

Chapter 17 - A Social Chorus

Amazement sits enthroned upon the countenances of Mr and Mrs Alfred Lammle's circle of acquaintance, when the disposal of their first-class furniture and effects (including a Billiard Table in capital letters), 'by auction, under a bill of sale,' is publicly announced on a waving hearthrug in Sackville Street. But, nobody is half so much amazed as Hamilton Veneering, Esquire, M.P. for Pocket-Breaches, who instantly begins to find out that the Lammles are the only people ever entered on his soul's register, who are NOT the oldest and dearest friends he has in the world. Mrs Veneering, W.M.P. for Pocket-Breaches, like a faithful wife shares her husband's discovery and inexpressible astonishment. Perhaps the Veneerings twain may deem the last unutterable feeling particularly due to their reputation, by reason that once upon a time some of the longer heads in the City are whispered to have shaken themselves, when Veneering's extensive dealings and great wealth were mentioned. But, it is certain that neither Mr nor Mrs Veneering can find words to wonder in, and it becomes necessary that they give to the oldest and dearest friends they have in the world, a wondering dinner.

For, it is by this time noticeable that, whatever befalls, the Veneerings must give a dinner upon it. Lady Tippins lives in a chronic state of invitation to dine with the Veneerings, and in a chronic state of inflammation arising from the dinners. Boots and Brewer go about in cabs, with no other intelligible business on earth than to beat up people to come and dine with the Veneerings. Veneering pervades the legislative lobbies, intent upon entrapping his fellow-legislators to dinner. Mrs Veneering dined with five-and-twenty bran-new faces over night; calls upon them all to day; sends them every one a dinner-card to-morrow, for the week after next; before that dinner is digested, calls upon their brothers and sisters, their sons and daughters, their nephews and nieces, their aunts and uncles and cousins, and invites them all to dinner. And still, as at first, howsoever, the dining circle widens, it is to be observed that all the diners are consistent in appearing to go to the Veneerings, not to dine with Mr and Mrs Veneering (which would seem to be the last thing in their minds), but to dine with one another.

Perhaps, after all, - who knows? - Veneering may find this dining, though expensive, remunerative, in the sense that it makes champions. Mr Podsnap, as a representative man, is not alone in caring very particularly for his own dignity, if not for that of his acquaintances, and therefore in angrily supporting the acquaintances who have taken out his Permit, lest, in their being lessened, he should be. The gold and silver camels, and the ice-pails, and the rest of the Veneering table decorations, make a brilliant show, and when I, Podsnap, casually remark elsewhere that I dined last Monday with a

gorgeous caravan of camels, I find it personally offensive to have it hinted to me that they are broken-kneed camels, or camels labouring under suspicion of any sort. 'I don't display camels myself, I am above them: I am a more solid man; but these camels have basked in the light of my countenance, and how dare you, sir, insinuate to me that I have irradiated any but unimpeachable camels?'

The camels are polishing up in the Analytical's pantry for the dinner of wonderment on the occasion of the Lammles going to pieces, and Mr Twemlow feels a little queer on the sofa at his lodgings over the stable yard in Duke Street, Saint James's, in consequence of having taken two advertised pills at about mid-day, on the faith of the printed representation accompanying the box (price one and a penny halfpenny, government stamp included), that the same 'will be found highly salutary as a precautionary measure in connection with the pleasures of the table.' To whom, while sickly with the fancy of an insoluble pill sticking in his gullet, and also with the sensation of a deposit of warm gum languidly wandering within him a little lower down, a servant enters with the announcement that a lady wishes to speak with him.

'A lady!' says Twemlow, pluming his ruffled feathers. 'Ask the favour of the lady's name.'

The lady's name is Lammle. The lady will not detain Mr Twemlow longer than a very few minutes. The lady is sure that Mr Twemlow will do her the kindness to see her, on being told that she particularly desires a short interview. The lady has no doubt whatever of Mr Twemlow's compliance when he hears her name. Has begged the servant to be particular not to mistake her name. Would have sent in a card, but has none.

'Show the lady in.' Lady shown in, comes in.

Mr Twemlow's little rooms are modestly furnished, in an old-fashioned manner (rather like the housekeeper's room at Snigsworthy Park), and would be bare of mere ornament, were it not for a full-length engraving of the sublime Snigsworth over the chimneypiece, snorting at a Corinthian column, with an enormous roll of paper at his feet, and a heavy curtain going to tumble down on his head; those accessories being understood to represent the noble lord as somehow in the act of saving his country.

'Pray take a seat, Mrs Lammle.' Mrs Lammle takes a seat and opens the conversation.

'I have no doubt, Mr Twemlow, that you have heard of a reverse of fortune having befallen us. Of course you have heard of it, for no kind of news travels so fast - among one's friends especially.'

Mindful of the wondering dinner, Twemlow, with a little twinge, admits the imputation.

'Probably it will not,' says Mrs Lammle, with a certain hardened manner upon her, that makes Twemlow shrink, 'have surprised you so much as some others, after what passed between us at the house which is now turned out at windows. I have taken the liberty of calling upon you, Mr Twemlow, to add a sort of postscript to what I said that day.'

Mr Twemlow's dry and hollow cheeks become more dry and hollow at the prospect of some new complication.

'Really,' says the uneasy little gentleman, 'really, Mrs Lammle, I should take it as a favour if you could excuse me from any further confidence. It has ever been one of the objects of my life - which, unfortunately, has not had many objects - to be inoffensive, and to keep out of cabals and interferences.'

Mrs Lammle, by far the more observant of the two, scarcely finds it necessary to look at Twemlow while he speaks, so easily does she read him.

'My postscript - to retain the term I have used' - says Mrs Lammle, fixing her eyes on his face, to enforce what she says herself - 'coincides exactly with what you say, Mr Twemlow. So far from troubling you with any new confidence, I merely wish to remind you what the old one was. So far from asking you for interference, I merely wish to claim your strict neutrality.'

Twemlow going on to reply, she rests her eyes again, knowing her ears to be quite enough for the contents of so weak a vessel.

'I can, I suppose,' says Twemlow, nervously, 'offer no reasonable objection to hearing anything that you do me the honour to wish to say to me under those heads. But if I may, with all possible delicacy and politeness, entreat you not to range beyond them, I - I beg to do so.'

'Sir,' says Mrs Lammle, raising her eyes to his face again, and quite daunting him with her hardened manner, 'I imparted to you a certain piece of knowledge, to be imparted again, as you thought best, to a certain person.'

'Which I did,' says Twemlow.

'And for doing which, I thank you; though, indeed, I scarcely know why I turned traitress to my husband in the matter, for the girl is a poor little fool. I was a poor little fool once myself; I can find no better reason.' Seeing the effect she produces on him by her indifferent laugh and cold look, she keeps her eyes upon him as she proceeds. 'Mr Twemlow, if you should chance to see my husband, or to see me, or to see both of us, in the favour or confidence of any one else - whether of our common acquaintance or not, is of no consequence - you have no right to use against us the knowledge I intrusted you with, for one special purpose which has been accomplished. This is what I came to say. It is not a stipulation; to a gentleman it is simply a reminder.'

Twemlow sits murmuring to himself with his hand to his forehead.

'It is so plain a case,' Mrs Lammle goes on, 'as between me (from the first relying on your honour) and you, that I will not waste another word upon it.' She looks steadily at Mr Twemlow, until, with a shrug, he makes her a little one-sided bow, as though saying 'Yes, I think you have a right to rely upon me,' and then she moistens her lips, and shows a sense of relief.

'I trust I have kept the promise I made through your servant, that I would detain you a very few minutes. I need trouble you no longer, Mr Twemlow.'

'Stay!' says Twemlow, rising as she rises. 'Pardon me a moment. I should never have sought you out, madam, to say what I am going to say, but since you have sought me out and are here, I will throw it off my mind. Was it quite consistent, in candour, with our taking that resolution against Mr Fledgeby, that you should afterwards address Mr Fledgeby as your dear and confidential friend, and entreat a favour of Mr Fledgeby? Always supposing that you did; I assert no knowledge of my own on the subject; it has been represented to me that you did.'

'Then he told you?' retorts Mrs Lammle, who again has saved her eyes while listening, and uses them with strong effect while speaking. 'Yes.'

'It is strange that he should have told you the truth,' says Mrs Lammle, seriously pondering. 'Pray where did a circumstance so very extraordinary happen?'

Twemlow hesitates. He is shorter than the lady as well as weaker, and, as she stands above him with her hardened manner and her well-used eyes, he finds himself at such a disadvantage that he would like to be of the opposite sex.

'May I ask where it happened, Mr Twemlow? In strict confidence?'

'I must confess,' says the mild little gentleman, coming to his answer by degrees, 'that I felt some compunctions when Mr Fledgeby mentioned it. I must admit that I could not regard myself in an agreeable light. More particularly, as Mr Fledgeby did, with great civility, which I could not feel that I deserved from him, render me the same service that you had entreated him to render you.'

It is a part of the true nobility of the poor gentleman's soul to say this last sentence. 'Otherwise,' he has reflected, 'I shall assume the superior position of having no difficulties of my own, while I know of hers. Which would be mean, very mean.'

'Was Mr Fledgeby's advocacy as effectual in your case as in ours?' Mrs Lammle demands.

'As ineffectual.'

'Can you make up your mind to tell me where you saw Mr Fledgeby, Mr Twemlow?'

'I beg your pardon. I fully intended to have done so. The reservation was not intentional. I encountered Mr Fledgeby, quite by accident, on the spot. - By the expression, on the spot, I mean at Mr Riah's in Saint Mary Axe.'

'Have you the misfortune to be in Mr Riah's hands then?'

'Unfortunately, madam,' returns Twemlow, 'the one money obligation to which I stand committed, the one debt of my life (but it is a just debt; pray observe that I don't dispute it), has fallen into Mr Riah's hands.'

'Mr Twemlow,' says Mrs Lammle, fixing his eyes with hers: which he would prevent her doing if he could, but he can't; 'it has fallen into Mr Fledgeby's hands. Mr Riah is his mask. It has fallen into Mr Fledgeby's hands. Let me tell you that, for your guidance. The information may be of use to you, if only to prevent your credulity, in judging another man's truthfulness by your own, from being imposed upon.'

'Impossible!' cries Twemlow, standing aghast. 'How do you know it?'

'I scarcely know how I know it. The whole train of circumstances seemed to take fire at once, and show it to me.'

'Oh! Then you have no proof.'

'It is very strange,' says Mrs Lammle, coldly and boldly, and with some disdain, 'how like men are to one another in some things, though their characters are as different as can be! No two men can have less affinity between them, one would say, than Mr Twemlow and my husband. Yet my husband replies to me 'You have no proof,' and Mr Twemlow replies to me with the very same words!'

'But why, madam?' Twemlow ventures gently to argue. 'Consider why the very same words? Because they state the fact. Because you HAVE no proof.'

'Men are very wise in their way,' quoth Mrs Lammle, glancing haughtily at the Snigsworth portrait, and shaking out her dress before departing; 'but they have wisdom to learn. My husband, who is not over-confiding, ingenuous, or inexperienced, sees this plain thing no more than Mr Twemlow does - because there is no proof! Yet I believe five women out of six, in my place, would see it as clearly as I do. However, I will never rest (if only in remembrance of Mr Fledgeby's having kissed my hand) until my husband does see it. And you will do well for yourself to see it from this time forth, Mr Twemlow, though I CAN give you no proof.'

As she moves towards the door, Mr Twemlow, attending on her, expresses his soothing hope that the condition of Mr Lammle's affairs is not irretrievable.

'I don't know,' Mrs Lammle answers, stopping, and sketching out the pattern of the paper on the wall with the point of her parasol; 'it depends. There may be an opening for him dawning now, or there may be none. We shall soon find out. If none, we are bankrupt here, and must go abroad, I suppose.'

Mr Twemlow, in his good-natured desire to make the best of it, remarks that there are pleasant lives abroad.

'Yes,' returns Mrs Lammle, still sketching on the wall; 'but I doubt whether billiard-playing, card-playing, and so forth, for the means to live under suspicion at a dirty table-d'hote, is one of them.'

It is much for Mr Lammle, Twemlow politely intimates (though greatly shocked), to have one always beside him who is attached to him in all his fortunes, and whose restraining influence will prevent him from courses that would be discreditable and ruinous. As he says it, Mrs Lammle leaves off sketching, and looks at him.

'Restraining influence, Mr Twemlow? We must eat and drink, and dress, and have a roof over our heads. Always beside him and attached in all his fortunes? Not much to boast of in that; what can a

woman at my age do? My husband and I deceived one another when we married; we must bear the consequences of the deception - that is to say, bear one another, and bear the burden of scheming together for to-day's dinner and to-morrow's breakfast - till death divorces us.'

With those words, she walks out into Duke Street, Saint James's. Mr Twemlow returning to his sofa, lays down his aching head on its slippery little horsehair bolster, with a strong internal conviction that a painful interview is not the kind of thing to be taken after the dinner pills which are so highly salutary in connexion with the pleasures of the table.

But, six o'clock in the evening finds the worthy little gentleman getting better, and also getting himself into his obsolete little silk stockings and pumps, for the wondering dinner at the Veneerings. And seven o'clock in the evening finds him trotting out into Duke Street, to trot to the corner and save a sixpence in coach-hire.

Tippins the divine has dined herself into such a condition by this time, that a morbid mind might desire her, for a blessed change, to sup at last, and turn into bed. Such a mind has Mr Eugene Wrayburn, whom Twemlow finds contemplating Tippins with the moodiest of visages, while that playful creature rallies him on being so long overdue at the woollack. Skittish is Tippins with Mortimer Lightwood too, and has raps to give him with her fan for having been best man at the nuptials of these deceiving what's-their-names who have gone to pieces. Though, indeed, the fan is generally lively, and taps away at the men in all directions, with something of a grisly sound suggestive of the clattering of Lady Tippins's bones.

A new race of intimate friends has sprung up at Veneering's since he went into Parliament for the public good, to whom Mrs Veneering is very attentive. These friends, like astronomical distances, are only to be spoken of in the very largest figures. Boots says that one of them is a Contractor who (it has been calculated) gives employment, directly and indirectly, to five hundred thousand men. Brewer says that another of them is a Chairman, in such request at so many Boards, so far apart, that he never travels less by railway than three thousand miles a week. Buffer says that another of them hadn't a sixpence eighteen months ago, and, through the brilliancy of his genius in getting those shares issued at eighty-five, and buying them all up with no money and selling them at par for cash, has now three hundred and seventy-five thousand pounds - Buffer particularly insisting on the odd seventy-five, and declining to take a farthing less. With Buffer, Boots, and Brewer, Lady Tippins is eminently facetious on the subject of these Fathers of the Scrip-Church: surveying them through her eyeglass, and inquiring whether Boots and Brewer and Buffer think they will make her fortune if she makes love to them? with other

pleasantries of that nature. Veneering, in his different way, is much occupied with the Fathers too, piously retiring with them into the conservatory, from which retreat the word 'Committee' is occasionally heard, and where the Fathers instruct Veneering how he must leave the valley of the piano on his left, take the level of the mantelpiece, cross by an open cutting at the candelabra, seize the carrying-traffic at the console, and cut up the opposition root and branch at the window curtains.

Mr and Mrs Podsnap are of the company, and the Fathers descry in Mrs Podsnap a fine woman. She is consigned to a Father - Boots's Father, who employs five hundred thousand men - and is brought to anchor on Veneering's left; thus affording opportunity to the sportive Tippins on his right (he, as usual, being mere vacant space), to entreat to be told something about those loves of Navvies, and whether they really do live on raw beefsteaks, and drink porter out of their barrows. But, in spite of such little skirmishes it is felt that this was to be a wondering dinner, and that the wondering must not be neglected. Accordingly, Brewer, as the man who has the greatest reputation to sustain, becomes the interpreter of the general instinct.

'I took,' says Brewer in a favourable pause, 'a cab this morning, and I rattled off to that Sale.'

Boots (devoured by envy) says, 'So did I.'

Buffer says, 'So did I'; but can find nobody to care whether he did or not.

'And what was it like?' inquires Veneering.

'I assure you,' replies Brewer, looking about for anybody else to address his answer to, and giving the preference to Lightwood; 'I assure you, the things were going for a song. Handsome things enough, but fetching nothing.'

'So I heard this afternoon,' says Lightwood.

Brewer begs to know now, would it be fair to ask a professional man how - on - earth - these - people - ever - did - come - TO - such - A - total smash? (Brewer's divisions being for emphasis.)

Lightwood replies that he was consulted certainly, but could give no opinion which would pay off the Bill of Sale, and therefore violates no confidence in supposing that it came of their living beyond their means.

'But how,' says Veneering, 'CAN people do that!'

Hah! That is felt on all hands to be a shot in the bull's eye. How CAN people do that! The Analytical Chemist going round with champagne, looks very much as if HE could give them a pretty good idea how people did that, if he had a mind.

'How,' says Mrs Veneering, laying down her fork to press her aquiline hands together at the tips of the fingers, and addressing the Father who travels the three thousand miles per week: 'how a mother can look at her baby, and know that she lives beyond her husband's means, I cannot imagine.'

Eugene suggests that Mrs Lammle, not being a mother, had no baby to look at.

'True,' says Mrs Veneering, 'but the principle is the same.'

Boots is clear that the principle is the same. So is Buffer. It is the unfortunate destiny of Buffer to damage a cause by espousing it. The rest of the company have meekly yielded to the proposition that the principle is the same, until Buffer says it is; when instantly a general murmur arises that the principle is not the same.

'But I don't understand,' says the Father of the three hundred and seventy-five thousand pounds, ' - if these people spoken of, occupied the position of being in society - they were in society?'

Veneering is bound to confess that they dined here, and were even married from here.

'Then I don't understand,' pursues the Father, 'how even their living beyond their means could bring them to what has been termed a total smash. Because, there is always such a thing as an adjustment of affairs, in the case of people of any standing at all.'

Eugene (who would seem to be in a gloomy state of suggestiveness), suggests, 'Suppose you have no means and live beyond them?'

This is too insolvent a state of things for the Father to entertain. It is too insolvent a state of things for any one with any self-respect to entertain, and is universally scouted. But, it is so amazing how any people can have come to a total smash, that everybody feels bound to account for it specially. One of the Fathers says, 'Gaming table.' Another of the Fathers says, 'Speculated without knowing that speculation is a science.' Boots says 'Horses.' Lady Tippins says to her fan, 'Two establishments.' Mr Podsnap, saying nothing, is referred to for his opinion; which he delivers as follows; much flushed and extremely angry:

'Don't ask me. I desire to take no part in the discussion of these people's affairs. I abhor the subject. It is an odious subject, an offensive subject, a subject that makes me sick, and I - ' And with his favourite right-arm flourish which sweeps away everything and settles it for ever, Mr Podsnap sweeps these inconveniently unexplainable wretches who have lived beyond their means and gone to total smash, off the face of the universe.

Eugene, leaning back in his chair, is observing Mr Podsnap with an irreverent face, and may be about to offer a new suggestion, when the Analytical is beheld in collision with the Coachman; the Coachman manifesting a purpose of coming at the company with a silver salver, as though intent upon making a collection for his wife and family; the Analytical cutting him off at the sideboard. The superior stateliness, if not the superior generalship, of the Analytical prevails over a man who is as nothing off the box; and the Coachman, yielding up his salver, retires defeated.

Then, the Analytical, perusing a scrap of paper lying on the salver, with the air of a literary Censor, adjusts it, takes his time about going to the table with it, and presents it to Mr Eugene Wrayburn. Whereupon the pleasant Tippins says aloud, 'The Lord Chancellor has resigned!'

With distracting coolness and slowness - for he knows the curiosity of the Charmer to be always devouring - Eugene makes a pretence of getting out an eyeglass, polishing it, and reading the paper with difficulty, long after he has seen what is written on it. What is written on it in wet ink, is:

'Young Blight.'

'Waiting?' says Eugene over his shoulder, in confidence, with the Analytical.

'Waiting,' returns the Analytical in responsive confidence.

Eugene looks 'Excuse me,' towards Mrs Veneering, goes out, and finds Young Blight, Mortimer's clerk, at the hall-door.

'You told me to bring him, sir, to wherever you was, if he come while you was out and I was in,' says that discreet young gentleman, standing on tiptoe to whisper; 'and I've brought him.'

'Sharp boy. Where is he?' asks Eugene.

'He's in a cab, sir, at the door. I thought it best not to show him, you see, if it could be helped; for he's a-shaking all over, like - Blight's

simile is perhaps inspired by the surrounding dishes of sweets - 'like Glue Monge.'

'Sharp boy again,' returns Eugene. 'I'll go to him.'

Goes out straightway, and, leisurely leaning his arms on the open window of a cab in waiting, looks in at Mr Dolls: who has brought his own atmosphere with him, and would seem from its odour to have brought it, for convenience of carriage, in a rum-cask.

'Now Dolls, wake up!'

'Mist Wrayburn? Drection! Fifteen shillings!'

After carefully reading the dingy scrap of paper handed to him, and as carefully tucking it into his waistcoat pocket, Eugene tells out the money; beginning incautiously by telling the first shilling into Mr Dolls's hand, which instantly jerks it out of window; and ending by telling the fifteen shillings on the seat.

'Give him a ride back to Charing Cross, sharp boy, and there get rid of him.'

Returning to the dining-room, and pausing for an instant behind the screen at the door, Eugene overhears, above the hum and clatter, the fair Tippins saying: 'I am dying to ask him what he was called out for!'

'Are you?' mutters Eugene, 'then perhaps if you can't ask him, you'll die. So I'll be a benefactor to society, and go. A stroll and a cigar, and I can think this over. Think this over.' Thus, with a thoughtful face, he finds his hat and cloak, unseen of the Analytical, and goes his way.