

Chapter 8 - A Few Grains Of Pepper

The dolls' dressmaker went no more to the business-premises of Pubsey and Co. in St Mary Axe, after chance had disclosed to her (as she supposed) the flinty and hypocritical character of Mr Riah. She often moralized over her work on the tricks and the manners of that venerable cheat, but made her little purchases elsewhere, and lived a secluded life. After much consultation with herself, she decided not to put Lizzie Hexam on her guard against the old man, arguing that the disappointment of finding him out would come upon her quite soon enough. Therefore, in her communication with her friend by letter, she was silent on this theme, and principally dilated on the backslidings of her bad child, who every day grew worse and worse.

'You wicked old boy,' Miss Wren would say to him, with a menacing forefinger, 'you'll force me to run away from you, after all, you will; and then you'll shake to bits, and there'll be nobody to pick up the pieces!'

At this foreshadowing of a desolate decease, the wicked old boy would whine and whimper, and would sit shaking himself into the lowest of low spirits, until such time as he could shake himself out of the house and shake another threepennyworth into himself. But dead drunk or dead sober (he had come to such a pass that he was least alive in the latter state), it was always on the conscience of the paralytic scarecrow that he had betrayed his sharp parent for sixty threepennyworths of rum, which were all gone, and that her sharpness would infallibly detect his having done it, sooner or later. All things considered therefore, and addition made of the state of his body to the state of his mind, the bed on which Mr Dolls reposed was a bed of roses from which the flowers and leaves had entirely faded, leaving him to lie upon the thorns and stalks.

On a certain day, Miss Wren was alone at her work, with the house-door set open for coolness, and was trolling in a small sweet voice a mournful little song which might have been the song of the doll she was dressing, bemoaning the brittleness and meltability of wax, when whom should she descry standing on the pavement, looking in at her, but Mr Fledgeby.

'I thought it was you?' said Fledgeby, coming up the two steps.

'Did you?' Miss Wren retorted. 'And I thought it was you, young man. Quite a coincidence. You're not mistaken, and I'm not mistaken. How clever we are!'

'Well, and how are you?' said Fledgeby.

'I am pretty much as usual, sir,' replied Miss Wren. 'A very unfortunate parent, worried out of my life and senses by a very bad child.'

Fledgeby's small eyes opened so wide that they might have passed for ordinary-sized eyes, as he stared about him for the very young person whom he supposed to be in question.

'But you're not a parent,' said Miss Wren, 'and consequently it's of no use talking to you upon a family subject. - To what am I to attribute the honour and favour?'

'To a wish to improve your acquaintance,' Mr Fledgeby replied.

Miss Wren, stopping to bite her thread, looked at him very knowingly.

'We never meet now,' said Fledgeby; 'do we?'

'No,' said Miss Wren, chopping off the word.

'So I had a mind,' pursued Fledgeby, 'to come and have a talk with you about our dodging friend, the child of Israel.'

'So HE gave you my address; did he?' asked Miss Wren.

'I got it out of him,' said Fledgeby, with a stammer.

'You seem to see a good deal of him,' remarked Miss Wren, with shrewd distrust. 'A good deal of him you seem to see, considering.'

'Yes, I do,' said Fledgeby. 'Considering.'

'Haven't you,' inquired the dressmaker, bending over the doll on which her art was being exercised, 'done interceding with him yet?'

'No,' said Fledgeby, shaking his head.

'La! Been interceding with him all this time, and sticking to him still?' said Miss Wren, busy with her work.

'Sticking to him is the word,' said Fledgeby.

Miss Wren pursued her occupation with a concentrated air, and asked, after an interval of silent industry:

'Are you in the army?'

'Not exactly,' said Fledgeby, rather flattered by the question.

'Navy?' asked Miss Wren.

'N - no,' said Fledgeby. He qualified these two negatives, as if he were not absolutely in either service, but was almost in both.

'What are you then?' demanded Miss Wren.

'I am a gentleman, I am,' said Fledgeby.

'Oh!' assented Jenny, screwing up her mouth with an appearance of conviction. 'Yes, to be sure! That accounts for your having so much time to give to interceding. But only to think how kind and friendly a gentleman you must be!'

Mr Fledgeby found that he was skating round a board marked Dangerous, and had better cut out a fresh track. 'Let's get back to the dodgerest of the dodgers,' said he. 'What's he up to in the case of your friend the handsome gal? He must have some object. What's his object?'

'Cannot undertake to say, sir, I am sure!' returned Miss Wren, composedly.

'He won't acknowledge where she's gone,' said Fledgeby; 'and I have a fancy that I should like to have another look at her. Now I know he knows where she is gone.'

'Cannot undertake to say, sir, I am sure!' Miss Wren again rejoined.

'And you know where she is gone,' hazarded Fledgeby.

'Cannot undertake to say, sir, really,' replied Miss Wren.

The quaint little chin met Mr Fledgeby's gaze with such a baffling hitch, that that agreeable gentleman was for some time at a loss how to resume his fascinating part in the dialogue. At length he said:

'Miss Jenny! - That's your name, if I don't mistake?'

'Probably you don't mistake, sir,' was Miss Wren's cool answer; 'because you had it on the best authority. Mine, you know.'

'Miss Jenny! Instead of coming up and being dead, let's come out and look alive. It'll pay better, I assure you,' said Fledgeby, bestowing an inveigling twinkle or two upon the dressmaker. 'You'll find it pay better.'

'Perhaps,' said Miss Jenny, holding out her doll at arm's length, and critically contemplating the effect of her art with her scissors on her lips and her head thrown back, as if her interest lay there, and not in the conversation; 'perhaps you'll explain your meaning, young man, which is Greek to me. - You must have another touch of blue in your trimming, my dear.' Having addressed the last remark to her fair client, Miss Wren proceeded to snip at some blue fragments that lay before her, among fragments of all colours, and to thread a needle from a skein of blue silk.

'Look here,' said Fledgeby. - 'Are you attending?'

'I am attending, sir,' replied Miss Wren, without the slightest appearance of so doing. 'Another touch of blue in your trimming, my dear.'

'Well, look here,' said Fledgeby, rather discouraged by the circumstances under which he found himself pursuing the conversation. 'If you're attending - '

('Light blue, my sweet young lady,' remarked Miss Wren, in a sprightly tone, 'being best suited to your fair complexion and your flaxen curls.')

'I say, if you're attending,' proceeded Fledgeby, 'it'll pay better in this way. It'll lead in a roundabout manner to your buying damage and waste of Pubsey and Co. at a nominal price, or even getting it for nothing.'

'Aha!' thought the dressmaker. 'But you are not so roundabout, Little Eyes, that I don't notice your answering for Pubsey and Co. after all! Little Eyes, Little Eyes, you're too cunning by half.'

'And I take it for granted,' pursued Fledgeby, 'that to get the most of your materials for nothing would be well worth your while, Miss Jenny?'

'You may take it for granted,' returned the dressmaker with many knowing nods, 'that it's always well worth my while to make money.'

'Now,' said Fledgeby approvingly, 'you're answering to a sensible purpose. Now, you're coming out and looking alive! So I make so free, Miss Jenny, as to offer the remark, that you and Judah were too thick together to last. You can't come to be intimate with such a deep file as Judah without beginning to see a little way into him, you know,' said Fledgeby with a wink.

'I must own,' returned the dressmaker, with her eyes upon her work, 'that we are not good friends at present.'

'I know you're not good friends at present,' said Fledgeby. 'I know all about it. I should like to pay off Judah, by not letting him have his own deep way in everything. In most things he'll get it by hook or by crook, but - hang it all! - don't let him have his own deep way in everything. That's too much.' Mr Fledgeby said this with some display of indignant warmth, as if he was counsel in the cause for Virtue.

'How can I prevent his having his own way?' began the dressmaker.

'Deep way, I called it,' said Fledgeby.

' - His own deep way, in anything?'

'I'll tell you,' said Fledgeby. 'I like to hear you ask it, because it's looking alive. It's what I should expect to find in one of your sagacious understanding. Now, candidly.'

'Eh?' cried Miss Jenny.

'I said, now candidly,' Mr Fledgeby explained, a little put out.

'Oh-h!'

'I should be glad to countermine him, respecting the handsome gal, your friend. He means something there. You may depend upon it, Judah means something there. He has a motive, and of course his motive is a dark motive. Now, whatever his motive is, it's necessary to his motive' - Mr Fledgeby's constructive powers were not equal to the avoidance of some tautology here - 'that it should be kept from me, what he has done with her. So I put it to you, who know: What HAS he done with her? I ask no more. And is that asking much, when you understand that it will pay?'

Miss Jenny Wren, who had cast her eyes upon the bench again after her last interruption, sat looking at it, needle in hand but not working, for some moments. She then briskly resumed her work, and said with a sidelong glance of her eyes and chin at Mr Fledgeby:

'Where d'ye live?'

'Albany, Piccadilly,' replied Fledgeby.

'When are you at home?'

'When you like.'

'Breakfast-time?' said Jenny, in her abruptest and shortest manner.

'No better time in the day,' said Fledgeby.

'I'll look in upon you to-morrow, young man. Those two ladies,' pointing to dolls, 'have an appointment in Bond Street at ten precisely. When I've dropped 'em there, I'll drive round to you. With a weird little laugh, Miss Jenny pointed to her crutch-stick as her equipage.

'This is looking alive indeed!' cried Fledgeby, rising.

'Mark you! I promise you nothing,' said the dolls' dressmaker, dabbing two dabs at him with her needle, as if she put out both his eyes.

'No no. I understand,' returned Fledgeby. 'The damage and waste question shall be settled first. It shall be made to pay; don't you be afraid. Good-day, Miss Jenny.'

'Good-day, young man.'

Mr Fledgeby's prepossessing form withdrew itself; and the little dressmaker, clipping and snipping and stitching, and stitching and snipping and clipping, fell to work at a great rate; musing and muttering all the time.

'Misty, misty, misty. Can't make it out. Little Eyes and the wolf in a conspiracy? Or Little Eyes and the wolf against one another? Can't make it out. My poor Lizzie, have they both designs against you, either way? Can't make it out. Is Little Eyes Pubsey, and the wolf Co? Can't make it out. Pubsey true to Co, and Co to Pubsey? Pubsey false to Co, and Co to Pubsey? Can't make it out. What said Little Eyes? 'Now, candidly?' Ah! However the cat jumps, HE'S a liar. That's all I can make out at present; but you may go to bed in the Albany, Piccadilly, with THAT for your pillow, young man!' Thereupon, the little dressmaker again dabbed out his eyes separately, and making a loop in the air of her thread and deftly catching it into a knot with her needle, seemed to bowstring him into the bargain.

For the terrors undergone by Mr Dolls that evening when his little parent sat profoundly meditating over her work, and when he imagined himself found out, as often as she changed her attitude, or turned her eyes towards him, there is no adequate name. Moreover it was her habit to shake her head at that wretched old boy whenever she caught his eye as he shivered and shook. What are popularly called 'the trembles' being in full force upon him that evening, and likewise what are popularly called 'the horrors,' he had a very bad time of it; which was not made better by his being so remorseful as frequently to moan 'Sixty threepennorths.' This imperfect sentence not being at all intelligible as a confession, but sounding like a

Gargantuan order for a dram, brought him into new difficulties by occasioning his parent to pounce at him in a more than usually snappish manner, and to overwhelm him with bitter reproaches.

What was a bad time for Mr Dolls, could not fail to be a bad time for the dolls' dressmaker. However, she was on the alert next morning, and drove to Bond Street, and set down the two ladies punctually, and then directed her equipage to conduct her to the Albany. Arrived at the doorway of the house in which Mr Fledgeby's chambers were, she found a lady standing there in a travelling dress, holding in her hand - of all things in the world - a gentleman's hat.

'You want some one?' said the lady in a stern manner.

'I am going up stairs to Mr Fledgeby's.'

'You cannot do that at this moment. There is a gentleman with him. I am waiting for the gentleman. His business with Mr Fledgeby will very soon be transacted, and then you can go up. Until the gentleman comes down, you must wait here.'

While speaking, and afterwards, the lady kept watchfully between her and the staircase, as if prepared to oppose her going up, by force. The lady being of a stature to stop her with a hand, and looking mightily determined, the dressmaker stood still.

'Well? Why do you listen?' asked the lady.

'I am not listening,' said the dressmaker.

'What do you hear?' asked the lady, altering her phrase.

'Is it a kind of a spluttering somewhere?' said the dressmaker, with an inquiring look.

'Mr Fledgeby in his shower-bath, perhaps,' remarked the lady, smiling.

'And somebody's beating a carpet, I think?'

'Mr Fledgeby's carpet, I dare say,' replied the smiling lady.

Miss Wren had a reasonably good eye for smiles, being well accustomed to them on the part of her young friends, though their smiles mostly ran smaller than in nature. But she had never seen so singular a smile as that upon this lady's face. It twitched her nostrils open in a remarkable manner, and contracted her lips and eyebrows. It was a smile of enjoyment too, though of such a fierce kind that Miss

Wren thought she would rather not enjoy herself than do it in that way.

'Well!' said the lady, watching her. 'What now?'

'I hope there's nothing the matter!' said the dressmaker.

'Where?' inquired the lady.

'I don't know where,' said Miss Wren, staring about her. 'But I never heard such odd noises. Don't you think I had better call somebody?'

'I think you had better not,' returned the lady with a significant frown, and drawing closer.

On this hint, the dressmaker relinquished the idea, and stood looking at the lady as hard as the lady looked at her. Meanwhile the dressmaker listened with amazement to the odd noises which still continued, and the lady listened too, but with a coolness in which there was no trace of amazement.

Soon afterwards, came a slamming and banging of doors; and then came running down stairs, a gentleman with whiskers, and out of breath, who seemed to be red-hot.

'Is your business done, Alfred?' inquired the lady.

'Very thoroughly done,' replied the gentleman, as he took his hat from her.

'You can go up to Mr Fledgeby as soon as you like,' said the lady, moving haughtily away.

'Oh! And you can take these three pieces of stick with you,' added the gentleman politely, 'and say, if you please, that they come from Mr Alfred Lammle, with his compliments on leaving England. Mr Alfred Lammle. Be so good as not to forget the name.'

The three pieces of stick were three broken and frayed fragments of a stout lithe cane. Miss Jenny taking them wonderingly, and the gentleman repeating with a grin, 'Mr Alfred Lammle, if you'll be so good. Compliments, on leaving England,' the lady and gentleman walked away quite deliberately, and Miss Jenny and her crutch-stick went up stairs. 'Lammle, Lammle, Lammle?' Miss Jenny repeated as she panted from stair to stair, 'where have I heard that name? Lammle, Lammle? I know! Saint Mary Axe!'

With a gleam of new intelligence in her sharp face, the dolls' dressmaker pulled at Fledgeby's bell. No one answered; but, from within the chambers, there proceeded a continuous spluttering sound of a highly singular and unintelligible nature.

'Good gracious! Is Little Eyes choking?' cried Miss Jenny.

Pulling at the bell again and getting no reply, she pushed the outer door, and found it standing ajar. No one being visible on her opening it wider, and the spluttering continuing, she took the liberty of opening an inner door, and then beheld the extraordinary spectacle of Mr Fledgeby in a shirt, a pair of Turkish trousers, and a Turkish cap, rolling over and over on his own carpet, and spluttering wonderfully.

'Oh Lord!' gasped Mr Fledgeby. 'Oh my eye! Stop thief! I am strangling. Fire! Oh my eye! A glass of water. Give me a glass of water. Shut the door. Murder! Oh Lord!' And then rolled and spluttered more than ever.

Hurrying into another room, Miss Jenny got a glass of water, and brought it for Fledgeby's relief: who, gasping, spluttering, and rattling in his throat betweenwhiles, drank some water, and laid his head faintly on her arm.

'Oh my eye!' cried Fledgeby, struggling anew. 'It's salt and snuff. It's up my nose, and down my throat, and in my wind-pipe. Ugh! Ow! Ow! Ow! Ah - h - h - h!' And here, crowing fearfully, with his eyes starting out of his head, appeared to be contending with every mortal disease incidental to poultry.

'And Oh my Eye, I'm so sore!' cried Fledgeby, starting, over on his back, in a spasmodic way that caused the dressmaker to retreat to the wall. 'Oh I smart so! Do put something to my back and arms, and legs and shoulders. Ugh! It's down my throat again and can't come up. Ow! Ow! Ow! Ah - h - h - h! Oh I smart so!' Here Mr Fledgeby bounded up, and bounded down, and went rolling over and over again.

The dolls' dressmaker looked on until he rolled himself into a corner with his Turkish slippers uppermost, and then, resolving in the first place to address her ministrations to the salt and snuff, gave him more water and slapped his back. But, the latter application was by no means a success, causing Mr Fledgeby to scream, and to cry out, 'Oh my eye! don't slap me! I'm covered with weales and I smart so!'

However, he gradually ceased to choke and crow, saving at intervals, and Miss Jenny got him into an easy-chair: where, with his eyes red and watery, with his features swollen, and with some half-dozen livid bars across his face, he presented a most rueful sight.

'What ever possessed you to take salt and snuff, young man?' inquired Miss Jenny.

'I didn't take it,' the dismal youth replied. 'It was crammed into my mouth.'

'Who crammed it?' asked Miss Jenny.

'He did,' answered Fledgeby. 'The assassin. Lammle. He rubbed it into my mouth and up my nose and down my throat - Ow! Ow! Ow! Ah - h - h - h! Ugh! - to prevent my crying out, and then cruelly assaulted me.'

'With this?' asked Miss Jenny, showing the pieces of cane.

'That's the weapon,' said Fledgeby, eyeing it with the air of an acquaintance. 'He broke it over me. Oh I smart so! How did you come by it?'

'When he ran down stairs and joined the lady he had left in the hall with his hat' - Miss Jenny began.

'Oh!' groaned Mr Fledgeby, writhing, 'she was holding his hat, was she? I might have known she was in it.'

'When he came down stairs and joined the lady who wouldn't let me come up, he gave me the pieces for you, and I was to say, "With Mr Alfred Lammle's compliments on his leaving England." Miss Jenny said it with such spiteful satisfaction, and such a hitch of her chin and eyes as might have added to Mr Fledgeby's miseries, if he could have noticed either, in his bodily pain with his hand to his head.

'Shall I go for the police?' inquired Miss Jenny, with a nimble start towards the door.

'Stop! No, don't!' cried Fledgeby. 'Don't, please. We had better keep it quiet. Will you be so good as shut the door? Oh I do smart so!'

In testimony of the extent to which he smarted, Mr Fledgeby came wallowing out of the easy-chair, and took another roll on the carpet.

Now the door's shut,' said Mr Fledgeby, sitting up in anguish, with his Turkish cap half on and half off, and the bars on his face getting bluer, 'do me the kindness to look at my back and shoulders. They must be in an awful state, for I hadn't got my dressing-gown on, when the brute came rushing in. Cut my shirt away from the collar; there's a pair of scissors on that table. Oh!' groaned Mr Fledgeby, with his hand to his head again. 'How I do smart, to be sure!'

'There?' inquired Miss Jenny, alluding to the back and shoulders.

'Oh Lord, yes!' moaned Fledgeby, rocking himself. 'And all over! Everywhere!'

The busy little dressmaker quickly snipped the shirt away, and laid bare the results of as furious and sound a thrashing as even Mr Fledgeby merited. 'You may well smart, young man!' exclaimed Miss Jenny. And stealthily rubbed her little hands behind him, and poked a few exultant pokes with her two forefingers over the crown of his head.

'What do you think of vinegar and brown paper?' inquired the suffering Fledgeby, still rocking and moaning. 'Does it look as if vinegar and brown paper was the sort of application?'

'Yes,' said Miss Jenny, with a silent chuckle. 'It looks as if it ought to be Pickled.'

Mr Fledgeby collapsed under the word 'Pickled,' and groaned again. 'My kitchen is on this floor,' he said; 'you'll find brown paper in a dresser-drawer there, and a bottle of vinegar on a shelf. Would you have the kindness to make a few plasters and put 'em on? It can't be kept too quiet.'

'One, two - hum - five, six. You'll want six,' said the dress-maker.

'There's smart enough,' whimpered Mr Fledgeby, groaning and writhing again, 'for sixty.'

Miss Jenny repaired to the kitchen, scissors in hand, found the brown paper and found the vinegar, and skilfully cut out and steeped six large plasters. When they were all lying ready on the dresser, an idea occurred to her as she was about to gather them up.

'I think,' said Miss Jenny with a silent laugh, 'he ought to have a little pepper? Just a few grains? I think the young man's tricks and manners make a claim upon his friends for a little pepper?'

Mr Fledgeby's evil star showing her the pepper-box on the chimneypiece, she climbed upon a chair, and got it down, and sprinkled all the plasters with a judicious hand. She then went back to Mr Fledgeby, and stuck them all on him: Mr Fledgeby uttering a sharp howl as each was put in its place.

'There, young man!' said the dolls' dressmaker. 'Now I hope you feel pretty comfortable?'

Apparently, Mr Fledgeby did not, for he cried by way of answer, 'Oh - h how I do smart!'

Miss Jenny got his Persian gown upon him, extinguished his eyes crookedly with his Persian cap, and helped him to his bed: upon which he climbed groaning. 'Business between you and me being out of the question to-day, young man, and my time being precious,' said Miss Jenny then, 'I'll make myself scarce. Are you comfortable now?'

'Oh my eye!' cried Mr Fledgeby. 'No, I ain't. Oh - h - h! how I do smart!'

The last thing Miss Jenny saw, as she looked back before closing the room door, was Mr Fledgeby in the act of plunging and gambolling all over his bed, like a porpoise or dolphin in its native element. She then shut the bedroom door, and all the other doors, and going down stairs and emerging from the Albany into the busy streets, took omnibus for Saint Mary Axe: pressing on the road all the gaily-dressed ladies whom she could see from the window, and making them unconscious lay-figures for dolls, while she mentally cut them out and basted them.