

BOOK THE SECOND

REAPING

Chapter 1

Effects In The Bank

A SUNNY midsummer day. There was such a thing sometimes, even in Coketown.

Seen from a distance in such weather, Coketown lay shrouded in a haze of its own, which appeared impervious to the sun's rays. You only knew the town was there, because you knew there could have been no such sulky blotch upon the prospect without a town. A blur of soot and smoke, now confusedly tending this way, now that way, now aspiring to the vault of Heaven, now murkily creeping along the earth, as the wind rose and fell, or changed its quarter: a dense formless jumble, with sheets of cross light in it, that showed nothing but masses of darkness:- Coketown in the distance was suggestive of itself, though not a brick of it could be seen.

The wonder was, it was there at all. It had been ruined so often, that it was amazing how it had borne so many shocks. Surely there never was such fragile china-ware as that of which the millers of Coketown were made. Handle them never so lightly, and they fell to pieces with such ease that you might suspect them of having been flawed before. They were ruined, when they were required to send labouring children to school; they were ruined when inspectors were appointed to look into their works; they were ruined, when such inspectors considered it doubtful whether they were quite justified in chopping people up with their machinery; they were utterly undone, when it was hinted that perhaps they need not always make quite so much smoke. Besides Mr. Bounderby's gold spoon which was generally received in Coketown, another prevalent fiction was very popular there. It took the form of a threat. Whenever a Coketowner felt he was ill-used - that is to say, whenever he was not left entirely alone, and it was proposed to hold him accountable for the consequences of any of his acts - he was sure to come out with the awful menace, that he would 'sooner pitch his property into the Atlantic.' This had terrified the Home Secretary within an inch of his life, on several occasions.

However, the Coketowners were so patriotic after all, that they never had pitched their property into the Atlantic yet, but, on the contrary, had been kind enough to take mighty good care of it. So there it was, in the haze yonder; and it increased and multiplied.

The streets were hot and dusty on the summer day, and the sun was so bright that it even shone through the heavy vapour drooping over Coketown, and could not be looked at steadily. Stokers emerged from low underground doorways into factory yards, and sat on steps, and posts, and palings, wiping their swarthy visages, and contemplating coals. The whole town seemed to be frying in oil. There was a stifling smell of hot oil everywhere. The steam-engines shone with it, the dresses of the Hands were soiled with it, the mills throughout their many stories oozed and trickled it. The atmosphere of those Fairy palaces was like the breath of the simoom: and their inhabitants, wasting with heat, toiled languidly in the desert. But no temperature made the melancholy mad elephants more mad or more sane. Their wearisome heads went up and down at the same rate, in hot weather and cold, wet weather and dry, fair weather and foul. The measured motion of their shadows on the walls, was the substitute Coketown had to show for the shadows of rustling woods; while, for the summer hum of insects, it could offer, all the year round, from the dawn of Monday to the night of Saturday, the whirr of shafts and wheels.

Drowsily they whirred all through this sunny day, making the passenger more sleepy and more hot as he passed the humming walls of the mills. Sun-blinds, and sprinklings of water, a little cooled the main streets and the shops; but the mills, and the courts and alleys, baked at a fierce heat. Down upon the river that was black and thick with dye, some Coketown boys who were at large - a rare sight there - rowed a crazy boat, which made a spumous track upon the water as it jogged along, while every dip of an oar stirred up vile smells. But the sun itself, however beneficent, generally, was less kind to Coketown than hard frost, and rarely looked intently into any of its closer regions without engendering more death than life. So does the eye of Heaven itself become an evil eye, when incapable or sordid hands are interposed between it and the things it looks upon to bless.

Mrs. Sparsit sat in her afternoon apartment at the Bank, on the shadier side of the frying street. Office-hours were over: and at that period of the day, in warm weather, she usually embellished with her genteel presence, a managerial board-room over the public office. Her own private sitting-room was a story higher, at the window of which post of observation she was ready, every morning, to greet Mr. Bounderby, as he came across the road, with the sympathizing recognition appropriate to a Victim. He had been married now a year; and Mrs. Sparsit had never released him from her determined pity a moment.

The Bank offered no violence to the wholesome monotony of the town. It was another red brick house, with black outside shutters, green inside blinds, a black street-door up two white steps, a brazen door-plate, and a brazen door-handle full stop. It was a size larger than Mr.

Bounderby's house, as other houses were from a size to half-a-dozen sizes smaller; in all other particulars, it was strictly according to pattern.

Mrs. Sparsit was conscious that by coming in the evening-tide among the desks and writing implements, she shed a feminine, not to say also aristocratic, grace upon the office. Seated, with her needlework or netting apparatus, at the window, she had a self-laudatory sense of correcting, by her ladylike deportment, the rude business aspect of the place. With this impression of her interesting character upon her, Mrs. Sparsit considered herself, in some sort, the Bank Fairy. The townspeople who, in their passing and repassing, saw her there, regarded her as the Bank Dragon keeping watch over the treasures of the mine.

What those treasures were, Mrs. Sparsit knew as little as they did. Gold and silver coin, precious paper, secrets that if divulged would bring vague destruction upon vague persons (generally, however, people whom she disliked), were the chief items in her ideal catalogue thereof. For the rest, she knew that after office-hours, she reigned supreme over all the office furniture, and over a locked-up iron room with three locks, against the door of which strong chamber the light porter laid his head every night, on a truckle bed, that disappeared at cockcrow. Further, she was lady paramount over certain vaults in the basement, sharply spiked off from communication with the predatory world; and over the relics of the current day's work, consisting of blots of ink, worn-out pens, fragments of wafers, and scraps of paper torn so small, that nothing interesting could ever be deciphered on them when Mrs. Sparsit tried. Lastly, she was guardian over a little armoury of cutlasses and carbines, arrayed in vengeful order above one of the official chimney-pieces; and over that respectable tradition never to be separated from a place of business claiming to be wealthy - a row of fire-buckets - vessels calculated to be of no physical utility on any occasion, but observed to exercise a fine moral influence, almost equal to bullion, on most beholders.

A deaf serving-woman and the light porter completed Mrs. Sparsit's empire. The deaf serving-woman was rumoured to be wealthy; and a saying had for years gone about among the lower orders of Coketown, that she would be murdered some night when the Bank was shut, for the sake of her money. It was generally considered, indeed, that she had been due some time, and ought to have fallen long ago; but she had kept her life, and her situation, with an ill-conditioned tenacity that occasioned much offence and disappointment.

Mrs. Sparsit's tea was just set for her on a pert little table, with its tripod of legs in an attitude, which she insinuated after office-hours, into the company of the stern, leathern-topped, long board-table that

bestrode the middle of the room. The light porter placed the tea-tray on it, knuckling his forehead as a form of homage.

'Thank you, Bitzer,' said Mrs. Sparsit.

'Thank you, ma'am,' returned the light porter. He was a very light porter indeed; as light as in the days when he blinkingly defined a horse, for girl number twenty.

'All is shut up, Bitzer?' said Mrs. Sparsit.

'All is shut up, ma'am.'

'And what,' said Mrs. Sparsit, pouring out her tea, 'is the news of the day? Anything?'

'Well, ma'am, I can't say that I have heard anything particular. Our people are a bad lot, ma'am; but that is no news, unfortunately.'

'What are the restless wretches doing now?' asked Mrs. Sparsit.

'Merely going on in the old way, ma'am. Uniting, and leaguings, and engaging to stand by one another.'

'It is much to be regretted,' said Mrs. Sparsit, making her nose more Roman and her eyebrows more Coriolanian in the strength of her severity, 'that the united masters allow of any such class-combinations.'

'Yes, ma'am,' said Bitzer.

'Being united themselves, they ought one and all to set their faces against employing any man who is united with any other man,' said Mrs. Sparsit.

'They have done that, ma'am,' returned Bitzer; 'but it rather fell through, ma'am.'

'I do not pretend to understand these things,' said Mrs. Sparsit, with dignity, 'my lot having been signally cast in a widely different sphere; and Mr. Sparsit, as a Fowler, being also quite out of the pale of any such dissensions. I only know that these people must be conquered, and that it's high time it was done, once for all.'

'Yes, ma'am,' returned Bitzer, with a demonstration of great respect for Mrs. Sparsit's oracular authority. 'You couldn't put it clearer, I am sure, ma'am.'

As this was his usual hour for having a little confidential chat with Mrs. Sparsit, and as he had already caught her eye and seen that she was going to ask him something, he made a pretence of arranging the rulers, inkstands, and so forth, while that lady went on with her tea, glancing through the open window, down into the street.

'Has it been a busy day, Bitzer?' asked Mrs. Sparsit.

'Not a very busy day, my lady. About an average day.' He now and then slid into my lady, instead of ma'am, as an involuntary acknowledgment of Mrs. Sparsit's personal dignity and claims to reverence.

'The clerks,' said Mrs. Sparsit, carefully brushing an imperceptible crumb of bread and butter from her left-hand mitten, 'are trustworthy, punctual, and industrious, of course?'

'Yes, ma'am, pretty fair, ma'am. With the usual exception.'

He held the respectable office of general spy and informer in the establishment, for which volunteer service he received a present at Christmas, over and above his weekly wage. He had grown into an extremely clear-headed, cautious, prudent young man, who was safe to rise in the world. His mind was so exactly regulated, that he had no affections or passions. All his proceedings were the result of the nicest and coldest calculation; and it was not without cause that Mrs. Sparsit habitually observed of him, that he was a young man of the steadiest principle she had ever known. Having satisfied himself, on his father's death, that his mother had a right of settlement in Coketown, this excellent young economist had asserted that right for her with such a steadfast adherence to the principle of the case, that she had been shut up in the workhouse ever since. It must be admitted that he allowed her half a pound of tea a year, which was weak in him: first, because all gifts have an inevitable tendency to pauperise the recipient, and secondly, because his only reasonable transaction in that commodity would have been to buy it for as little as he could possibly give, and sell it for as much as he could possibly get; it having been clearly ascertained by philosophers that in this is comprised the whole duty of man - not a part of man's duty, but the whole.

'Pretty fair, ma'am. With the usual exception, ma'am,' repeated Bitzer.

'Ah - h!' said Mrs. Sparsit, shaking her head over her tea-cup, and taking a long gulp.

'Mr. Thomas, ma'am, I doubt Mr. Thomas very much, ma'am, I don't like his ways at all.'

'Bitzer,' said Mrs. Sparsit, in a very impressive manner, 'do you recollect my having said anything to you respecting names?'

'I beg your pardon, ma'am. It's quite true that you did object to names being used, and they're always best avoided.'

'Please to remember that I have a charge here,' said Mrs. Sparsit, with her air of state. 'I hold a trust here, Bitzer, under Mr. Bounderby. However improbable both Mr. Bounderby and myself might have deemed it years ago, that he would ever become my patron, making me an annual compliment, I cannot but regard him in that light. From Mr. Bounderby I have received every acknowledgment of my social station, and every recognition of my family descent, that I could possibly expect. More, far more. Therefore, to my patron I will be scrupulously true. And I do not consider, I will not consider, I cannot consider,' said Mrs. Sparsit, with a most extensive stock on hand of honour and morality, 'that I should be scrupulously true, if I allowed names to be mentioned under this roof, that are unfortunately - most unfortunately - no doubt of that - connected with his.'

Bitzer knuckled his forehead again, and again begged pardon.

'No, Bitzer,' continued Mrs. Sparsit, 'say an individual, and I will hear you; say Mr. Thomas, and you must excuse me.'

'With the usual exception, ma'am,' said Bitzer, trying back, 'of an individual.'

'Ah - h!' Mrs. Sparsit repeated the ejaculation, the shake of the head over her tea-cup, and the long gulp, as taking up the conversation again at the point where it had been interrupted.

'An individual, ma'am,' said Bitzer, 'has never been what he ought to have been, since he first came into the place. He is a dissipated, extravagant idler. He is not worth his salt, ma'am. He wouldn't get it either, if he hadn't a friend and relation at court, ma'am!'

'Ah - h!' said Mrs. Sparsit, with another melancholy shake of her head.

'I only hope, ma'am,' pursued Bitzer, 'that his friend and relation may not supply him with the means of carrying on. Otherwise, ma'am, we know out of whose pocket that money comes.'

'Ah - h!' sighed Mrs. Sparsit again, with another melancholy shake of her head.

'He is to be pitied, ma'am. The last party I have alluded to, is to be pitied, ma'am,' said Bitzer.

'Yes, Bitzer,' said Mrs. Sparsit. 'I have always pitied the delusion, always.'

'As to an individual, ma'am,' said Bitzer, dropping his voice and drawing nearer, 'he is as improvident as any of the people in this town. And you know what their improvidence is, ma'am. No one could wish to know it better than a lady of your eminence does.'

'They would do well,' returned Mrs. Sparsit, 'to take example by you, Bitzer.'

'Thank you, ma'am. But, since you do refer to me, now look at me, ma'am. I have put by a little, ma'am, already. That gratuity which I receive at Christmas, ma'am: I never touch it. I don't even go the length of my wages, though they're not high, ma'am. Why can't they do as I have done, ma'am? What one person can do, another can do.'

This, again, was among the fictions of Coketown. Any capitalist there, who had made sixty thousand pounds out of sixpence, always professed to wonder why the sixty thousand nearest Hands didn't each make sixty thousand pounds out of sixpence, and more or less reproached them every one for not accomplishing the little feat. What I did you can do. Why don't you go and do it?

'As to their wanting recreations, ma'am,' said Bitzer, 'it's stuff and nonsense. I don't want recreations. I never did, and I never shall; I don't like 'em. As to their combining together; there are many of them, I have no doubt, that by watching and informing upon one another could earn a trifle now and then, whether in money or good will, and improve their livelihood. Then, why don't they improve it, ma'am! It's the first consideration of a rational creature, and it's what they pretend to want.'

'Pretend indeed!' said Mrs. Sparsit.

'I am sure we are constantly hearing, ma'am, till it becomes quite nauseous, concerning their wives and families,' said Bitzer. 'Why look at me, ma'am! I don't want a wife and family. Why should they?'

'Because they are improvident,' said Mrs. Sparsit.

'Yes, ma'am,' returned Bitzer, 'that's where it is. If they were more provident and less perverse, ma'am, what would they do? They would say, "While my hat covers my family," or "while my bonnet covers my

family," - as the case might be, ma'am - "I have only one to feed, and that's the person I most like to feed."

'To be sure,' assented Mrs. Sparsit, eating muffin.

'Thank you, ma'am,' said Bitzer, knuckling his forehead again, in return for the favour of Mrs. Sparsit's improving conversation. 'Would you wish a little more hot water, ma'am, or is there anything else that I could fetch you?'

'Nothing just now, Bitzer.'

'Thank you, ma'am. I shouldn't wish to disturb you at your meals, ma'am, particularly tea, knowing your partiality for it,' said Bitzer, craning a little to look over into the street from where he stood; 'but there's a gentleman been looking up here for a minute or so, ma'am, and he has come across as if he was going to knock. That is his knock, ma'am, no doubt.'

He stepped to the window; and looking out, and drawing in his head again, confirmed himself with, 'Yes, ma'am. Would you wish the gentleman to be shown in, ma'am?'

'I don't know who it can be,' said Mrs. Sparsit, wiping her mouth and arranging her mittens.

'A stranger, ma'am, evidently.'

'What a stranger can want at the Bank at this time of the evening, unless he comes upon some business for which he is too late, I don't know,' said Mrs. Sparsit, 'but I hold a charge in this establishment from Mr. Bounderby, and I will never shrink from it. If to see him is any part of the duty I have accepted, I will see him. Use your own discretion, Bitzer.'

Here the visitor, all unconscious of Mrs. Sparsit's magnanimous words, repeated his knock so loudly that the light porter hastened down to open the door; while Mrs. Sparsit took the precaution of concealing her little table, with all its appliances upon it, in a cupboard, and then decamped up-stairs, that she might appear, if needful, with the greater dignity.

'If you please, ma'am, the gentleman would wish to see you,' said Bitzer, with his light eye at Mrs. Sparsit's keyhole. So, Mrs. Sparsit, who had improved the interval by touching up her cap, took her classical features down-stairs again, and entered the board-room in the manner of a Roman matron going outside the city walls to treat with an invading general.

The visitor having strolled to the window, and being then engaged in looking carelessly out, was as unmoved by this impressive entry as man could possibly be. He stood whistling to himself with all imaginable coolness, with his hat still on, and a certain air of exhaustion upon him, in part arising from excessive summer, and in part from excessive gentility. For it was to be seen with half an eye that he was a thorough gentleman, made to the model of the time; weary of everything, and putting no more faith in anything than Lucifer.

'I believe, sir,' quoth Mrs. Sparsit, 'you wished to see me.'

'I beg your pardon,' he said, turning and removing his hat; 'pray excuse me.'

'Humph!' thought Mrs. Sparsit, as she made a stately bend. 'Five and thirty, good-looking, good figure, good teeth, good voice, good breeding, well-dressed, dark hair, bold eyes.' All which Mrs. Sparsit observed in her womanly way - like the Sultan who put his head in the pail of water - merely in dipping down and coming up again.

'Please to be seated, sir,' said Mrs. Sparsit.

'Thank you. Allow me.' He placed a chair for her, but remained himself carelessly lounging against the table. 'I left my servant at the railway looking after the luggage - very heavy train and vast quantity of it in the van - and strolled on, looking about me. Exceedingly odd place. Will you allow me to ask you if it's always as black as this?'

'In general much blacker,' returned Mrs. Sparsit, in her uncompromising way.

'Is it possible! Excuse me: you are not a native, I think?'

'No, sir,' returned Mrs. Sparsit. 'It was once my good or ill fortune, as it may be - before I became a widow - to move in a very different sphere. My husband was a Powler.'

'Beg your pardon, really!' said the stranger. 'Was - ?'

Mrs. Sparsit repeated, 'A Powler.'

'Powler Family,' said the stranger, after reflecting a few moments. Mrs. Sparsit signified assent. The stranger seemed a little more fatigued than before.

'You must be very much bored here?' was the inference he drew from the communication.

'I am the servant of circumstances, sir,' said Mrs. Sparsit, 'and I have long adapted myself to the governing power of my life.'

'Very philosophical,' returned the stranger, 'and very exemplary and laudable, and - ' It seemed to be scarcely worth his while to finish the sentence, so he played with his watch-chain wearily.

'May I be permitted to ask, sir,' said Mrs. Sparsit, 'to what I am indebted for the favour of - '

'Assuredly,' said the stranger. 'Much obliged to you for reminding me. I am the bearer of a letter of introduction to Mr. Bounderby, the banker. Walking through this extraordinarily black town, while they were getting dinner ready at the hotel, I asked a fellow whom I met; one of the working people; who appeared to have been taking a shower-bath of something fluffy, which I assume to be the raw material - '

Mrs. Sparsit inclined her head.

' - Raw material - where Mr. Bounderby, the banker, might reside. Upon which, misled no doubt by the word Banker, he directed me to the Bank. Fact being, I presume, that Mr. Bounderby the Banker does not reside in the edifice in which I have the honour of offering this explanation?'

'No, sir,' returned Mrs. Sparsit, 'he does not.'

'Thank you. I had no intention of delivering my letter at the present moment, nor have I. But strolling on to the Bank to kill time, and having the good fortune to observe at the window,' towards which he languidly waved his hand, then slightly bowed, 'a lady of a very superior and agreeable appearance, I considered that I could not do better than take the liberty of asking that lady where Mr. Bounderby the Banker does live. Which I accordingly venture, with all suitable apologies, to do.'

The inattention and indolence of his manner were sufficiently relieved, to Mrs. Sparsit's thinking, by a certain gallantry at ease, which offered her homage too. Here he was, for instance, at this moment, all but sitting on the table, and yet lazily bending over her, as if he acknowledged an attraction in her that made her charming - in her way.

'Banks, I know, are always suspicious, and officially must be,' said the stranger, whose lightness and smoothness of speech were pleasant likewise; suggesting matter far more sensible and humorous than it ever contained - which was perhaps a shrewd device of the founder of

this numerous sect, whosoever may have been that great man: 'therefore I may observe that my letter - here it is - is from the member for this place - Gradgrind - whom I have had the pleasure of knowing in London.'

Mrs. Sparsit recognized the hand, intimated that such confirmation was quite unnecessary, and gave Mr. Bounderby's address, with all needful clues and directions in aid.

'Thousand thanks,' said the stranger. 'Of course you know the Banker well?'

'Yes, sir,' rejoined Mrs. Sparsit. 'In my dependent relation towards him, I have known him ten years.'

'Quite an eternity! I think he married Gradgrind's daughter?'

'Yes,' said Mrs. Sparsit, suddenly compressing her mouth, 'he had that - honour.'

'The lady is quite a philosopher, I am told?'

'Indeed, sir,' said Mrs. Sparsit. 'Is she?'

'Excuse my impertinent curiosity,' pursued the stranger, fluttering over Mrs. Sparsit's eyebrows, with a propitiatory air, 'but you know the family, and know the world. I am about to know the family, and may have much to do with them. Is the lady so very alarming? Her father gives her such a portentously hard-headed reputation, that I have a burning desire to know. Is she absolutely unapproachable? Repellently and stunningly clever? I see, by your meaning smile, you think not. You have poured balm into my anxious soul. As to age, now. Forty? Five and thirty?'

Mrs. Sparsit laughed outright. 'A chit,' said she. 'Not twenty when she was married.'

'I give you my honour, Mrs. Fowler,' returned the stranger, detaching himself from the table, 'that I never was so astonished in my life!'

It really did seem to impress him, to the utmost extent of his capacity of being impressed. He looked at his informant for full a quarter of a minute, and appeared to have the surprise in his mind all the time. 'I assure you, Mrs. Fowler,' he then said, much exhausted, 'that the father's manner prepared me for a grim and stony maturity. I am obliged to you, of all things, for correcting so absurd a mistake. Pray excuse my intrusion. Many thanks. Good day!'

He bowed himself out; and Mrs. Sparsit, hiding in the window curtain, saw him languishing down the street on the shady side of the way, observed of all the town.

'What do you think of the gentleman, Bitzer?' she asked the light porter, when he came to take away.

'Spends a deal of money on his dress, ma'am.'

'It must be admitted,' said Mrs. Sparsit, 'that it's very tasteful.'

'Yes, ma'am,' returned Bitzer, 'if that's worth the money.'

'Besides which, ma'am,' resumed Bitzer, while he was polishing the table, 'he looks to me as if he gamed.'

'It's immoral to game,' said Mrs. Sparsit.

'It's ridiculous, ma'am,' said Bitzer, 'because the chances are against the players.'

Whether it was that the heat prevented Mrs. Sparsit from working, or whether it was that her hand was out, she did no work that night. She sat at the window, when the sun began to sink behind the smoke; she sat there, when the smoke was burning red, when the colour faded from it, when darkness seemed to rise slowly out of the ground, and creep upward, upward, up to the house-tops, up the church steeple, up to the summits of the factory chimneys, up to the sky. Without a candle in the room, Mrs. Sparsit sat at the window, with her hands before her, not thinking much of the sounds of evening; the whooping of boys, the barking of dogs, the rumbling of wheels, the steps and voices of passengers, the shrill street cries, the clogs upon the pavement when it was their hour for going by, the shutting-up of shop-shutters. Not until the light porter announced that her nocturnal sweetbread was ready, did Mrs. Sparsit arouse herself from her reverie, and convey her dense black eyebrows - by that time creased with meditation, as if they needed ironing out-up-stairs.

'O, you Fool!' said Mrs. Sparsit, when she was alone at her supper. Whom she meant, she did not say; but she could scarcely have meant the sweetbread.