

THOMAS CHANDLER

HALIBURTON, ALGER HORATIO JR.

# NOTHING TO EAT

Thomas Chandler Haliburton

**Nothing to Eat**

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# Horatio Alger, Thomas Chandler Haliburton

## Nothing to Eat

*"I'll nibble a little at what I have got."*

*—"My appetite's none of the best.  
And so I must pamper the delicate thing."*

*—The least mite will suffice:  
A side bone and dressing and bit of the breast.  
The tip of the rump—that's it—and one of the fli's"*

## The Argument

THOUGH famine prevails not at all in the city;  
Though none of starvation have died in the street;  
Yet many there are now exciting our pity,  
Who're daily complaining of nothing to eat.

The every-day cry and the every-day fare,  
That's every day heard where the Livewells are dining,  
Is nothing to eat, or else nothing to wear,  
Which naked and starving rich Merdles are whining.

There's Kitty Malone—Mrs. Merdle 'tis now—  
Was ever on earth here before such a sinner;  
Protesting, excusing and swearing a vow,  
She'd nothing worth eating to give us for dinner.

Why Kitty, if starving for want of a meal,  
And had'nt a cent in the world to buy meat,  
You wouldn't exclaim with a more pious zeal,  
"I'm dying of hunger—we've nothing to eat!!"

## The Proof—the Queen of Fashion

The point I advance, if it need confirmation,  
I'll prove by a witness that few will dispute,  
A pink of perfection and truth in the naion  
Where fashion and folly are all of a suit.

'Tis "Merdle the banker"—or rather his wife,  
Whose fashion, religion, or music, or dress,  
Is followed, consulted, by many through life,  
As pilots are followed by ships in distress;  
For money's a pilot, a master, a king,  
Which men follow blindly through quicksands and shoals,  
Where pilots their ships in a moment might fling  
To destruction the vessel and cargo and souls.

'Twas money made Kitty of fashion the queen,  
And fortune oft lends queens the scepter;  
So fortune and fashion with this one we've seen  
Her money and fortune in fashion has kept her;  
While slaves of the queen with her hoops rules the day,  
Expanding their utmost extent of expansion,  
And mandates of fashion most freely obey,  
And would if it bid all their souls to extinction.

## The Object aimed at

But what “lady patron” as queen holds the sway;  
Or sweeping, whose hoops in the street are most sweeping;  
The burthen is not of this truth-telling lay,  
That should in its reading the world set to weeping,  
While telling the suff’rings from head to the feet,  
Of poor human beings with *nothing to eat*.

## What another Poet did

Another expounder of life's thorny mazes  
Excited our pity at fortune's hard fare,  
And troubled the city's most troublesome places,  
While singing his ditty of "Nothing to Wear."

"A tale worth the telling," though I tell for the same,  
Great objects of pity we see in the street,  
"With nothing to wear, though a legion by name,  
Is not to buy clothing, but something to eat.

## How the Author sometimes Dines

And now by your leave I will try to expound it,  
In truth as it is and the way that I found it.

My dinner, sometimes, like things transcendental  
And things more substantial, like women and wine  
A thing is, uncertain, and quite accidental,  
And sometimes I wonder, "Oh! where shall I dine?"

It was when reflecting one evening of late,  
What tavern or hotel or dining-room skinner,  
With table cloth dirty and dirtier plate,  
Would give me a nausea and call it a dinner,  
I met with Jack Merdle, a name fully known  
As good for a million in Stock-gamblers' Street,  
Where none but a nabob or forger high flown  
With "bulls" or with "bears" need look for a seat.

## **Merdle the Banker**

Now Merdle this day having toss'd with his horns  
The bears that were pulling so hard at the stocks,  
And gored every bull that was treading his corns,  
Had lined all his pockets with "plenty of rocks,"  
And home now was driving at "two forty" speed,  
Where dinner was waiting—"a jolly good feed."

Himself feeling happy, he knew by my looks,  
A case full of sadness and deep destitution  
Was present in person, not read of in books,  
Appealing in pity for an alms institution.

## Places Where Mortals Dine

The case, too, was urgent, for there stood a sinner,  
Whose fate hung on chance—a chance for his dinner;  
A chance for all mortals, with truth I assert,  
Who eat where his chance was, to counteract fate,  
“To eat during life each a peck of pure dirt”  
By eating at once the whole peck from one plate.  
For true when I think of the places we eat at,  
Or rather the places by hunger when driven  
We rush in and swallow our bread and our meat at,  
A bushel good measure in life will be given  
To those who are living a “boarding-house life,”  
Or those who are driven by fortune to journey,  
And eat when we must with so dirty a knife,  
I wish’t could be done by the power of attorney;  
Or where you must eat in a place called “saloon;”  
Or “coffee-house” synonym of whisky and rum;  
(I wish all the breed were sent off to the moon,  
And earth was well clear of the coffee-house scum;)   
Or where “Restauration” hangs out for sign,  
At bar-room or cellar or dirty back room,  
Where dishcloths for napkins are thought extra fine,  
And table cloths look as though washed with a broom;  
Where knives waiters spit on and wipe on their sleeves,  
And plates needing polish, with coat tails are cleaned;  
Where priests dine with harlots, and judges with thieves,  
And mayors with villains his worship has screened.

## Things That Mortals Eat There

And what do you eat in the mess there compounded?  
For roast beef, the gravy the soap-man should claim—  
The soup some odd things might turn up if sounded,  
And other “made-dishes” might turn up the same.

Decoctions that puzzle your chemical skill,  
You get if you call either coffee or tea;  
And milk that is made with and tastes of the swill,  
As like milk, as wine is that often we see  
Is like to the juice of the grape in perfection,  
Or like as the candidate after election  
Is like the fair thing that we hoped or expected  
Before the base thief was exposed or detected;  
As like truth and virtue—and more is the pity—  
The men we elected to rule our own city.

In “council” while sitting, though “common” we call them,  
In common opinion, if people at large  
Are’s common in morals, no worse could befall ‘em  
If Satan should take them at once in his charge.

If food as their filth was as plenty for diet,  
No lack would they feel of the coveted cash,  
Or power they maintain with the power of a riot,  
When heads of opponents are served up as hash  
By Star-chamber cooks of the club “restoration,”  
That rules now the city and would rule the nation,  
If “Sachems” were willing the “Wigwam” to yield,  
And give the arch-traitor a fair fighting field.

But fighting just now is not our intention,  
But dining with Merdle, the banker, in state,  
And only these items like side dishes mention,  
While waiting the coming the main dinner plate.

## The Invitation

While waiting debating I stated before,  
Jack Merdle drove up in his carriage and bays,  
“Halloo,” said the banker, “I see you’re ashore—  
No wonder—this weather is all in a haze—  
But come in my carriage, and truly confess  
You’re a victim of hunger and dinner down town;  
A case of most common distressing distress;  
When dining in public with Jones, Smith or Brown,  
Or some other practical men of the nation,  
Is worse on the whole than a little starvation.

But come home with me for the sake of Lang Syne,  
And see Mrs. Merdle and see how we dine.

I must not expect,” he advised in advance,  
“To meet with a dinner got up in perfection,  
But must run the risk of the luck and the chance,  
As candidates do on the day of election.”

## The Merdle Origin

Now Merdle, *en passant*, I had known for a score  
Of years, when a dinner with Jones, Brown or Smith  
As good as one gets for a quarter or more,  
Was a thing unthought of, or else but a myth  
In Merde's day-dreaming of things yet in store,  
When hope painted visions of a painted abode,  
And hope never hoped for anything more—  
I'm sure never dreamed he would dine *a la mode*.

In dreams wildest fancy I doubt if he dreamed,  
That time in its changes that wears rocky shores,  
Should change what so changeless certainly seemed,  
Till Merdle, Jack Merdle, would own twenty stores,  
Much more own a bank, e'en the horse that he rode,  
Or pay half the debts of the wild oats he sowed.

I knew when he worked at his old father's trade,  
And thought he would stick to his wax and the last,  
But Fortune, the fickle, incontinent jade,  
A turn to his fortune has given a cast;  
"A wife with a fortune," which men hunt in packs,  
To Jack was the fortune that fell to his share;  
A fortune that often is such a hard tax,  
That men hurry through it with "nothing to spare,"  
With "nothing to eat," or a house "fit to live in,"  
With "nothing half decent" to put on their backs,  
With nothing "exclusive" to have or believe in,  
"Except what is common to common street hacks."

So fortune and comfort, that should be like brothers,  
Though fought for and bled for where fortunes are made,  
Though sought for and failed of by ten thousand others,  
Are not worth the fighting and fuss that is made.

But fortune for Merdle by Cupid was cast,  
And bade him look higher than wax and the last,  
That Merdle his father, with good honest trade,  
Had used with the stitches his waxed end had made.

I knew when old Merdle lived down by the mill,  
I often went fishing and Jack dug the bait;  
But Jack Merdle then never thought he should fill  
With fish and roast meat such a full dinner plate:  
Nor I, when my line which I threw for a trout  
While Jack watched the bob of the light floating cork,



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