

1.

Do you know what it is to be poor? Not poor with the arrogant poverty — certain people complain of who have five or six thousand a year to live upon; who yet swear they can hardly manage to make both ends meet. I mean really poor — downright, cruelly, hideously poor, with a poverty that is graceless, sordid and miserable. Poverty that compels you to dress in your one suit of clothes till it is worn threadbare. That denies you clean linen on account of the ruinous charges of **washerwomen**¹. That robs you of your own self-respect, and causes you to slink along the streets vaguely abashed, instead of walking erect among your friends in independent ease. This is the sort of poverty I mean. This is the curse; this is the moral cancer that eats into the heart of any human creature and makes him envious and malignant. When he sees the fat idle woman passing by in her luxurious carriage, lolling back lazily, when he observes the brainless and sensual man smoking and dawdling away the hours in the Park, then the blood in him turns to gall, and his suffering spirit rises in fierce rebellion, crying out,

¹ **washerwomen** — прачки

“Why in God’s name, should this injustice be? Why should a worthless lounge have his pockets full of gold by chance and heritage, while I, toiling wearily from morning till midnight, can scarce afford myself a satisfying meal?”

Why indeed? I have often thought about it. Now however I believe I can solve the problem out of my own personal experience. But ... such an experience! Who will believe that anything so strange and terrific ever chanced to a mortal man? No one. Yet it is true; truer than **so-called**¹ truth. Moreover I know that many men are living under the same influence, that they are in the tangles of sin, but too weak to break the net in which they have become voluntarily imprisoned. Will they be taught, I wonder, the lesson I have learned?

But I do not write with any hope of either persuading or enlightening my **fellow-men**². I know their obstinacy too well. I can gauge it by my own. I used to have proud belief in myself. And I am aware that others are in similar case. I merely intend to relate the various incidents of my life.

During a certain bitter winter, when a great wave of intense cold spread throughout all Europe, I, Geoffrey Tempest, was alone in London and starving. Now a starving man seldom gets the sympathy he merits. Few people believe in him. Worthy folks are the most incredulous. Some of them even laugh when told of hungry people. Or they will idly murmur ‘How dreadful!’ and at once turn to the discussion of the latest news for killing time. To be hungry sounds coarse and vulgar, and is not a topic for polite society, which always eats more than sufficient for its needs.

That time I knew the cruel meaning of the word “hunger” too well: the gnawing pain, the sick faintness, the deadly stupor, the insatiable animal craving for

¹ **so-called** — так называемая

² **fellow-men** — собратья

mere food. I felt that I had not deserved to suffer the wretchedness in which **I found myself**¹. I had worked hard. From the time my father died, when I discovered that every penny of the fortune went to the swarming creditors, and that nothing of all our house and estate was left to me except a jewelled miniature of my mother who had lost her own life in giving me birth, — from that time, I had toiled late and early. I had used my University education to the literature. I had sought for employment on almost every journal in London, — refused by many, taken on trial by some, but getting steady pay from none.

Whoever seeks to live by brain and pen alone is, at the beginning of such a career, treated as a sort of social pariah. Nobody wants him, everybody despises him. His efforts are derided, his manuscripts are flung back to him unread. **He is less cared for**² than the condemned murderer in gaol. The murderer is at least fed and clothed. A clergyman visits him, and his gaoler will occasionally play cards with him. But a man with original thoughts and the power of expressing them, appears to be regarded by everyone in authority as much worse than the worst criminal.

I took both kicks and blows in sullen silence and lived on, — not for the love of life, but simply because I scorned the cowardice of self-destruction. I was young enough not to part with hope too easily. For about six months I got some work on a well-known literary journal. Thirty novels a week were sent to me to ‘criticise’. I was glancing hastily at about eight or ten of them, and writing one column of abuse concerning these thus casually selected. The remainder were useless at all. I found that this mode of action was considered ‘smart,’ and I pleased my editor who paid me the munificent sum of fifteen shillings for my weekly labour.

¹ **I found myself** — я оказался

² **he is less cared for** — о нём заботятся меньше

But on one fatal occasion I changed my tactics and warmly praised a work which my own conscience told me was both original and excellent. The author of it was an old enemy of the proprietor of the journal on which I was employed. My eulogistic review, unfortunately for me, appeared, and I was immediately dismissed.

After this I dragged on in a miserable way, doing some work for the dailies, and living on promises that never became realities, till, in the early January of the bitter winter, I found myself literally penniless and face to face with starvation. Moreover, I was owing a month's rent for the poor lodging I occupied in a back street not far from the British Museum.

I had been out all day trudging from one newspaper office to another, seeking for work and finding none. Every available post was filled. I had also tried, unsuccessfully, to dispose of a manuscript of my own, — a work of fiction which I knew had some merit. But all the 'readers' found it exceptionally worthless. These 'readers' were novelists themselves who read other people's productions in their spare moments and passed judgment on them.

The last publisher was a kindly man who looked at my shabby clothes and gaunt face with some commiseration.

"I'm sorry," said he, "very sorry, but my readers are quite unanimous. From what I can learn, it seems to me you have been too earnest. And also, rather sarcastic against society. My dear fellow, **that won't do**¹. Never blame society, — it buys books! Now if you could write a smart love-story, slightly risky, — even a little more than risky for that matter; that is the sort of thing that suits the **present age**²."

"Pardon me," I interposed, "but are you sure you judge the public taste correctly?"

He smiled a bland smile.

¹ **that won't do** — так не пойдёт

² **present age** — наше время

“Of course I am sure,” he replied. “It is my business to know the public taste as thoroughly as I know my own pocket. Understand me, I don’t suggest that you should write a book on an indecent subject, but I assure you high-class fiction doesn’t sell. The critics don’t like it. What goes down with them and with the public is some sensational realism.”

“I think,” I said with a forced smile, “if what you say be true, I must lay down the pen and try another trade. I consider Literature as the highest of all professions, and I would rather not join in with those who voluntarily degrade it.”

He gave me a quick side-glance of mingled incredulity and depreciation.

“Well, well!” he finally observed, “you are a little quixotic. Will you come on to my club and dine with me?”

I refused this invitation promptly. I knew my wretched plight, and pride — false pride if you will — rose up to my rescue. I bade him a hurried good-day, and started back to my lodging, carrying my rejected manuscript with me. Arrived there, my landlady met me, and asked me whether I would ‘kindly settle accounts’ the next day. She spoke civilly enough, and not without a certain compassionate hesitation in her manner. Her evident pity for me galled my spirit as much as the publisher’s offer of a dinner had wounded my pride. I at once promised her the money at the time she herself appointed, though I had not the least idea where or how I should get the required sum.

When I was in my room, I flung my useless manuscript on the floor and myself into a chair, and swore. It refreshed me, and it seemed natural. A fierce formidable oath was to me the sort of physical relief. I was incapable of talking to God in my despair. To speak frankly, I did not believe in any God then. Of course I knew the Christian faith; but that creed became useless to me. Spiritually I was adrift in chaos.

I had worked honestly and patiently; all to no purpose. I knew of rogues who gained plenty of money; and of knaves who were amassing large fortunes. Their prosperity proved that honesty after all was not the best policy. What should I do then?

The night was bitter cold. My hands were numbed, and I tried to warm them at the oil-lamp my landlady was good enough to allow me, in spite of delayed cash-payments. As I did so, I noticed three letters on the table. One in a long blue envelope, one with the Melbourne postmark, and the third a thick square missive coroneted in red and gold at the back. I turned over all three indifferently. Selecting the one from Australia, balanced it in my hand a moment before opening it. I knew from whom it came, and wondered what news it brought me. Some months previously I had written a detailed account of my increasing debts and difficulties to an old college friend. Finding England too narrow for his ambition that friend had gone out to the New world. He was getting on well, so I understood. I had therefore ventured to ask him for the loan of fifty pounds. Here, no doubt, was his reply, and I hesitated before breaking the seal.

“Of course it will be a refusal,” I said, — “However kindly a friend may otherwise be, he soon turns crusty if asked to lend money. He will express many regrets, accuse trade and the general bad times and hope I will soon get better. I know the sort of thing.”

But as I opened the envelope, a bill for fifty pounds fell out upon the table. My heart gave a quick bound of mingled relief and gratitude.

“My old fellow, I wronged you!” I exclaimed, “Your heart is great indeed!”

I eagerly read his letter. It was not very long,

Dear Geoff,

I’m sorry to hear you are down. It shows that fools are still flourishing in London, when a man of your

capability cannot gain his proper place in the world of letters. I believe it's all a question of intrigues, and money is the only thing that will pull the intrigues. Here's the fifty you ask for, don't hurry about paying it back. I am sending you a friend, — a real friend! He brings you a letter of introduction from me, and between ourselves, old man, you cannot do better than put yourself and your literary affairs entirely in his hands. He knows everybody, he is a great philanthropist and seems particularly fond of the society of the clergy. He has explained to me quite frankly, that he is so enormously wealthy that he does not know what to do with his money. He is always glad to know of some places where his money and influence (he is very influential) may be useful to others. He has helped me out of a very serious hobble, and I owe him a big debt of gratitude. I've told him all about you, — what a smart fellow you are, and he has promised to give you a lift up. He can do anything he likes. Use him, and write and let me know how you get on. Don't bother about the fifty.

Ever yours

Boffles.

I laughed as I read the absurd signature. 'Boffles' was the nickname given to my friend by several of our college companions, and neither he nor I knew how it first arose. But no one except ever addressed him by his proper name, which was John Carrington. He was simply 'Boffles,' and Boffles he remained even now for all those who had been his intimates. I wondered as to what manner of man the 'philanthropist' might be who had more money than he knew what to do with. Anyway, now I can pay my landlady as I promised. Moreover I can order some supper, and have a fire lit to cheer my chilly room.

I opened the long blue envelope, and unfolded the paper within, stared at it amazedly. What was it all about? The written characters danced before my eyes.

Puzzled and bewildered, I found myself reading the thing over and over again without any clear comprehension of it. No — no! — impossible! If it is a joke, it is a very elaborate and remarkable one!

2.

With an effort, I read every word of the document deliberately, and the stupefaction of my wonder increased. Was I going mad, or sickening for a fever? Can this startling, this stupendous information be really true? If it is true, I am king instead of beggar! The letter, the amazing letter, bore the printed name of a well-known firm of London solicitors. It stated in precise terms that a distant relative of my father's, of whom I had scarcely heard, had died suddenly in South America, leaving me his sole heir.

"The real and personal estate¹ now amounting to something over five millions of pounds sterling, we should esteem it a favour if you could make it convenient to call upon us any day this week in order that we may go through the necessary formalities together. The larger bulk of the cash is lodged in the Bank of England, and a considerable amount is placed in French government securities.

Trusting you will call on us without delay, we are, Sir, yours obediently...."

Five millions! I, the starving literary hack, the friendless, hopeless, almost reckless haunter of low newspaper dens, I, the possessor of "over five millions of pounds sterling"! The fact seemed to me a wild delusion, born of the dizzy vagueness which lack of food engendered in my brain. I stared round the room. The mean miserable furniture, the fireless grate, the dirty lamp, the low truckle bedstead, — and then, then the overwhelming contrast between the poverty that environed me and the

¹ **the real and personal estate** — движимое и недвижимое имущество

news I had just received, struck me as the wildest, most ridiculous incongruity I had ever heard of or imagined.

“Was there ever such a caprice of mad Fortune!” I cried aloud. “Who would have imagined it! Good God!”

And I laughed loudly again; laughed just as I had previously sworn, simply by way of relief to my feelings. Some one laughed in answer. A laugh that seemed to echo mine. I checked myself abruptly, somewhat startled, and listened. Rain poured outside, and the wind shrieked like a petulant shrew. The violinist next door was practising a brilliant roulade up and down his instrument. Yet I could have sworn I heard a man’s laughter close behind me where I stood.

“It must have been my fancy;” I murmured, turning the flame of the lamp up higher in order to obtain more light in the room. “I am nervous I suppose, no wonder! Poor Boffles! Good old fellow!” I continued, remembering my friend’s draft for fifty pounds. “What a surprise for you! You will have your loan back as promptly as you sent it, with an extra fifty added for your generosity. And as for the rich friend you are sending to help me over my difficulties, well, he may be a very excellent old gentleman, but he will find himself quite useless this time. I want neither assistance nor advice nor patronage. I can buy them all! Titles, honours, possessions, — they are all purchaseable, — love, friendship, position, — they are all for sale in this admirably commercial age! The wealthy ‘philanthropist’ will find it difficult **to match me in power**¹! He will scarcely have more than five millions to waste, I think! And now for supper, I shall have to live on credit till I get some cash. And there is no reason why I should not leave this wretched hole at once, and go to one of the best hotels!”

I was about to leave the room on the swift impulse of excitement and joy, when a fresh and violent gust of

¹ **to match me in power** — состязаться со мной в могуществе

wind cast some soot on my rejected manuscript. It lay forgotten on the floor, as I had despairingly thrown it. I hastily picked it up and shook it. Now I could publish it myself, and not only publish it but advertise it, and not only advertise it, but 'push' it, in all the crafty and cautious ways! I smiled as I thought of the vengeance I would take on all those who had scorned and slighted me and my labour. Now they will fawn and whine at my feet like curs! Every stiff and stubborn neck will bend before me. Brains and money together can move the world!

Full of ambitious thought, I caught wild sounds from the violin, and all at once I remembered I had not yet opened the third letter addressed to me, the one coroneted in scarlet and gold, which had remained where it was on the table almost unnoticed till now. I took it up and turned it over with an odd sense of reluctance in my fingers, I read the following lines,

Dear Sir.

I am the bearer of a letter of introduction to you from your former college companion Mr. John Carrington, now of Melbourne, who has been good enough to thus give me the means of making the acquaintance of one, who, I understand, is more than exceptionally endowed with the gift of literary genius. I shall call upon you this evening between eight and nine o'clock, trusting to find you at home and disengaged. I enclose my card, and present address, and beg to remain,

Very faithfully yours

Lucio Rimanez.

The card mentioned dropped on the table as I finished reading the note. It bore a small, exquisitely engraved coronet and the words "Prince Lucio Rimanez" while, scribbled lightly in pencil underneath was the address 'Grand Hotel.'

I read the brief letter through again, it was simple enough, expressed with clearness and civility. There was nothing remarkable about it, nothing whatever; yet it seemed to me surcharged with meaning. Why, I could not imagine. How the wind roared! And how that violin next door wailed! My brain swam and my heart ached heavily. I grew irritable and nervous. An impulse of shame possessed me, shame that this foreign prince, with limitless wealth, should be coming to visit me, — me, now a millionaire, — in my present wretched lodging. If I had had a sixpence about me, (which I had not) I should have sent a telegram to my approaching visitor.

“But in any case,” I said aloud, addressing myself to the empty room, “I will not meet him tonight. I’ll go out and leave no message. If he comes he will think I have not yet had his letter. I can make an appointment to see him when I am better lodged, and better dressed.”

I groped about the room for my hat and coat, and I was still engaged in a fruitless and annoying search, when I caught a sound of galloping horses’ hoofs coming to a stop in the street below. I paused and listened. There was a slight commotion in the basement, I heard landlady’s voice and then a deep masculine voice. After that steps, firm and even, ascended the stairs to my landing.

“The devil is in it!” I muttered vexedly. “Here comes the very man I meant to avoid!”

3.

The door opened. I could just perceive a tall shadowy figure standing on the threshold. I heard my landlady’s introductory words “A gentleman to see you sir,” words that were quickly interrupted by a murmur of dismay at finding the room in total darkness.

“Well to be sure! The lamp must have gone out!” she exclaimed, then addressing the personage she had ushered thus far, she added, “I’m afraid Mr Tempest