Chapter 8

Never Wonder

LET us strike the key-note again, before pursuing the tune.

When she was half a dozen years younger, Louisa had been overheard to begin a conversation with her brother one day, by saying 'Tom, I wonder' - upon which Mr. Gradgrind, who was the person overhearing, stepped forth into the light and said, 'Louisa, never wonder!'

Herein lay the spring of the mechanical art and mystery of educating the reason without stooping to the cultivation of the sentiments and affections. Never wonder. By means of addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division, settle everything somehow, and never wonder. Bring to me, says M'Choakumchild, yonder baby just able to walk, and I will engage that it shall never wonder.

Now, besides very many babies just able to walk, there happened to be in Coketown a considerable population of babies who had been walking against time towards the infinite world, twenty, thirty, forty, fifty years and more. These portentous infants being alarming creatures to stalk about in any human society, the eighteen denominations incessantly scratched one another's faces and pulled one another's hair by way of agreeing on the steps to be taken for their improvement - which they never did; a surprising circumstance, when the happy adaptation of the means to the end is considered. Still, although they differed in every other particular, conceivable and inconceivable (especially inconceivable), they were pretty well united on the point that these unlucky infants were never to wonder. Body number one, said they must take everything on trust. Body number two, said they must take everything on political economy. Body number three, wrote leaden little books for them, showing how the good grown-up baby invariably got to the Savings-bank, and the bad grown-up baby invariably got transported. Body number four, under dreary pretences of being droll (when it was very melancholy indeed), made the shallowest pretences of concealing pitfalls of knowledge, into which it was the duty of these babies to be smuggled and inveigled. But, all the bodies agreed that they were never to wonder.

There was a library in Coketown, to which general access was easy. Mr. Gradgrind greatly tormented his mind about what the people read in this library: a point whereon little rivers of tabular statements periodically flowed into the howling ocean of tabular statements, which no diver ever got to any depth in and came up sane. It was a disheartening circumstance, but a melancholy fact, that even these readers persisted in wondering. They wondered about human nature,

human passions, human hopes and fears, the struggles, triumphs and defeats, the cares and joys and sorrows, the lives and deaths of common men and women! They sometimes, after fifteen hours' work, sat down to read mere fables about men and women, more or less like themselves, and about children, more or less like their own. They took De Foe to their bosoms, instead of Euclid, and seemed to be on the whole more comforted by Goldsmith than by Cocker. Mr. Gradgrind was for ever working, in print and out of print, at this eccentric sum, and he never could make out how it yielded this unaccountable product.

'I am sick of my life, Loo. I, hate it altogether, and I hate everybody except you,' said the unnatural young Thomas Gradgrind in the hair-cutting chamber at twilight.

'You don't hate Sissy, Tom?'

'I hate to be obliged to call her Jupe. And she hates me,' said Tom, moodily.

'No, she does not, Tom, I am sure!'

'She must,' said Tom. 'She must just hate and detest the whole set-out of us. They'll bother her head off, I think, before they have done with her. Already she's getting as pale as wax, and as heavy as - I am.'

Young Thomas expressed these sentiments sitting astride of a chair before the fire, with his arms on the back, and his sulky face on his arms. His sister sat in the darker corner by the fireside, now looking at him, now looking at the bright sparks as they dropped upon the hearth.

'As to me,' said Tom, tumbling his hair all manner of ways with his sulky hands, 'I am a Donkey, that's what I am. I am as obstinate as one, I am more stupid than one, I get as much pleasure as one, and I should like to kick like one.'

'Not me, I hope, Tom?'

'No, Loo; I wouldn't hurt you. I made an exception of you at first. I don't know what this - jolly old - Jaundiced Jail,' Tom had paused to find a sufficiently complimentary and expressive name for the parental roof, and seemed to relieve his mind for a moment by the strong alliteration of this one, 'would be without you.'

'Indeed, Tom? Do you really and truly say so?'

'Why, of course I do. What's the use of talking about it!' returned Tom, chafing his face on his coat-sleeve, as if to mortify his flesh, and have it in unison with his spirit.

'Because, Tom,' said his sister, after silently watching the sparks awhile, 'as I get older, and nearer growing up, I often sit wondering here, and think how unfortunate it is for me that I can't reconcile you to home better than I am able to do. I don't know what other girls know. I can't play to you, or sing to you. I can't talk to you so as to lighten your mind, for I never see any amusing sights or read any amusing books that it would be a pleasure or a relief to you to talk about, when you are tired.'

'Well, no more do I. I am as bad as you in that respect; and I am a Mule too, which you're not. If father was determined to make me either a Prig or a Mule, and I am not a Prig, why, it stands to reason, I must be a Mule. And so I am,' said Tom, desperately.

'It's a great pity,' said Louisa, after another pause, and speaking thoughtfully out of her dark corner: 'it's a great pity, Tom. It's very unfortunate for both of us.'

'Oh! You,' said Tom; 'you are a girl, Loo, and a girl comes out of it better than a boy does. I don't miss anything in you. You are the only pleasure I have - you can brighten even this place - and you can always lead me as you like.'

'You are a dear brother, Tom; and while you think I can do such things, I don't so much mind knowing better. Though I do know better, Tom, and am very sorry for it.' She came and kissed him, and went back into her corner again.

'I wish I could collect all the Facts we hear so much about,' said Tom, spitefully setting his teeth, 'and all the Figures, and all the people who found them out: and I wish I could put a thousand barrels of gunpowder under them, and blow them all up together! However, when I go to live with old Bounderby, I'll have my revenge.'

'Your revenge, Tom?'

'I mean, I'll enjoy myself a little, and go about and see something, and hear something. I'll recompense myself for the way in which I have been brought up.'

'But don't disappoint yourself beforehand, Tom. Mr. Bounderby thinks as father thinks, and is a great deal rougher, and not half so kind.'

‘Oh!’ said Tom, laughing; ‘I don’t mind that. I shall very well know how to manage and smooth old Bounderby!’

Their shadows were defined upon the wall, but those of the high presses in the room were all blended together on the wall and on the ceiling, as if the brother and sister were overhung by a dark cavern. Or, a fanciful imagination - if such treason could have been there - might have made it out to be the shadow of their subject, and of its lowering association with their future.

‘What is your great mode of smoothing and managing, Tom? Is it a secret?’

‘Oh!’ said Tom, ‘if it is a secret, it’s not far off. It’s you. You are his little pet, you are his favourite; he’ll do anything for you. When he says to me what I don’t like, I shall say to him, "My sister Loo will be hurt and disappointed, Mr. Bounderby. She always used to tell me she was sure you would be easier with me than this." That’ll bring him about, or nothing will.’

After waiting for some answering remark, and getting none, Tom wearily relapsed into the present time, and twined himself yawning round and about the rails of his chair, and rumpled his head more and more, until he suddenly looked up, and asked:

‘Have you gone to sleep, Loo?’

‘No, Tom. I am looking at the fire.’

‘You seem to find more to look at in it than ever I could find,’ said Tom. ‘Another of the advantages, I suppose, of being a girl.’

‘Tom,’ enquired his sister, slowly, and in a curious tone, as if she were reading what she asked in the fire, and it was not quite plainly written there, ‘do you look forward with any satisfaction to this change to Mr. Bounderby’s?’

‘Why, there’s one thing to be said of it,’ returned Tom, pushing his chair from him, and standing up; ‘it will be getting away from home.’

‘There is one thing to be said of it,’ Louisa repeated in her former curious tone; ‘it will be getting away from home. Yes.’

‘Not but what I shall be very unwilling, both to leave you, Loo, and to leave you here. But I must go, you know, whether I like it or not; and I had better go where I can take with me some advantage of your influence, than where I should lose it altogether. Don’t you see?’

'Yes, Tom.'

The answer was so long in coming, though there was no indecision in it, that Tom went and leaned on the back of her chair, to contemplate the fire which so engrossed her, from her point of view, and see what he could make of it.

'Except that it is a fire,' said Tom, 'it looks to me as stupid and blank as everything else looks. What do you see in it? Not a circus?'

'I don't see anything in it, Tom, particularly. But since I have been looking at it, I have been wondering about you and me, grown up.'

'Wondering again!' said Tom.

'I have such unmanageable thoughts,' returned his sister, 'that they will wonder.'

'Then I beg of you, Louisa,' said Mrs. Gradgrind, who had opened the door without being heard, 'to do nothing of that description, for goodness' sake, you inconsiderate girl, or I shall never hear the last of it from your father. And, Thomas, it is really shameful, with my poor head continually wearing me out, that a boy brought up as you have been, and whose education has cost what yours has, should be found encouraging his sister to wonder, when he knows his father has expressly said that she is not to do it.'

Louisa denied Tom's participation in the offence; but her mother stopped her with the conclusive answer, 'Louisa, don't tell me, in my state of health; for unless you had been encouraged, it is morally and physically impossible that you could have done it.'

'I was encouraged by nothing, mother, but by looking at the red sparks dropping out of the fire, and whitening and dying. It made me think, after all, how short my life would be, and how little I could hope to do in it.'

'Nonsense!' said Mrs. Gradgrind, rendered almost energetic. 'Nonsense! Don't stand there and tell me such stuff, Louisa, to my face, when you know very well that if it was ever to reach your father's ears I should never hear the last of it. After all the trouble that has been taken with you! After the lectures you have attended, and the experiments you have seen! After I have heard you myself, when the whole of my right side has been benumbed, going on with your master about combustion, and calcination, and calorification, and I may say every kind of ation that could drive a poor invalid distracted, to hear you talking in this absurd way about sparks and ashes! I wish,' whimpered Mrs. Gradgrind, taking a chair, and discharging her

strongest point before succumbing under these mere shadows of facts, 'yes, I really do wish that I had never had a family, and then you would have known what it was to do without me!'