CHAPTER X

STRUGGLES, INCIDENTS AND ADVENTURES.

Oh, it was pitiful!
Near a whole city full
Home she had none —Hood.

We reached San Francisco in the summer of the year 1889, arriving in the city at night, and though my pockets were light—so light, indeed, that they contained nothing but a penknife—I went immediately to a respectable hotel. I remained here during the rest of the night, and got breakfast there the next morning. I then wandered out into the city, with the intention of finding some employment. But the day passed, and when night came I had found nothing. Anyone like myself, not bred to any trade or profession who has ever sought for employment in the streets of a strange city, well knows what a disheartening task it is. Indeed, I became discouraged more than once, but in spite of this, and the apparent futility of my quest, I persevered most earnestly. At many places where I applied, I met with cold rebuffs, or positive insults; at some, courteous treatment; and at all, refusal. But in the first case, when anyone offered me a positive insult, I contrived to make him speedily sensible that I would not sit quietly under unmerited affronts, and in the
next case, that politeness was never wasted upon me.

However, night closed, and the employment so earnestly sought had not been found. I had not so much as one cent in my pocket, and was wholly and entirely alone in the midst of a greater wilderness than any ever trodden by the children of Israel. I had gone without dinner, and I now realized the unwelcome fact that I must go without supper also. Nor was this the least of my troubles. I had no money to pay for the use of a bed, and would be under the disagreeable necessity of walking the streets all night. This was the only alternative, and I must own that it would cause me far greater suffering to walk from pavement to pavement in the damp air of night than would be occasioned by the loss of two meals. To add to my discomfort I had walked the streets during the whole day, and was not only foot-sore and weary, but with a frame weakened by disease, and unable to support me through times of cold, privation, or exposure, it will readily be seen that when night came I was ready to drop with fatigue. In this condition I was compelled to go out into the night, in the damp air and falling dew, with no covering but the star-strewn canopy of heaven, and wander to and fro the whole night through.

That was a dark hour for me, and for others as well; and I saw more than one wistful face, pallid and drawn with hunger, gazing longingly into the hundreds of brilliant shop windows laden with dainties, but none of whom, like the luckless Jean Valjean, ventured to take by force that which they could not
acquire by purchase. During that dreadful night, of which I can never think without a shudder, I crept wearily from street to street from alley to alley, from square to square, and I thought the night would never end. Many unfortunates like myself roamed over the streets, but I could not have that sympathy for them that I have felt since. The pangs of hunger are harder to bear than almost any other earthly affliction, and I experienced only a feeling of rebellion against my fate and against the world. The calls of unappeased hunger, which no excuse can satisfy, and no artifice deceive, will lower us to the level of beasts of prey, as all the world knows.

I do not know how I lived through that night, nor how it passed, but finally, after a length of time which seemed interminable, day broke in the east. When morning came it seemed to me that long years had gone by since the day before. Ragged newsboys were soon hurrying over the streets, with batches of morning papers under their arms, and this suggested that possibly I might find something of interest in the “want” columns. An opportunity to glance over the Examiner soon presented itself, and I searched the “want” columns with some eagerness. In glancing down the sheet, scanning “wants” of almost every description, my eye fell upon the following:

“Wanted—A few energetic men for light employment. Salary to begin on, $16 per week. No capital required. For particulars, apply at nine o’clock this A. M. at No. — Market-street.”

The sentence, “No capital required,” seemed to
suit the depleted condition of my purse, and I resolved to apply. But the appointed time had not yet arrived, and I had nearly two hours to wait. How I passed the time I hardly know, but promptly on the stroke of nine I ascended the stairway on Market street as directed. I found that there were no less than forty men there before me, and we all, needy adventurers that we were, looked askance at one another, as if each expected the other to deprive him of a sinecure. It was a motley crowd, some among them being the worst specimens of humanity it had ever been my lot to see.

We all stood, ranged according to our time of arrival, before a door, mysteriously closed, which only opened at irregular intervals to swallow one of our number, like a hungry dragon. To carry the simile further, none of those who were admitted ever came out again, or at least if they did, we did not see them. As so many were ahead of me, I had to wait a full hour and, I did not dare to move from my place, lest some one should assume it, as a number had arrived after me. As only one was admitted at a time, it was slow work; but finally, when my patience was about exhausted, and I was ready to drop to the floor through sheer fatigue, my turn came, and I entered the mysterious portal. The room was furnished in a very scanty manner, only a chair or two, and a commodious desk, being visible. A gentleman was seated at the desk, writing in a big book. He looked up as I entered and received me very politely.
I soon learned the nature of the business. Mr. Underhill, this being the advertiser's name, was general agent for P. F. Collier, publisher, of New York. This firm, one of the largest in the world, had lately put an illustrated weekly in the field, with the apt name of Once a Week. Each subscriber to this journal received a number of handsome presents, and paid for the whole upon the instalment plan. The subscription price was about five dollars per year, and of this the canvassing agent got, as commission, nearly a dollar.

Mr. Underhill offered to furnish me with an outfit to canvass with, without exacting a deposit from me, and during the previous hour had put out some half a dozen canvassers. I had never done any work of the kind, but the bait was very tempting, and starvation stared me in the face. I therefore took the outfit and hurried away to take as many orders as I could, and in the shortest possible time. Yet I was weak and ill, and really unfit for work, almost tottering at times as I walked. One who has never canvassed for books in a large city cannot remotely imagine what disagreeable labor it is; but, sustained by the hope of earning a dollar with which to provide some of those physical comforts (necessities) which I had never properly valued until now, I went earnestly to work. That day's canvassing over the streets of San Francisco was far harder than ever was labor before to my weakened frame and diminished energies. Nothing, indeed, but the mere force of will-power prevented me from falling exhausted
upon the street; but I bore up, knowing that the goal was near and the reward sweet.

Often during the day I was under the necessity of taking insults (which came principally from ladies) without so much as a murmur in reply, and all manner of rebuffs. I was very careful to give offense to none, and to conduct myself with as much dignity, politeness, and courtesy as was possible under the circumstances. As a result I was better treated, as I afterwards learned, than are most book-canvassers in San Francisco, and other large cities, although some rude treatment I could not and did not escape.

On account of physical exhaustion I was compelled to bring my day's work to a close some hours before sunset. I was very well satisfied, however, with what I had done, as I had taken a sufficient number of orders to net me $2.80, and strange to say I felt somewhat better as well as more hopeful. About the middle of the afternoon I returned the outfit to Mr. Underhill, and borrowed a dollar from him. He and I were conversing for a moment after he had handed me the money when a woe-begone and dejected figure darkened the doorway for a moment and advanced towards the desk. I recognized him as one of the men whom I had observed coming up the stairway after me that morning. He had a scratch on his face, his shoes and clothes were covered with dust, and he was a forlorn figure generally, while in his countenance disgust, dejection, anger, discouragement and cynicism were comically blended. He advanced silently and with lagging step, and laid his
canvassing outfit upon the desk without a word. "Well, what now?" demanded Mr. Underhill, too well bred to laugh at the man's lugubrious countenance, and yet inwardly convulsed.

"What now?" echoed the man, in a hollow voice, yet with infinite scorn, "you can take your d—d outfit. I don't want it."

"Why what's the matter? Haven't you taken any orders?"

"No!" roared the man, in a sudden burst of rage. "Who the devil could? I've been kicked down one stairway, thrust out of two houses, had my face slapped once, and hot water poured down my back. No more peddling for me. I've simply discovered that I'm no book-agent."

Having thus spoken, he turned and limped away without another word, and soon disappeared down the stairs.

When the man was out of earshot, Mr. Underhill lay back in his chair and laughed until the tears rolled down his cheeks.

"Such scenes are of common occurrence, I suppose," I said, when he had left off, and was wiping his eyes.

"Yes indeed," he replied, wiping the last tear away and restoring his handkerchief to his pocket. "Only the fewest possible number of men are fit for book-agents—only a few being gifted with the necessary qualities. Well, Fleming," he added, in his customary business-like manner, "you have begun so well that I suppose you will continue with us?"
I told him that I would; and being very greatly worn and fatigued, and anxious for a few hours' rest, I left my outfit to be called for next day and went out upon the street. A few blocks away, as I knew, there was an eating-house known as the Palace Restaurant, which was the most popular establishment of the kind in the city. Some three or four thousand people, it was said, got their meals there daily, and it was generally known that one could get a pretty fair meal there for fifteen or twenty cents. With my dollar in my pocket I went to this house and ordered a cheap but substantial meal, which I need not say was heartily enjoyed. This done, I repaired to a neighboring lodging-house, and though the sun would not set for another hour, I went to bed and slept until eight o'clock next day. I awoke greatly refreshed and after breakfast went to the Polyclinic Dispensary, a medical institution under the control of able and efficient physicians. I was treated here for diabetes mellitus, as long as I remained in San Francisco, and was finally pronounced cured by them.

From this place I returned to Mr. Underhill's office. Here I got my outfit and passed the day in canvassing about the city for orders. Good fortune seemed now to pursue me as persistently as dire misery had done. I took a sufficient number of orders to net me a handsome profit. I labored in this manner, day by day, for several months, and had many amusing experiences. My canvassing was done in a particular locality, and in making my selection, I followed instinct rather than reason. The
most ultra-stylish and ultra-aristocratic quarter of the city was that known as Knob Hill. Nearly all of the class mentioned lived here, or in the immediate vicinity, and none others. They were an exclusive and purse-proud set, and Knob Hill had long been the terror of all book-salesmen. I was told that no resident of Knob Hill, so far as was known, had ever purchased a book from an agent, and for years no salesman had been admitted into one of its exclusive mansions. Indeed, there was no agent bold enough to make the attempt. On all of the handsome residences which abounded in the vicinity, the eye was greeted by such notices, in glaring characters, as these:

"Book-canvasers not allowed." "Book-agents and tramps, keep away," and more to the same purpose. These signs were displayed in almost every conceivable place, and glared out upon the adventurous canvasser on every hand.

Now every part of the city, with the single exception of Knob Hill, was completely overrun with enterprising book-agents, and competition was so brisk that none of them could earn more than a bare livelihood. And neither should I, had I followed in their course.

I turned my attention to Knob Hill; and from first to last, as long as I remained in San Francisco, I did almost all of my book-selling in that unpromising quarter. As might be expected, the other agents who saw fit to watch my course, prophesied my immediate and ignominious failure, but the croakings of such
prophets of evil—of which the world is full—could not deter me from following my own plans. There were, as might be supposed, a few houses on the Hill more difficult to enter than some others; and one, in particular, had shown itself so hostile to all salesmen that the very sight of it was sufficient to make the boldest agent quake in his boots. I determined to enter this house first, and I did so.

It was a magnificent mansion, set in the midst of elegant and commodious grounds. Several signs, displayed on conspicuous parts of the basement, warned all book-agents in threatening language to keep away, and I own that it was not without misgivings that I entered and rang the bell. On entering the piazza, I placed my book and paper upon the floor and stood upon them. When the servant appeared, she seemed to suspect my errand, but I told her to tell her mistress that a newspaper man desired to see her. The servant turned about, without asking me to walk in, and closing the door, went away.

After a slight delay I heard, somewhat faintly, the majestic tread of a woman coming down the hall, and the rustle of silken garments. Then the door opened and the aristocratic and exclusive lady of the house stood before me. A tall woman, large, robust, and stout. Her complexion was coarse, her nose red, her features commonplace, while the expression upon her face was that of coarse, impertinent, and insolent vulgarity. I thought when this woman stood before me, and I noted the expression of her countenance, her air and manner, that she was one
of the most despicable of created beings, and an illustration of upstart vulgarity in its most hateful and repulsive form. My first impulse was to turn my back upon her, and go on my way without more ado, but such a course not appearing either very feasible or very politic, I made her a low bow.

She came up to me without ceremony.

"So you're one of them reporter fellers?" Her voice was loud, harsh, and unpleasant.

"I have the honor, madam," I responded, with another bow, as graceful as I could make when standing upon a good-sized book, "to represent a newspaper."

She stared; then turning short about, with a clownish attempt at graceful courtesy, but which was only obsequious vulgarity, she told me to "come in."

She led the way; and, quickly snatching up my book from the floor, and concealing it underneath my coat, I followed her into a gorgeously-furnished parlor. She waved her hand towards an elegantly-upholstered rocking-chair, and sank into a similar seat herself. I then began to talk, and she listened patiently enough until I drew out my book and paper.

As soon as her eyes fell upon these, she sprang up as though the mere sight of a book had the same effect upon her that a red flag has upon a bull, and approaching me threateningly, she exclaimed in a loud angry voice:

"Are you one of them air book-agents?"

She pronounced the last word about as one would speak the word rattlesnake.
"But, madam," said I, wishing to gain time, "if you will hear me—"

She interrupted me without ceremony.

"Are you one of them air book-agents? Air you?"

Then, without waiting for a reply she seized me by the collar, and by the exercise of simple muscular force, for she was almost twice as large as the unfortunate agent who was now in her clutches, she dragged me out into the hall, down the steps, and out into the yard until we stood before a glaring sign on which was painted the legend: "Book-agents not allowed on this place."

"Do you see that!" she shrieked, glaring down upon me more like a wild Indian about to take my scalp than a civilized American. "Do you see it, you dog?"

I was obliged to confess that I did.

"Well, then," said she, in a lower tone, releasing my collar from her grasp, "you remember it; and now you git! You rascal," she went on, as if her indignation at such a mortal affront mastered all other feelings whenever she thought of it, "you rascal, to deceive and insult a trustin' woman! You ought to be give sixty days. You villyun, to come sneakin' here! I thought you was a gentleman, and here you turn out a book-agent." She spoke these words with ineffable scorn, and repeating it in the same tone several times over, she returned to the house, and disappeared behind the carved street door, her silken garments rustling angrily as she went.

There was nothing left for me but retreat, and
this more ignominiously than even my officious acquaintances had prophesied. I need hardly say that I left with far less ceremony than I had observed when entering, but my poor success at this place did not deter me from trying similar places in that vicinity. I canvassed all day on Knob Hill, taking my usual average of orders. When I returned that afternoon to Mr. Underhill's office, he was very greatly surprised at my success, and complimented me very highly.

Shortly after my arrival in San Francisco I formed the habit of going regularly to the apartments of the Y. M. C. A. Finally, some of the officers suggested that I deliver a public lecture in some of the churches of the city, and they offered to manage it for me. After deliberating over the matter for some time, I decided to make the attempt, and a month or so after I had returned an affirmative answer, the lecture was announced. We had a good audience, and the church was filled. As to what others thought of the lecture, and the general effect it had, perhaps I cannot do better than simply to reproduce here, begging pardon of the reader, the following head lines which appeared next day in a leading morning newspaper over the reporter's account of the affair.

A SENSATIONAL LECTURE.
MISSION STREET CHURCH CROWDED TO OVERFLOWING.
E. B. FLEMING, OF TEXAS, DELIVERED THE FOLLOWING REMARKABLE, UNIQUE AND POWERFUL ADDRESS TO A LARGE AUDIENCE LAST NIGHT.
While this was very encouraging, the amount of the money-receipts was no less gratifying, of which my share amounted to about thirty dollars. I lectured after this in various parts of the State, and always with the most unexpected though gratifying success.

I then left the city of San Francisco and journeyed per steamer down the coast, stopping, among other places, at Santa Barbara, San Luis Obispo, and ultimately at San Diego. At the latter place I remained nearly a year.