, apathetically.

"Oh, papa, is that all you've got to say about it? Why, lots of coats that only cost twenty pounds are nice and warm. This cost one hundred and fifty pounds. It's real Russian sable. I think mother's a dear to have bought it for me."

"Take it off at once," said the millionaire, coldly. "It's not meant to wear in the house, and I think I've told you, Sibyl, that it's very vulgar to talk about what your clothes cost. Where is your mother?"

"In the hall," the girl replied, sulkily. She rose from the arm of the chair and walked slowly toward the door. Her sweet little face was hot with anger.

Just as she reached the door, however, Mrs. Lampirthy entered, caught her in her arms and kissed her affectionately.

"Look, Harry," she cried, eagerly, "doesn't Sibyl look a little darling? Isn't she a sweet, fluffy little pet in this coat?"

Mr. Lampirthy did not turn his head to look at his "fluffy little pet." Sibyl freed herself from her mother's embrace and left the room. And when she reached her own bedroom she took off the fur coat and flung it angrily into a corner.

"What's the matter, Harry?" asked Mrs. Lampirthy, when the child had left the room.

"You're making a fool of that child," he replied, without looking round at his wife. "She's got all the airs and vanities of a grown-up woman. She'll be insufferable in another year or two. I've half a mind to send her to a boarding school in France, some place where all the pupils wear black calico and have their hair done up in pigtails."

"I wouldn't let her go," said Mrs. Lampirthy, settling herself down in a chair by the fire. "How can you be so cruel, Harry?"

Mrs. Lampirthy's face grew tearful as she thought of the possibility of a separation from her daughter.

It was the face of a shallow, worldly woman, only redeemed by the expression in the eyes. The whole face laughed through life, as a butterfly flits through a garden. But the eyes never laughed. They were deep, serious and even clouded with the memory of some time that ought to be forgotten. Perhaps Mrs. Lampirthy remembered the hard days when she was the wife of a working man who earned five dollars a week.

"I suppose it's no good asking you about Sibyl's motor car while you're in this beast of a temper?" she said.

"Sibyl's motor car?"

"Yes. She wants a little car of her very own, with a man to take orders from her. We saw such a sweet little car today. It only cost——"

"What does the cost matter?" he exclaimed, angrily. "You know that you and Sibyl can have whatever you want to buy. That's the curse of this life. We'd appreciate things more if we had to save up, to stint ourselves, in order to get something that we wanted. Buy the motor car, buy twenty motor cars if you like, but don't worry me about it."

He rose to his feet and stalked out of the room, banging the door behind him.

When he had gone Mrs. Lampirthy reseated herself in the armchair and picked up an evening paper from the floor. She hurriedly glanced at the news and then turned to the advertisements.

Her eyes lingered over one which headed the "Personal" column and which had been there for the last five years.

"Violet Hexamer.—If this lady will communicate with Messrs. John Sarl & Son, 22a Lincoln's Inn Fields, she will hear of something to her advantage. Any one giving such information as will lead to the proof of this lady's death or the discovery of her present residence will receive £200 reward."

She looked at the words for two or three minutes, and then she laughed. But there was no laughter in the large gray eyes.

Then she idly turned over the pages of the paper and her attention was arrested by the following paragraph:

"A WINDFALL FOR CHARITY.

"Every day for the last five years the same advertisement has appeared in all the leading papers in England. Our representative called today on the old established firm of solicitors who are responsible for the insertion of this advertisement. We are authorized to state that it will appear only for another fortnight, and that, if the missing lady is not found by 12 o'clock noon on December the 29th a large sum of money left to this lady by her half-brother, the late Mr. George Crawshay, will be, under the terms of the will, applied to charitable purposes. Our representative inspected the will at Somerset House, and it is pretty certain that a deserving charity will benefit to the extent of nearly half a million pounds."

"Half a million pounds!" said Mrs. Lampirthy to herself. "H'm! That is about Harry's income for one month."

IV.

An Appeal to Mammon.

One evening toward the end of January Sir Richard Gaunt took out a small pile of coins from his pocket and counted them carefully. There were nine pennies, four halfpennies, a shilling and two sixpences—two and elevenpence in all. He owed a week's rent and there was only a piece of dry crust lying on the window sill. For twelve hours he had not tasted food. He did not know how long that little store of money might have to last him. And, besides, he owed every penny of it.

His campaign had so far resulted in nothing but ridicule. He had achieved a certain notoriety, but of a kind that did not lend dignity to any cause. His name, Father Francis, by which he was known to the world, had figured more than once in the police news. He was known as a disturber of the peace, as a harmless anarchist, as one who would upset all the comfortable laws and conventions of society.

If he had confined his fervent speeches to Hyde Park on Sundays he would not have placed himself in the grasp of the law. But he was too proud and ardent to be content with this. Hyde Park was the playground of people who were tolerated because of their incapacity. Blood, fire and ruin streamed out from the lips of these orators, and the law laughed because it knew that nothing would follow, because it was well assured that no single speech would ever induce the mob of London to rise up and sack the mansions in Grosvenor Square, or blow up the houses of parliament, or assassinate the king.

Father Francis did not wish to be identified with these harmless failures. He went to the other extreme and chose the most inconvenient and inopportune places for his denunciation of society. In a crowded thoroughfare, outside the door of a theater disgorging its vapid crowd of pleasure seekers, among the weary watchers by the gates of the docks, in a railway station crammed with people going to some popular race meeting—these were the sort of places he chose for the deliverance of his message. The result was inevitable. He was always figuring in the police courts, and, though he was generally let off with a caution, he once received a week's imprisonment. The crowning indignity came in the form of a decree that the state of his mind should be inquired into. The inquiry proved him to be a man of sound intellect, but the doctor, who was an honest man, told him that religion would affect his brain if he continued to harp on it so incessantly.

"FATHER FRANCIS AGAIN."

So ran the title of the paragraph which described his last conflict with the law. The phrase jarred on his sensitive nature. It was an insult to the name he had assumed. In a public library he had read the story of St. Francis of Assisi. It had seemed to be in some way analogous to his own. St. Francis had been a youth of vicious and profligate habits. He had suddenly been roused to a sense of his own sins and been shown, by an extraordinary miracle, that there was divine work to be done in the world. Sir Richard Gaunt had assumed the title in all humility, and had prayed that his own work might prosper under the aegis of so great a name.

Yet what had been the result? He had only brought the name into contempt and ridicule.

Nothing could be done without money. The methods of primitive times were useless for an age of high civilization. The machinery of the social system clanged in the ears of the idealist. Nothing could be done without money. Where was the money to come from? That was the question of the hour.

The man shrank from all public appeal to charity. Such a course would be detrimental to the cause. It would arouse suspicions in the minds of the givers. The battle was to be waged against the universal worship of gold. It would hardly be wise to solicit alms in the street.

The money would have to come from some private source, from a man who would understand the motive which prompted the request for it. It is easy to explain things quietly to a single individual, but very difficult to bring them clearly before the minds of a crowd.

His thoughts once more turned to Mr. Harry Lampirthy, the richest man in the world, the man whose life was said to be a burden to him. Some weeks previously it had occurred to him to try and show this man that there was still something worth doing in the world. But after due deliberation he had shrunk from making an appeal in a quarter where it would be so hard to find sympathy. He had realized how many thousands of people had been ruined to build up that colossal fortune. He knew something of the life of the man, the hard cruelty of his mind, the brutal strength of his will, the fierce lust of his heart for gold. Such a man was hardly likely to sympathize with the dreams of an idealist.

But now, as he was brought face to face with starvation and the entire destruction of all his hopes, he began to wonder whether it was not his duty to approach the owner of this huge fortune, and whether, after all, there was not something desirable in the hopelessness of the task.

And, as he thought of the battle that he would have to fight, his eyes flashed and his lips tightened. It would be a contest worthy of his cause. If he won, the whole world would be affected by the victory. If he lost, no one would suffer.

So far the result of his labors had been practically nil, and beyond the fact that he had obtained a certain advertisement, and that his face and views were becoming familiar to the people of London, he might just as well have stayed in the deserts of Arabia. A few kind-hearted men had offered alms, jumping at once to the conclusion that he was on the lookout for money. A few of the lowest class of idlers had tried to "pal up" to him, and expressed their willingness to help his cause if it was made worth their while. But that was all. So far he had failed, but he felt that he had not been given a fair chance.

The meeting with Lampirthy, however, would be a reasonable test of his abilities. He would encounter a man whose whole life had been devoted to the acquisition of a huge fortune. He would not have to point out to him the vanity of earthly riches, for from all accounts the man had realized that already. But he would have to show him that there is a work to be done in the world worthy of the highest intellect and which could only be done by a man of immense wealth.

This would be a battle worth fighting. The opponent would be no mere passer by in a crowded street, but a man of strong will, keen intellect and stupendous faith in himself. Harry Lampirthy represented the very eyes and brains of the idol which was to be destroyed. If this victory could be won it might mean the conquest of England. He realized that it would be hard to get speech of the great millionaire. These kings of finance are as inaccessible as royalty. They are hedged in by a cordon of secretaries, who are paid to act as buffers between the outer world and their master. Yet, where reporters had succeeded it was incredible that a man inspired by a strong and earnest purpose should fail.

When once the interview was granted half the battle would be won. Face to face with the man Sir Richard Gaunt felt that he would be given power to achieve a victory. But the interview itself would have to be obtained by other means than eloquence or the strength of a righteous cause. It might even have to be obtained by trickery, by subterfuge, by the employment of means which would be distasteful to him, which would be unworthy of the Master whom he wished to serve.

He sat in the darkened room before the fireless grate and considered the matter. It seemed cold and cheerless as the room itself. And the man felt that he had dropped from the sunlit heights of religious enthusiasm to the sordid gloom of a city on the plain. There was nothing fine or noble in his thoughts. He had to plot and plan like any beggar who is seeking charity.

He saw that it would be useless for him to call at the Carlton, as he would only be turned away from the door. A letter would probably be ineffectual. It would be opened by the secretary and thrown in the waste-paper basket. He remembered that Mr. Lampirthy received a thousand letters a day.

Yet the attack might well be opened by a letter. It would have to be framed in such a way that it would excite curiosity, that it would not suggest an appeal for help in any form. Such a letter might reach its destination. The secretary might be puzzled by its contents and it might reach the eyes of the millionaire.

He rose to his feet and lit a small piece of candle. Then he went to an old sugar box in the corner and took out a large envelope which contained note paper. The paper was expensive and of good quality. He had not grudged the few extra pence which it had cost him. He knew the value of good stationery in letters of importance. Then he found a pen and a small bottle of ink, and, seating himself on the floor, he used his wooden box as a table and commenced to write:

"223 Dartford road, Bermondsey, s.e."

He paused and frowned at the address. It suggested an application for money, and yet he could not very well give any other if he wished to receive a reply.

"Dear sir," he continued, "I have heard that you are the richest man in the world. If you would care to become the possessor of a wealth which it is impossible to estimate would you grant me the favor of an interview?"

(To be continued next Sunday.)