

HOW WE LIVE IN LONDON ON A POUND A WEEK.

CHAPTER I.

"What is life, father?"
"A battle, my child."

A. A. Proctor.



ONE of the hardest experiences of a woman's life comes to her when, standing by the grave of her father or husband, she realises that henceforth her earthly stay is gone, and she must battle with the cold world alone—save for Him

who careth for the tiny sparrows, and never forsakes His sorrowing children. Even that very independent, self-sufficing person, the new woman, would feel how forlorn and dark the future path appeared without the support of the strong, loving arm and wise affection which had hitherto protected her from the rough blasts of life. I do not think we ever comprehend the truth of Adelaide Proctor's sadly beautiful words until a grief like this falls upon us. I know that I did not. Sorrow, trial, care, of the ordinary domestic type were familiar enough, but it was not until the death of as tender and noble a father as ever shielded his only child from the sterner aspects of earthly existence that I learned the real meaning of the phrase, used so glibly by mortals in their prosperous days, whispered in accents of heart-bitterness when the spirit sinks in some *de profundis* of agony. The battle of life! Ay, it is a struggle, but for our purification, our uplifting. God so wills it, and in His wisdom educates His scholars in this rough school for the wonderful Beyond of glory supernal, when we shall be able to trace out the working of His providence on earth, and comprehend why our lives here are so full of striving and apparent loss.

My father's death compelled me to leave the sheltered home-life, and earn daily bread for my mother and myself. It was no easy task to gain a foothold. I had unfortunately no technical skill in any branch of women's work to offer in the market of labour. My poor father, perhaps mistakenly, held tenaciously to the opinions prevalent in his early days regarding girls being "keepers at home," and was consistently opposed to my learning a profession.

"You do not want to leave home, May. Are you so discontented with it?" he would say. "It was different in my mother's time. Young women did not gad about so much by themselves, nor ape men in their dress and talk, and occupations; yet they made good, sensible wives and mothers. Be a good child, and obey your mother, May."

Thus ended every attempt to impress my father with the advance of woman, and the necessity of making a girl self-reliant in business matters. He belonged to the old school, and in that school I was of course trained, while other girls of my acquaintance had the benefit of the higher education for women then first making itself popular, and afterwards were trained for various positions in life, wherein they successfully maintained themselves in delightful independence. I would here entreat every girl who may read this true sketch to make herself mistress of some art, to which she can turn for a means of livelihood should fortune prove adverse and throw her upon her own resources. Even with skilled labour to offer—whether of hand or brain—the competition is so keen that there

is ever a difficulty of obtaining an appointment. But without definite knowledge of any special calling, and at best but a slender acquaintance with business requirements, how wild is the hope of securing any post, even the most meagrely paid! I remember well seeing an advertisement for a lady-clerk, which stated the salary at ten shillings weekly. For this magnificent sum they—the firm—required book-keeping, shorthand, and, preferably, a knowledge of type-writing from their prospective *employé*!

My experiences during that winter and spring, following my father's death, would certainly be an amusing, if at times painful chapter. Among them I recall a visit to one of our most brilliant and noted journalistic lions, with whom I had a slight acquaintance. He received me with frank *bonhomie*, heard my modest request patiently, then, running his fingers through his hair, he exclaimed—"Why on earth do all the women come to me for employment? My dear young lady, I have eight women now on my staff, and I don't see how I can possibly make you the ninth. Stay!" with a kindly glance at my black dress. "Have you had any business experience?"

Oh, that fatal question. I was compelled to answer it in the negative, and the good-natured journalist regretfully declared his inability to help me in any way.

Hard as the trial was then, I do not now regret those months of weary searching for work. I learnt to sympathise with the "out of work" denizens of our great metropolis, and I never gaze upon the faces I pass in city streets, that bear the unmistakable hunger for employment, without a passionate pity swelling in my heart. I have been to their school myself, and personal acquaintance with a thing is the most effective education. How often have I turned away with quivering lips, and a very disagreeable choking in my throat after a disappointing refusal.

In those dark days of my life I learned to love the cathedral as I had never done in happier times. The solemn hush of that vast sanctuary quieted my rebellious murmurings; while our church's glorious comforting liturgy breathed its holy message of consolation and trust in God, lifting my thoughts beyond this transient changeable world, to that which is eternal and all-satisfying. How many a soul beside my own has had like reason to bless the services in St. Paul's, wherein gather rich and poor, a successful merchant in broadcloth brushing sleeves with a toil-worn mechanic. The gentlewoman kneeling beside her poor sister, who mayhap sweeps out a city office, all—all needing encouragement to strive hopefully, bravely in the battle of life.

CHAPTER II.

It is a long lane that never turns. After a goodly number of disappointments, I awoke one morning in early summer to find myself not, like Byron, famous, but with a slight variation of Goldsmith's text, "passing rich on fifty-two pounds a year." An appointment was offered me at that salary and I thankfully closed with it. I had hoped for a country life for a little while, but instead of the peaceful meadows and sweet influences of Nature to refresh my tired eyes, I was perforce obliged to enter that closely inhabited monotonous district known as the East End of London, and settle down to work of a most taxing character. I at first hesitated to take my mother there, but my modest stipend could not support two homes, so one hot summer morning I set forth on a house-hunting expedition—a perfect novelty to me, be it

remarked. Agent after agent I visited, in vain. Nowhere could I obtain a dwelling. The neighbourhood is a populous one, the house accommodation limited. Almost in despair I walked to the extreme end of the parish to the address of the last agent. The street was a fairly wide one, the houses tidy and respectable in appearance, while at the end of the roadway wide green fields lay stretched in the sunshine, as far as the eye could see, and a pleasant breeze from the river, near, though not visible, cooled my hot face.

"Here at last," said I to myself, "I can, I should think, find a habitation." Alas! The agent and his family had that very morning departed for their summer holiday, and their house was shut. Thanking the civil neighbour who gave me the information, I was disconsolately turning away when she said with a cheery little nod, "Don't you be disappointed, miss. The Lord will direct you."

Her words, oddly as they sounded, had the ring of sincerity. I have often recalled them, for almost immediately afterwards I found, not a dozen yards away, a house where the, to me, joyful notice appeared, "Apartments to Let." The clean look of the place promised well, and I followed the landlady upstairs with an inward conviction that my quest was ended. The flat contained a large bow-windowed sitting-room, which looked out upon the road with the pleasant green fields at each end, and as we afterwards discovered, the long lines of electric lamps which light the Docks to enliven the view at night. A commodious, well-fitted kitchen, smaller bedroom and a bath-room completed the premises I was glad to engage at the rental of seven shillings per week, a sum which I admit bears a somewhat large proportion to my income; but considering all things, I do not think it too extravagant—for London. The following fortnight saw us duly installed in our new home prepared to make the best of it. My mother brought her sound common-sense into action, and we decided that we would not be ashamed to perform our own domestic duties, excepting only the help a strong woman might give us at special seasons of extra cleaning. I may here observe that if people chose to conform to their circumstances and use the health and ability God has given to them without so much false pride about "not doing menial work," there are many unhappy persons who would lose their anxieties at once. Life in London is not a bad or unwholesome one provided you have a contented spirit and possess enough moral strength to abandon the "genteel" fringes of aristocratic quarters where living is so expensive, for some respectable but homely district where the income will double its spending value, and a cosy little home can be made which no one need be sorry to visit.

I do not hold a brief for town-life *versus* country-life, for each has its advantages and drawbacks. But this I do say, that a sensible practical girl or woman will make herself satisfied wherever her lot may be cast; and although the country has its own charm, I believe the majority of city-bred people are more fitted for a town-life. There is work to be done in these noisy populous streets, and those who dislike the solitude of a rural existence can there find paths of usefulness, where all their education and refinement of breeding can be put to noble account. I remember a friend of our own, a Welshman full of the passionate love his race bear for Nature, who when appointed to a town curacy was asked if he did not regret very much the change from his country parish to a working centre of London. His reply was given with ready ardour—

"I love and miss the country a little. But you know men are of more interest than trees."

Truly so. How many a hard-worked clergyman in city parishes would be thankful for the presence of some high-bred gentlewomen to reside among his people and influence them towards higher aims of life. Ladies of slender means would thus confer real and great assistance in this way without any drain upon their incomes, which as I said above, can be more thriftily economised in working-class localities than in fashionable ones, if only the attempt to vie with wealthy friends be abandoned, the habits of life be simple, and above all, that ridiculous notion about "domestic" work being derogatory to one's dignity be wholly surrendered. A gentlewoman can never lose her dignity by the performance of manual work, whether in her kitchen peeling potatoes—yes, I know they make our white fingers very brown and rough, but a little lemon juice and olive oil will easily repair the damage, and God gave us hands to *use*—or in the pretty sitting-room her taste has decorated so daintily, she is her own sweet gracious self.

The word decorated has acted upon my thoughts somewhat like the brake upon a railway engine, and bids me remember that I am, without apologising for my short lecture, not keeping strictly to the point at issue, to which I return at once. The first thing which we looked rather askance upon in "our flat" was the close American stove, and its next-door neighbour the "sink," a sorry little specimen of iron from which the paint was nearly worn off. A pot of enamel remedied that, but the sink itself remained a very in-artistic object.

"If only that could be hidden somehow, the room would not look very unlike a nice breakfast-room," said my mother. She has a genius for overcoming difficulties, and after a little consideration arranged for a curtain drawn on two rods of thick wire to be fastened across the recess, completely hiding the necessary but objectionable sink. At the other end of the room stands a long dresser with shelves to the ceiling and cupboards below; but as the whole erection, except the mahogany top, is painted in two pretty art shades of green, we arranged it to look as much like an open cabinet as possible. And really it looks very pretty with the rich old-fashioned china displayed upon the shelves.

We had a tiresome time getting things in order, but when all that could be done then was completed my mother solemnly sat down, and murmured—

"Now, May, we must consider the best way to lay out our luxurious income. We shall not be able to afford meat every day, with the rent we have to pay and other things."

"Oh yes. Make yourself content, *mater*. I have arranged it all," and I produced, with a feeling of importance, a slip of paper upon which I had jotted down our items of expenditure.

"When the rent is paid we have exactly thirteen shillings left of that wee bright sovereign," I said, laying the coin on the table.

Poor mother. She looked wistfully at it and sighed. I went on quickly, assuming a mock-serious tone.

"Now all we can allow for groceries is the sum of four shillings. Our 'cow' will require ten pence, our greengrocer and fruiterer will supply our table with his commodities for the modest amount of one shilling and sixpence, and I have, as you know, effected a small life insurance, the premium on which is sixpence weekly."

"But what about coal?" interposed my mother.

"That is indispensable, of course. I should prefer to have it in by the ton, but as our

cellarage is limited to that spacious cupboard under the obnoxious sink, we must be content with a hundredweight at a time, the present price for which is a shilling." And I remark here that, excepting those trying winter weeks when coals became so dear, we have rarely exceeded that sum. Our stove is a gem of its kind, and we do not often require more than one fire at a time. Perhaps in winter we average one hundredweight and a half per week, because we are chilly mortals, and could more easily do without food than fire.

The next item on my housekeeping list was meat. We had been accustomed to high prices, and could scarcely believe in the quality of beef for which our obliging little butcher asked only sevenpence per pound. But I never have eaten much finer meat than the nice tiny joints he sells us at that price. Herein we prove the marketing facilities of a working neighbourhood, much to our comfort and convenience. For the sum of two and eightpence we can obtain meat for six days out of the seven, and on that other day we get a little fish for the sake of change in our simple menu. Occasionally we indulge in vegetarian dinners, as vegetables are good, cheap, and easily obtained. A favourite dish of this kind is a savoury pie, the recipe for which was discovered on a packet of mixed herbs. Three pounds of potatoes costing three halfpence or rather less, one pound of Spanish onions one penny, two tablespoonfuls of tapioca, costing a halfpenny, one teaspoonful of sweet herbs, two ounces of butter, with a little pepper and salt, and a small quantity of water. Bake in a moderate oven. This recipe is really very nice and tasty, and is so very inexpensive.

I am not writing a cookery lecture. Were I doing so I could give many equally good, even better dishes, whose nourishing qualities are decidedly greater than the leathern steak, or spilt chop, which you obtain in some kitchens. Many a poor gentlewoman, if she would use her dainty fingers to prepare such simple but nourishing food, would enjoy far better health than she at present does. I am aware that women who earn their living professionally cannot devote much time to domestic duties, but I am specially thinking of ladies whose small private means release them from the necessity of working for their livelihood, but need very economical management to make ends meet. To such as these domestic matters should be very fascinating. Housekeeping work is certainly health-giving. The exercise, the interest acts so beneficially upon us physically that the mind also benefits greatly. Our views of life are clearer, more cheerful; we have the relief of knowing that our income is more than sufficient to cover our expenses.

CHAPTER III

"Oh, Thou, who made the country
Guard the town."

IN my list of contingent expenditure I alluded to one item which is in my opinion very important. While men are recommended to insure their lives, and wisely, people rarely think how equally essential it is for women to do so. For the sake of a few pence weekly, a sufficient sum of money is provided whereby funeral expenses can be covered, and surviving friends be spared any inconvenience. Such a thoughtful, and to an independent mind necessary provision for the inevitable future, is, I believe, incumbent upon women as much as men, particularly now, in our present age with so large a number of women workers, who have to endure the great strain of business life, which certainly tends to shorten their earthly existence. When our insurance premium—paid

quarterly, but the money is put aside weekly—is settled, there remains, after all housekeeping dues are accounted for, the sum of half-a-crown. This sum is the most difficult item of all, for it has a very bad habit of melting away in a most unaccountable manner. Nearly sixpence of it goes in periodical literature, for my great extravagance lies in that direction. I can cheerfully dine on bread and cheese, sup on potatoes, wear much-mended gloves and a bonnet two years old with perfect equanimity, but deprive me of books and current journals, and I am disconsolate indeed. With the remaining two shillings at our disposal much has to be done, as it represents the only available margin for incidental expenses, dress, doctor, holidays, etc. Since we came here our health has been very good, despite the unpleasant atmosphere charged with fumes from the chemical and other factories. Hence we have most happily had no medical expenses. Our pleasures are simple enough, but not without charm. Within little less than an hour's walk are the beautiful Kentish heights, and lovely woods containing most romantic old ruins of some palace or abbey, I forget which. No one could desire a prettier spot for a picnic. Then if anyone has a taste for curious "character" scenes, a stroll through the Docks will afford material for amusement, not to say thought. For there may be met representatives of every race, well-nigh every nation. The smooth faces of the Chinese cooks, the swarthy beetle-browed Lascars, thick-lipped jet black negroes, yellow Malays, fiery South Americans, pass you in a bewildering stream chattering like monkeys, the variety of dialects a modern Babel. And the garments worn are a study. All shades and shapes, from the dirty calico tunic stained with oil and soot of a Sidi boy to the gay, blue-sashed, pale red robe of some well-to-do Indian, whose grave dignity would lead you to suppose him a prince of his race, but is in reality merely steward to the Lascar firemen.

One of the quaintest sights I ever saw was the arrival of a boat-load of these gentry at the quay-side. Such a motley group—all ages, all sizes, all nationalities, it seemed, came tumbling out, dragging the most miscellaneous assortment of belongings imaginable with them as they landed. How they laughed, chattered, grimaced, shouting the most desperate things, and making as much ado over their work as though they had six boats instead of one to unload, while ever and again a singularly-soft wailing cry penetrated the hubbub. I caught the word "Allah," and my companion, who understood them, said that was their way of invoking God's help in their undertaking. As I stood and watched the noisy throng, the contrast between these children of the East and the calm, amused Western faces struck me. Above, looking over the bulwarks of a mighty Peninsular and Oriental steamer, lounged some officers laughing at the antics going on below. What a difference between these masterful, purposeful Anglo-Saxons and the races of the Eastern world! Looking, I felt I could understand why the march of civilisation has travelled from east to west, and the imperial sceptre of dominion passed to the Occident.

There is no lack of interest in a town life, even in what has been called the gloomy East End. Monotonous and mean, sordid, unlovely if you will, but not uninteresting by any means. Every day you meet fresh varieties of human character, every day some good deed of most heroic unselfishness. Your sympathies are stirred, your deeper thoughts quickened, your interest in what are called social problems strengthened. To retire to the country, and there lead a secluded life is very peaceful, and very selfish if it is a permanent thing, particularly for educated, healthy young women. I am not sure that many would care for such an existence, tranquil though it

may be. We are born into the world not to find the easiest way of slipping through it, but to live for others, to help others to have better times. After all, the actual question simplifies into a very plain concrete fact, "Where does my duty lie? Can I best serve God and humanity in the country? Then there is my place. But if the town, with its teeming population and busy life appeals to me with all the force of a Divine command, then let me dwell in the midst of my people, to help, and guide, and bless them."

I could not now live in the country, whatever I might choose when the frosty touch of life's winter lays its snow on my head. I love the town, for its needs, its woes, its sin and suffering cry out to me. Oh, the good women are doing, and can do in the city's populous streets! Truly many are ministering angels in the sad homes of want and disease, and we want more.

"You will have no society there," remarked a friend to me when I decided to live "down by the river."

"No, I suppose not. But we are within

half an hour of Central London, and I can find some friends," I replied.

He was so far right. I admit that we are destitute of what is called "Society" with a big S. The clergy, the local doctors and one or two church-workers comprise our select little coterie. But we have some delightful hours together, and enjoy our informal social gatherings very much. It is friendship worthy of the name; and although, seeing we are all young people, circumstances of worldly fortune may improve with years, I think we shall then look back with a sigh to those days when all were so merry and genuinely sympathetic. Happiness is so coy a nymph that she is found when not pursued. Make up your mind with a steadfast purpose to be helpful and you are sure to be happy. A pound a week is not a large amount wherewith to make ends meet; but our life testifies that it can be made enough, and go farther if properly expended than twice the sum thoughtlessly or ignorantly spent, while I know we enjoy our lives and do not find them narrow or dull. The work brings one into

contact with two very different classes. One the "masses" with their needs and, scarcely articulate as yet, aspirations; the other, the noble men and women who are loyally endeavouring to raise and educate these aspirings to proper ideals, uplifting the labouring classes to a richer life. This society is the best earth can give, whether found in town or country.

As I write these closing sentences my eyes rove over to the distant line of the Docks, and gleaming their soft clear light in ordered ranks I see the electric lamps, guarding like watchful sentinels the ships behind. It is night, and all is still beneath the starry sky; but in our ears comes a low muffled sound like the roll of surf on a western beach. It is the voice of London, or the beating of its heart if you like better the simile. And as I listen, looking at the calm above and hearing the tokens of vague unrest below, my heart sends up a fervent petition to the throne of—

"Him who keeps
The vast and helpless city while it sleeps."

LLOYD LESTER.

MUNGO—A STUDY.

By Mrs. BRIGHTWEN.



MUNGO the ichneumon, whose early life was chronicled in "More about Wild Nature," has now been a household pet for about six years, and must be nearly eight years old. I do not know how long these animals generally

live, but as yet Mungo shows no signs of age or infirmity. He is as full of fun, and as inquisitive as ever, but not so bent upon mischief as in his youthful days. He now has the range of house and garden, and goes wherever he likes without even a collar to remind him of captivity. The chief trouble is in connection with my visitors, those at least who have a strong objection to "wild animals" about the house. Nothing can possibly be less "wild" than Mungo, for he is just like a tame cat. He does not dream of biting or scratching, and is never so happy as when curled up in the lap of some indulgent friend, yet as he unfortunately looks like a ferret, many people find it very hard to believe that he can be perfectly harmless.

Mungo delights to spend his mornings basking in the sun, on the window-sill of my bed-room, where he is sufficiently elevated to watch all that goes on in the garden. He is scarcely ever really asleep; as Mr. Rudyard Kipling says so truly, in the delightful account he gives of an Indian mongoose in his *Jungle Book*, "He is eaten up from nose to tail with curiosity," and whilst seeming to slumber, the active little cinnamon-coloured nose is ever on the work sniffing out the varied movements of the household.

As summer comes on we naturally let the fires die out, and Mungo strongly disapproves of this custom, for he dearly loves to bask on a little wool mat before a hot fire; now, however, he adopts another plan; when he finds the fire is out he quietly climbs over the wire guard, goes under the grate and there lies down amongst the warm ashes; he has even done this whilst there remained some fire in the grate, and I much fear he may make an *auto-da-fé* of himself some day by setting his long hair alight, which would be a terrible fate indeed for our cherished pet.

Mungo's love of warmth leads to another undesirable habit. He will steal into the bedrooms and hide himself under the *duvets*, and

low be it spoken, he has been found cosily rolled up in a night-dress. It may naturally be asked, "Why is he not kept in a suitable wired-in place where he can do no harm?" Simply because he makes himself perfectly miserable in confinement. He tears at the wirework till his paws are bleeding, and foams at the mouth with misery and rage. No one could keep an amiable little animal in such purgatory; it would be kinder to end its life at once, and such a fate cannot be even thought of. Mungo is a diplomatist; liberty he has schemed to obtain, and after years of astute planning, and almost reasoning, he has reached his end and we must acknowledge ourselves beaten, for to all intents and purposes he is now master of the situation and may do pretty much what he pleases.

There is however still a crumpled rose-leaf in his lot; the softest bed and the sunniest nook to bask in will not satisfy Mungo without human society, and as we cannot give up all other occupations in order to sit with him, he is often to be seen wandering about like an unquiet spirit, until he finds some friendly lap where he can curl himself up and enjoy all those conditions of warmth, ease, and society which form his idea of perfect bliss. I am sure Mungo is a staunch Conservative as to his political views; he hates changes of any kind, since they interfere with his personal comfort and methodical habits. He likes to have a morning sleep on a sunny spot, and then his profound interest in a certain rhododendron bed where rabbit-holes and mole tracks are to be found, leads him to steal across the lawn and disappear amongst the bushes. I rather fancy he has grand times there, for if I attempt to coax him to come with me, his pert little nose will appear amidst the leaves, and with a frisk and a leap of absolute disobedience and fun he will return to his playground, and remain there till it pleases him to come indoors again. His next desire is to enjoy a quiet afternoon under a warm *duvet*, and as he behaves with absolute propriety and only covets warmth and quietness, I am indulgent enough to allow him the luxury of being in my room until evening, when he is fed, wrapped up in a wool mat and piece of baize, and placed safely in his cage for the night. It has been an interest

to me to make a study of the character of my mongoose, for a wild creature rendered perfectly tame by unvarying kind treatment gives one an excellent opportunity of observing the real nature of the animal. I fear I must own that Mungo is absolutely selfish, his one idea is to enjoy perfect liberty and have his own way in everything.

After six years' petting he knows me well as his friend and purveyor, but he has not an atom of affection; he has apparently no mode of manifesting regard; the expression of his face never alters, he does not try to lick my hand or make any greeting sound. He likes to jump into my lap simply because it is a comfortable place, and as he is very timid at any unwonted sound, he will run to me for protection, but I am afraid he views me as a means of attaining comfort, food and warmth, and nothing more. All this does not prevent my liking the curious little animal, but one cannot but be struck by the immense difference between its nature and that of the faithful dog, whose devotion to his master will lead him to refuse his food, to take long toilsome journeys, to wait patiently for weary hours in cold wind and biting frost when bidden to guard his owner's flock, aye, and even to yield up his life if necessary to do his master service. All this shows, what I have often remarked before, that to those who are observant of the fact, there is as much difference between the characters of various animals, and even between those of individuals of the same species as may be found in human beings. Possibly Mungo is a selfish specimen of his race; there may exist brilliant exceptions abounding in affection and other noble qualities. I can only describe him as he is, and judging by his small cranium and its peculiar flattened formation, I should imagine he is formed to be, not a pattern of all the virtues, but a creature of one idea, and that, snake-killing. To be proficient in that art all the characteristics I have noted in this animal are specially needed, such as lynx-like watchfulness, undaunted courage, persistent curiosity and determination to care for himself under all circumstances.

We must therefore wink at his failure in moral goodness, and admire the way in which he carries out the purpose for which he was made. He worthily adorns his own special niche in creation.