CHAPTER III.

SOCIAL PROBLEMS.

When I awoke the room was still dark; I examined the head of the bed to see if there was any microphone; there evidently was, for I found the same construction I had noticed at the head of my bed, at the second outpost. I thought I would test it, so I said softly,—

"Where are you, Mary?" The answer came distinctly,—

"I am here, Frank, do you want me?"

"I should like to see you, if you are not too busy."

"I will come," and in a minute there was a knock at my door.

"Come in," I called, and Mary entered. She touched a button at the head of the bed, and the room was lit up by electricity.

"Are you better?" she asked.

"Yes, very much, and quite hungry."

"That is right," she said, kindly, and took my wrist in her beautiful hand to feel my pulse. She smiled, and continued, "I shall soon make you well; we have been talking about you, and making all manner of surmises as to the land you have lived in. It certainly must be uncivilized, but you will tell me all about it by-and-by."

The land I had left uncivilized? The British Constitution uncivilized, even in the eyes of the goddess of the land of the North Pole? I smiled.

"The land I have left is the most civilized on the face of the earth, and is the centre whence comes nearly all civilization."

"And yet you use a gunpowder rifle, and are not married?" she said, evidently certain that civilization could not exist under these circumstances.

"Well, such a rifle is surely the best, and no civilization could have all its men of twenty-seven married."

She looked at me in wonder for a moment, and then replied,—

"Such a rifle is not to be compared to the compressed gas gun, as you will admit when you see it; and no civilization can have even nearly reached its best, in which all the perfect men of twenty-seven are not married." Was she quizzing me?
"Thank you for the compliment; I am afraid I am far from being a perfect man."

"In Zara every man who has a healthy mind, and a healthy body, is called perfect; and all such men marry between the ages of twenty-one and twenty-five. Neither man nor woman are complete alone, but their power for good and happiness is mutually increased by their union."

"But what of the hundreds of men who are too poor marry?" I asked.

"No man can be too poor to marry, in a properly conducted community, when he reaches a fit age; of course those unfortunate who will not work, do not count, for they are sent to Pentona."

"Where is Pentona, and why are they sent there?"

"Pentona is a city on the River Voa, but nearer its source than Zara; and it is there that the Government have their places of detention and punishment; and most of their large workshops and mines. The foolish people are sent there, and are made to work for the Government till they have made sufficient to pay their fines, and keep them for a month after they are liberated."

"That seems to me an arrangement that would interfere with free labour very much."

"It is for the benefit of free labour; which in consequence has its hours of work reduced very much. You have, however, strayed from the point at issue, which was that your country could not be civilized because you used obsolete firearms, and your citizens could not marry in due course. Ion will convince you about the firearms, and the other point we will discuss after dinner, if you are well enough?"

She spoke so kindly, that my admiration began to change to love.

"I shall be well enough if you will keep near me, and not blame me for the faults of my native land."

"I shall never blame you for any faults but your own," she replied, "and perhaps I shall be blind to those."

Her voice softened, and for a moment her eyes which looked into mine were darkened with the shadow of thought. When for the first time, earlier in the day, I saw this woman, and realized the perfection of her strength and beauty, I thought she had everything but a feminine heart; her splendid strength, and evident intellect, seemed to preclude that. I was wrong, she was more perfect than I thought any being of earth, or heaven, could be. I think my eyes must have betrayed my thoughts to her.

"I will go down and see about dinner," she said, "but first I will connect the microphone, so that you can call me if you want me."

This she did, and then she left me. Presently there was a knock at my door, and Ion entered.
“Mary said you might sit up for tea if you wished to, so I have come to get you up, if you do.”

“You are very kind, Ion, every one is so good, I can hardly realize that I am still on earth.”

He laughed. “It is only the effects of civilization, Frank, nothing more.”

He went up to a mirror that hung slightly out from the wall in a peculiar framework, took it down, unfolded it, and revealed an adjustable invalid chair, with a mirror back. The mirror had hid a painting on the wall of an expanse of snow, in the midst of which stood a man shading his eyes with his hand, and looking anxiously into the distance; under the picture was written one word, “Lost.” Ion threw a big rug of Arctic hare skin over the chair, and then established me comfortably in it. He next proceeded to make my bed, which he did in a most proficient manner.

“How nice and warm the room is, Ion, how is it managed?”

“Why, from the stove, of course.”

“But there isn’t any fire in the stove,” I said, in amazement.

“Come and see for yourself,” he said, wheeling my chair over to the stove, on which the cover had descended; this I found was very hot.

“In the top of this dome is a fan,” he explained, “operated by a spring governed by clockwork, and wound up thus.” He took a square-shaped key with a wheel attached from a drawer, inserted the key in a hole in the top of the stove, and turned the wheel till it came to a stop. He then replaced the key.

“This fan will now go for ten hours,” he continued, “and when it runs down the dome will drop, and smother the fire in the stove, meanwhile it forces the smoke, and hot air, from the stove into these pipes, and so it traverses the room, and leaves by the upright pipe; and in any room higher up, can be turned on to warm it, or turned off and allowed to escape into a smoke consumer in the roof, and thence be discharged heavenwards.”

Mary knocked, and entered with a tray. Ion took down a picture of a penguin asleep, with a fox stealing up behind it, under which was written “Caught Napping,” unfolded the bars by which it was hung up, and lo! the back of the picture opened out into an excellent table, on which Mary put her tray. Ion handed her a chair, and then left us.

“Ion is good to think of making the bed for us, but I would rather have done it myself,” she said, the while producing from her tray a covered silver bowl, two soup plates and spoons, and some toast; she uncovered the bowl, which contained soup, and began to help it. The odour that arose was delicious, but she was so slow.

“I will do the helping, Frank, as you are an invalid.” It was just as well she did, for had she handed me the soup bowl I should have drunk it all up. Very rude was I? Not at all.
About thirty-two hours before I was living on seal flesh, had almost forgotten what good food was, and despaired of ever getting any again. My appetite had just begun to assert itself; I was famished, ravenous, craving for food. I restrained myself, and took my soup decently. From the moment the smell of the soup had reached my nostrils, I had been impervious to aught else, but now, though I was hungrier than ever, I looked up. Mary was looking at me, her eyes full of tears.

"Frank," she said, in a voice of sympathy that went to my heart, "how you must have suffered, starving in the snow; and to think that they nearly passed you by, and left you to perish."

Left me to perish. Yes, had it not been for the sleigh I should ere this have been lying dead beside poor Jim.

"What have they done with Jim, Mary? I have not thought of him as I should," I asked in contrition.

"He will be buried to-morrow. Frank, it is our duty to be true to the living, but it is not wise to grieve unduly for one whom the Almighty has taken to a better world."

She was so wise and good, this queenly woman. My appetite had become reasonable, and I felt weak. Mary now took from her tray some fish, and vegetables; after which we had some sweets, and fruit, all of which she served from the one seemingly inexhaustible source, so that we had a sumptuous feast.

"You will soon be well now," she said; "you have only to fear too fully satisfying your appetite. I shall give you another meal before you sleep."

She put everything back on the tray; I was still hungry, but the ravenous feeling had left me.

"Some of the men at Zara smoke tobacco, do they ever do so in your country?" she queried, wonderingly.

I smoked a good deal on board the Prospector, but we had our tobacco spoilt with the salt water, and so had not smoked for very many days.

"Oh yes," I replied, longingly, "and I should like to smoke very much now if you would not mind; I think it would soothe my nerves."

"I do not mind at all," she replied, with a smile; "I will get you some tobacco, for the Duke smokes."

She went to the telephone and asked, "Have you done dinner?" The reply came perfectly distinctly, "Yes, and we are all coming up to you by-and-by."

"Please bring up some tobacco for Frank."

"Certainly," said the telephone.

Mary now took the tray. "I will be back soon," she said, and left me. As I looked round the beautiful room I could hardly believe that I was awake, and that everything was real, though after all, things were only what the thoughtful in the "Middle World" advocated.
The harmonious room so beautifully and usefully arranged, the little stove with its simple mechanism. The works of art that in a moment could be changed to necessary pieces of furniture, the microphone, electric light, and many other things that might be used in any British community.

And then these people, who, while being all that our popular fancy attributes to a perfect aristocrat, were still as useful and quick in doing necessary work as a perfect servant or mechanic. And yet though they were very much ahead of what we were, they were still only what we might be. I heard a sound of merry voices, then a knock, and the door was opened by Ion for the Duke and Duchess Mura, who entered, followed by Edie, Mary, Andra Woolner Mura, and Mitho Mura, the two latter being the members of the Mura family that I had not before met.

"Mary has given us all permission to pay you a visit; Doctor Frank; she tells us you are very strong, and your recovery will be rapid, at which we are much pleased," said the Duke, in a manner marked by that courtesy and clearness that characterizes all great men.

"When the carrier gull brought us in news of you, Frank, we feared for your safety, so we now doubly rejoice at your rapid recovery."

It was Mitho who spoke, a blue-eyed, eager maiden of sixteen, who seemed very like her sister when they were apart, but when they were together you saw the resemblance consisted only in family mannerisms, similar blue eyes, and a bird-like grace of movement common to both. The Duke and Duchess sat on my right side in big easy chairs. On the "Caught Napping" table Ion put a big hookah with two stems, one of which he handed to the Duke, and gave me the other. He then lit the pipe, and we smoked. Even in the midst of my novel surroundings I enjoyed the tobacco, which seemed to me the nicest I had ever smoked—surely is abstinence the best tonic for all our appetites, and repletion the killer of their joys.

"I have heard a good report of you, Doctor Frank, from my son Ion, his betrothed Edie, and last, but not least, from Mary," said the Duke.

Mary's eyes met mine with the boldness of innocence, and a complete absence of that sister of shame, prudery.

"My lord Duke, your son has saved my life, and I am overwhelmed with the goodness of your people."

"Our habit is do unto others as we would be done by," said the kind old man. "In your case their inclination went with their duty, so they have my approbation, but not my praise. We are longing to hear of the Middle Globe, so you can repay us when you get strong." It was a consolation to think I could repay their kindness in some way.

"Have you lost your wife, Frank?" the Duchess asked, and
her voice was soft and sympathetic, as if she feared to touch a
wound unhealed.

"Frank has never been married or betrothed, dear Duchess," said
Mary, "and he says that in his country many of the men
cannot marry because they are too poor; so forsooth many of the
women must remain maids."

"It must be like the country of Gurla, and peopled by benighted
beings," said Mitho; "you are fortunate to leave it, Frank, but
we will get you a wife, won't we, Mary?" This merry imp looked
at Mary and laughed, but Mary, quite undisturbed, only replied,
"I hope so."

"I do not think the marriage customs of the Middle Globe
can be as wretched as those of Gurla?" said the Duke. "Pray
tell us about them, Doctor Frank."

"There is very little to tell; marriage may be either a civil
contract and religious ceremony performed in a church, or a
purely civil contract performed at the office of the Registrar.
Amongst the most destitute class very many marriages take
place between people who are little more than children."

"Surely you cannot mean that any unmarried man and woman
who wish, may marry, irrespective of age or other considerations,
and careless of their own good, or that of the common weal?" asked the Duke, gravely.

"It is almost so;" I replied, for the first time in my life feeling
shame at my country's customs; "all people who arrive at the age
of puberty may marry; if they are under the age of twenty-one
years they must get the consent of their parents, or some person
empowered to consent to the marriage of minors, but this is usually
given as a matter of course; so that amongst the poorest the
poverty is intensified by the marriage of very young and destitute
people, who have a numerous family that they can only barely
supply with such things as will sustain life, and whom they allow
to grow up in the street."

"This is a dreadful state of things," said the Duke, more
gravely still, "and just such as is permitted amongst the Gurlas,
where it leads to the production of a population of miserable
idlers, the ablest of whom, as a rule, join the criminal class. No
state can give to its people happiness, nor claim for them the
highest civilization, where people are allowed to marry before they
reach the fittest age; or where, when they have reached that age,
they are not all enabled to marry, and properly educate the
number of children they are allowed to have."

"We regard your first statements, Duke Mura, as describing
a desirable, but impossible, state of things; but your last seems
to me Utopian."

"All these things have been in force with us for generations,
and have led to all desirable results. No woman is allowed to
marry till she has reached the age of twenty, nor man, till he has
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reached the age of twenty-one; and they are only allowed to have three children, till they do something of sufficient worth to cause the senate to grant them permission to extend their family. Tell us more of your marriage customs, Doctor Frank, I pray you!"

"Amongst the worthy poor, marriage is usually contracted at a fitter age, with the exception of those amongst them who become either domestic servants or soldiers, these who include a very large percentage, hardly marry at all." I could see by the interested faces around me that this state of things was considered wonderful in its barbarism.

"Do they consider, where these customs prevail, that they are within either measurable distance of the highest civilization, or universal happiness?" It was the Duke who spoke; and though his voice and manner were most courteous, I felt hurt, that the wonderful civilization of the British should be regarded otherwise than with approval.

"They certainly do, and I have yet to learn that there is, or has ever been, a higher or happier civilization," I said indignantly. "That we will show you soon, Dr. Frank, and when we have extended our civilization to our neighbours the Uras, the Rodas, and the Gurlas, probably the Supreme Senate may send you as one of their messengers to proclaim it to the Middle Globe. Do not be angry, Dr. Frank, for we listen to your words with love and interest, though, that a large number of perfectly fit people should be debarred the right of marriage, is cruel to them, and detrimental to society. Pray continue your description." Mitho had gone over to a musical instrument, a sort of harmonium, on which she played, "pianissimo," tuneful melodies that seemed familiar to my ear.

"Amongst the middle, upper and highest classes in European society, there are very many who cannot marry till middle life; and many who cannot marry at all."

"But why?" the Duchess asked.

"Because they have not till then, or never have, sufficient means to live in a style, and with the comforts, even approaching those they have been so used to, as to regard as necessaries."

"Their parents are either very cruel, or very short-sighted, to bring them up to such a state of things," said the Duchess.

"But surely," said Mary, "if they truly love they want so little; the time and thoughts of the man are occupied with his work, which he will learn to love now that it returns him the means to brighten his home; and the woman"—Mary's lovely face—the face I had thought showed an absence of heart—softened with thought and glowed with fervour, as she continued, "Surely, when she has the love of her lover—when she has him, and his work to think of, and strive for—surely she will be happy and want little else; two rooms, some raiment, food, they cost so little, and are easily got. The parks and gardens are open to
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all, and in the theatres there are places where those who have but very little money—and no one is so foolish as to feel shame at its absence—can see, and hear, at small cost. They cannot know what love is, or poverty would not part them, or prevent their happiness."

"There are the conventionalities to be considered," I said.

"They are to be ignored, when they hinder proper happiness," replied Mary decidedly.

"The way to civilization is difficult to find, and slow to attain," said the Duke, "and ignorance, and its companion stupidity, obstruct both the finding and the attaining. We consider, and I think by-and-by you will agree with us, that marriage is the foundation of all that is desirable; therefore every proper person should be enabled to marry at a fit time."

"We must not talk to Frank any more," said Mary, "of these subjects that excite his brain, for he is not yet strong enough; do you not think so, Duke?"

"You are, right Mary," said Duke Mura; "please sing to us."

Mary selected a song from some music that Mitho had brought, and facing us, so that she formed the foreground of a tableau of which Mitho at the harmonica was the middle piece, sang and acted the following song:

Love that is born of a touch, or a sigh,
The sound of a song, the gleam from an eye,
Comes as the zephyrs do, gentle and sweet,
Covering the loved, as with garment complete
In a beautiful light that ye only can see,
If ye love, and are loved in the fullest degree.

Refrain.

Love, gentle love, down from above
Joy of existence, love, gentle love.

Love that is nourished by unknown desire,
Hopes for the future still further inspire,
Strengthened by kiss, and confirmed by caress,
On for a ring and love's fetters to press,
Till the man and the maid in a union are one,
Of one flesh, of one soul, till eternity's done.

Refrain.

Love, gentle love, &c.

No sooner was the song finished, than we heard a knocking at the door; in reply to the Duke's call, to come in, the door opened, and a jolly-looking man and woman entered. They both wore long cloaks reaching to their ankles, and were warmly gloved. After the salutations, which were like those usual in the Middle Globe, the Duke introduced them.

"Doctor Frank Farleigh, this is Clara Bel Ouna, and John Pleo Ouna her husband; Frank is the stranger from the Middle Globe that Edie and Ion found; Bel and John are the head cooks of our block."
These pleasant people shook hands, and Bel offered me some jelly, saying,—

"It is made from the white Smitha seaweed, Frank, and contains more nutrition for those who are weak than anything else."

Mary took it.

"I am his nurse, Bel," interposed Mary, "so I will take care of it, and also thank you for it."

To be entertained by a Duke, of most ducal appearance, and by him introduced to a head cook, was an unusual honour, and a complete surprise. Had the introduction been to a prize-fighter or a ballet girl, I could have understood it.

In the conversation, which became general, and which completely puzzled me, both Bel and John creditably took part, and by adding a jocular element, became a decided acquisition. Shortly they all left, and I was alone with Mary, who now gave me some of Bel's jelly which was extremely nice.

"Are you tired, Frank?" she asked.

"No; but I am more and more mystified; I do not think I can be dreaming, for no dream would show me things that I could not imagine. Can it be that I am in heaven, and you are a goddess?" Mary smiled.

"I suppose I shall realize it all by-and-by," I mused aloud.

"Yes," said Mary; "in a few days it will all be simple to you, and then perhaps you will cease to think I am a goddess. Good-night, sleep well."

Before I could realize it she was gone. In a few minutes Ion came up.

"Mary asked me to give you a warm bath if you were strong enough, as she thinks it will make you sleep."

I thanked him, and he took me in his arms, and carried me to the bath-room, where he bathed and dried me as if I were his brother, or a child; he then put me in bed, bade me good-night, and left me. The scenes I had lately witnessed jumbled together in my brain, like the colours in a kaleidoscope, but the centre round which they revolted was the beautiful woman, Mary.

To man, with manhood, comes a vision of a woman whom he hopes some day to woo and win. The woman whom he hopes for as wife; who with her sweetness will guide and elevate his aims; who will reward his love with boy children to carry on his work when he has ceased to live; and girl children to be the sunshine of his old age.

The woman I had conjured up, the woman I had hoped for, seemed in Mary to be personified. I had come, as a pauper, to an unknown land, and found my Queen. It was presumption to aspire to her.

"'Tis better to have loved and lost, than never to have loved at all." I had loved, but not yet lost. I had her sympathy, and if I did not win her, it would not be for want of trying.