

## Chapter 8

### *Explosion*

THE next morning was too bright a morning for sleep, and James Harthouse rose early, and sat in the pleasant bay window of his dressing-room, smoking the rare tobacco that had had so wholesome an influence on his young friend. Reposing in the sunlight, with the fragrance of his eastern pipe about him, and the dreamy smoke vanishing into the air, so rich and soft with summer odours, he reckoned up his advantages as an idle winner might count his gains. He was not at all bored for the time, and could give his mind to it.

He had established a confidence with her, from which her husband was excluded. He had established a confidence with her, that absolutely turned upon her indifference towards her husband, and the absence, now and at all times, of any congeniality between them. He had artfully, but plainly, assured her that he knew her heart in its last most delicate recesses; he had come so near to her through its tenderest sentiment; he had associated himself with that feeling; and the barrier behind which she lived, had melted away. All very odd, and very satisfactory!

And yet he had not, even now, any earnest wickedness of purpose in him. Publicly and privately, it were much better for the age in which he lived, that he and the legion of whom he was one were designedly bad, than indifferent and purposeless. It is the drifting icebergs setting with any current anywhere, that wreck the ships.

When the Devil goeth about like a roaring lion, he goeth about in a shape by which few but savages and hunters are attracted. But, when he is trimmed, smoothed, and varnished, according to the mode; when he is aweary of vice, and aweary of virtue, used up as to brimstone, and used up as to bliss; then, whether he take to the serving out of red tape, or to the kindling of red fire, he is the very Devil.

So James Harthouse reclined in the window, indolently smoking, and reckoning up the steps he had taken on the road by which he happened to be travelling. The end to which it led was before him, pretty plainly; but he troubled himself with no calculations about it. What will be, will be.

As he had rather a long ride to take that day - for there was a public occasion 'to do' at some distance, which afforded a tolerable opportunity of going in for the Gradgrind men - he dressed early and went down to breakfast. He was anxious to see if she had relapsed since the previous evening. No. He resumed where he had left off. There was a look of interest for him again.

He got through the day as much (or as little) to his own satisfaction, as was to be expected under the fatiguing circumstances; and came riding back at six o'clock. There was a sweep of some half-mile between the lodge and the house, and he was riding along at a foot pace over the smooth gravel, once Nickits's, when Mr. Bounderby burst out of the shrubbery, with such violence as to make his horse shy across the road.

'Harthouse!' cried Mr. Bounderby. 'Have you heard?'

'Heard what?' said Harthouse, soothing his horse, and inwardly favouring Mr. Bounderby with no good wishes.

'Then you haven't heard!'

'I have heard you, and so has this brute. I have heard nothing else.'

Mr. Bounderby, red and hot, planted himself in the centre of the path before the horse's head, to explode his bombshell with more effect.

'The Bank's robbed!'

'You don't mean it!'

'Robbed last night, sir. Robbed in an extraordinary manner. Robbed with a false key.'

'Of much?'

Mr. Bounderby, in his desire to make the most of it, really seemed mortified by being obliged to reply, 'Why, no; not of very much. But it might have been.'

'Of how much?'

'Oh! as a sum - if you stick to a sum - of not more than a hundred and fifty pound,' said Bounderby, with impatience. 'But it's not the sum; it's the fact. It's the fact of the Bank being robbed, that's the important circumstance. I am surprised you don't see it.'

'My dear Bounderby,' said James, dismounting, and giving his bridle to his servant, 'I do see it; and am as overcome as you can possibly desire me to be, by the spectacle afforded to my mental view. Nevertheless, I may be allowed, I hope, to congratulate you - which I do with all my soul, I assure you - on your not having sustained a greater loss.'

'Thank'ee,' replied Bounderby, in a short, ungracious manner. 'But I tell you what. It might have been twenty thousand pound.'

'I suppose it might.'

'Suppose it might! By the Lord, you may suppose so. By George!' said Mr. Bounderby, with sundry menacing nods and shakes of his head. 'It might have been twice twenty. There's no knowing what it would have been, or wouldn't have been, as it was, but for the fellows' being disturbed.'

Louisa had come up now, and Mrs. Sparsit, and Bitzer.

'Here's Tom Gradgrind's daughter knows pretty well what it might have been, if you don't,' blustered Bounderby. 'Dropped, sir, as if she was shot when I told her! Never knew her do such a thing before. Does her credit, under the circumstances, in my opinion!'

She still looked faint and pale. James Harthouse begged her to take his arm; and as they moved on very slowly, asked her how the robbery had been committed.

'Why, I am going to tell you,' said Bounderby, irritably giving his arm to Mrs. Sparsit. 'If you hadn't been so mighty particular about the sum, I should have begun to tell you before. You know this lady (for she is a lady), Mrs. Sparsit?'

'I have already had the honour - '

'Very well. And this young man, Bitzer, you saw him too on the same occasion?' Mr. Harthouse inclined his head in assent, and Bitzer knuckled his forehead.

'Very well. They live at the Bank. You know they live at the Bank, perhaps? Very well. Yesterday afternoon, at the close of business hours, everything was put away as usual. In the iron room that this young fellow sleeps outside of, there was never mind how much. In the little safe in young Tom's closet, the safe used for petty purposes, there was a hundred and fifty odd pound.'

'A hundred and fifty-four, seven, one,' said Bitzer.

'Come!' retorted Bounderby, stopping to wheel round upon him, 'let's have none of your interruptions. It's enough to be robbed while you're snoring because you're too comfortable, without being put right with your four seven ones. I didn't snore, myself, when I was your age, let me tell you. I hadn't victuals enough to snore. And I didn't four seven one. Not if I knew it.'

Bitzer knuckled his forehead again, in a sneaking manner, and seemed at once particularly impressed and depressed by the instance last given of Mr. Bounderby's moral abstinence.

'A hundred and fifty odd pound,' resumed Mr. Bounderby. 'That sum of money, young Tom locked in his safe, not a very strong safe, but that's no matter now. Everything was left, all right. Some time in the night, while this young fellow snored - Mrs. Sparsit, ma'am, you say you have heard him snore?'

'Sir,' returned Mrs. Sparsit, 'I cannot say that I have heard him precisely snore, and therefore must not make that statement. But on winter evenings, when he has fallen asleep at his table, I have heard him, what I should prefer to describe as partially choke. I have heard him on such occasions produce sounds of a nature similar to what may be sometimes heard in Dutch clocks. Not,' said Mrs. Sparsit, with a lofty sense of giving strict evidence, 'that I would convey any imputation on his moral character. Far from it. I have always considered Bitzer a young man of the most upright principle; and to that I beg to bear my testimony.'

'Well!' said the exasperated Bounderby, 'while he was snoring, or choking, or Dutch-clocking, or something or other - being asleep - some fellows, somehow, whether previously concealed in the house or not remains to be seen, got to young Tom's safe, forced it, and abstracted the contents. Being then disturbed, they made off; letting themselves out at the main door, and double-locking it again (it was double-locked, and the key under Mrs. Sparsit's pillow) with a false key, which was picked up in the street near the Bank, about twelve o'clock to-day. No alarm takes place, till this chap, Bitzer, turns out this morning, and begins to open and prepare the offices for business. Then, looking at Tom's safe, he sees the door ajar, and finds the lock forced, and the money gone.'

'Where is Tom, by the by?' asked Harthouse, glancing round.

'He has been helping the police,' said Bounderby, 'and stays behind at the Bank. I wish these fellows had tried to rob me when I was at his time of life. They would have been out of pocket if they had invested eighteenpence in the job; I can tell 'em that.'

'Is anybody suspected?'

'Suspected? I should think there was somebody suspected. Egod!' said Bounderby, relinquishing Mrs. Sparsit's arm to wipe his heated head. 'Josiah Bounderby of Coketown is not to be plundered and nobody suspected. No, thank you!'

Might Mr. Harthouse inquire Who was suspected?

'Well,' said Bounderby, stopping and facing about to confront them all, 'I'll tell you. It's not to be mentioned everywhere; it's not to be mentioned anywhere: in order that the scoundrels concerned (there's a gang of 'em) may be thrown off their guard. So take this in confidence. Now wait a bit.' Mr. Bounderby wiped his head again. 'What should you say to;' here he violently exploded: 'to a Hand being in it?'

'I hope,' said Harthouse, lazily, 'not our friend Blackpot?'

'Say Pool instead of Pot, sir,' returned Bounderby, 'and that's the man.'

Louisa faintly uttered some word of incredulity and surprise.

'O yes! I know!' said Bounderby, immediately catching at the sound. 'I know! I am used to that. I know all about it. They are the finest people in the world, these fellows are. They have got the gift of the gab, they have. They only want to have their rights explained to them, they do. But I tell you what. Show me a dissatisfied Hand, and I'll show you a man that's fit for anything bad, I don't care what it is.'

Another of the popular fictions of Coketown, which some pains had been taken to disseminate - and which some people really believed.

'But I am acquainted with these chaps,' said Bounderby. 'I can read 'em off, like books. Mrs. Sparsit, ma'am, I appeal to you. What warning did I give that fellow, the first time he set foot in the house, when the express object of his visit was to know how he could knock Religion over, and floor the Established Church? Mrs. Sparsit, in point of high connexions, you are on a level with the aristocracy, - did I say, or did I not say, to that fellow, "you can't hide the truth from me: you are not the kind of fellow I like; you'll come to no good"?''

'Assuredly, sir,' returned Mrs. Sparsit, 'you did, in a highly impressive manner, give him such an admonition.'

'When he shocked you, ma'am,' said Bounderby; 'when he shocked your feelings?'

'Yes, sir,' returned Mrs. Sparsit, with a meek shake of her head, 'he certainly did so. Though I do not mean to say but that my feelings may be weaker on such points - more foolish if the term is preferred - than they might have been, if I had always occupied my present position.'

Mr. Bounderby stared with a bursting pride at Mr. Harthouse, as much as to say, 'I am the proprietor of this female, and she's worth your attention, I think.' Then, resumed his discourse.

'You can recall for yourself, Harthouse, what I said to him when you saw him. I didn't mince the matter with him. I am never mealy with 'em. I KNOW 'em. Very well, sir. Three days after that, he bolted. Went off, nobody knows where: as my mother did in my infancy - only with this difference, that he is a worse subject than my mother, if possible. What did he do before he went? What do you say;' Mr. Bounderby, with his hat in his hand, gave a beat upon the crown at every little division of his sentences, as if it were a tambourine; 'to his being seen - night after night - watching the Bank? - to his lurking about there - after dark? - To its striking Mrs. Sparsit - that he could be lurking for no good - To her calling Bitzer's attention to him, and their both taking notice of him - And to its appearing on inquiry to-day - that he was also noticed by the neighbours?' Having come to the climax, Mr. Bounderby, like an oriental dancer, put his tambourine on his head.

'Suspicious,' said James Harthouse, 'certainly.'

'I think so, sir,' said Bounderby, with a defiant nod. 'I think so. But there are more of 'em in it. There's an old woman. One never hears of these things till the mischief's done; all sorts of defects are found out in the stable door after the horse is stolen; there's an old woman turns up now. An old woman who seems to have been flying into town on a broomstick, every now and then. She watches the place a whole day before this fellow begins, and on the night when you saw him, she steals away with him and holds a council with him - I suppose, to make her report on going off duty, and be damned to her.'

There was such a person in the room that night, and she shrunk from observation, thought Louisa.

'This is not all of 'em, even as we already know 'em,' said Bounderby, with many nods of hidden meaning. 'But I have said enough for the present. You'll have the goodness to keep it quiet, and mention it to no one. It may take time, but we shall have 'em. It's policy to give 'em line enough, and there's no objection to that.'

'Of course, they will be punished with the utmost rigour of the law, as notice-boards observe,' replied James Harthouse, 'and serve them right. Fellows who go in for Banks must take the consequences. If there were no consequences, we should all go in for Banks.' He had gently taken Louisa's parasol from her hand, and had put it up for her; and she walked under its shade, though the sun did not shine there.

‘For the present, Loo Bounderby,’ said her husband, ‘here’s Mrs. Sparsit to look after. Mrs. Sparsit’s nerves have been acted upon by this business, and she’ll stay here a day or two. So make her comfortable.’

‘Thank you very much, sir,’ that discreet lady observed, ‘but pray do not let My comfort be a consideration. Anything will do for Me.’

It soon appeared that if Mrs. Sparsit had a failing in her association with that domestic establishment, it was that she was so excessively regardless of herself and regardful of others, as to be a nuisance. On being shown her chamber, she was so dreadfully sensible of its comforts as to suggest the inference that she would have preferred to pass the night on the mangle in the laundry. True, the Powlers and the Scadgerses were accustomed to splendour, ‘but it is my duty to remember,’ Mrs. Sparsit was fond of observing with a lofty grace: particularly when any of the domestics were present, ‘that what I was, I am no longer. Indeed,’ said she, ‘if I could altogether cancel the remembrance that Mr. Sparsit was a Fowler, or that I myself am related to the Scadgers family; or if I could even revoke the fact, and make myself a person of common descent and ordinary connexions; I would gladly do so. I should think it, under existing circumstances, right to do so.’ The same Hermitical state of mind led to her renunciation of made dishes and wines at dinner, until fairly commanded by Mr. Bounderby to take them; when she said, ‘Indeed you are very good, sir;’ and departed from a resolution of which she had made rather formal and public announcement, to ‘wait for the simple mutton.’ She was likewise deeply apologetic for wanting the salt; and, feeling amiably bound to bear out Mr. Bounderby to the fullest extent in the testimony he had borne to her nerves, occasionally sat back in her chair and silently wept; at which periods a tear of large dimensions, like a crystal ear-ring, might be observed (or rather, must be, for it insisted on public notice) sliding down her Roman nose.

But Mrs. Sparsit’s greatest point, first and last, was her determination to pity Mr. Bounderby. There were occasions when in looking at him she was involuntarily moved to shake her head, as who would say, ‘Alas, poor Yorick!’ After allowing herself to be betrayed into these evidences of emotion, she would force a lambent brightness, and would be fitfully cheerful, and would say, ‘You have still good spirits, sir, I am thankful to find;’ and would appear to hail it as a blessed dispensation that Mr. Bounderby bore up as he did. One idiosyncrasy for which she often apologized, she found it excessively difficult to conquer. She had a curious propensity to call Mrs. Bounderby ‘Miss Gradgrind,’ and yielded to it some three or four score times in the course of the evening. Her repetition of this mistake covered Mrs. Sparsit with modest confusion; but indeed, she said, it seemed so

natural to say Miss Gradgrind: whereas, to persuade herself that the young lady whom she had had the happiness of knowing from a child could be really and truly Mrs. Bounderby, she found almost impossible. It was a further singularity of this remarkable case, that the more she thought about it, the more impossible it appeared; 'the differences,' she observed, 'being such.'

In the drawing-room after dinner, Mr. Bounderby tried the case of the robbery, examined the witnesses, made notes of the evidence, found the suspected persons guilty, and sentenced them to the extreme punishment of the law. That done, Bitzer was dismissed to town with instructions to recommend Tom to come home by the mail- train.

When candles were brought, Mrs. Sparsit murmured, 'Don't be low, sir. Pray let me see you cheerful, sir, as I used to do.' Mr. Bounderby, upon whom these consolations had begun to produce the effect of making him, in a bull-headed blundering way, sentimental, sighed like some large sea-animal. 'I cannot bear to see you so, sir,' said Mrs. Sparsit. 'Try a hand at backgammon, sir, as you used to do when I had the honour of living under your roof.' 'I haven't played backgammon, ma'am,' said Mr. Bounderby, 'since that time.' 'No, sir,' said Mrs. Sparsit, soothingly, 'I am aware that you have not. I remember that Miss Gradgrind takes no interest in the game. But I shall be happy, sir, if you will condescend.'

They played near a window, opening on the garden. It was a fine night: not moonlight, but sultry and fragrant. Louisa and Mr. Harthouse strolled out into the garden, where their voices could be heard in the stillness, though not what they said. Mrs. Sparsit, from her place at the backgammon board, was constantly straining her eyes to pierce the shadows without. 'What's the matter, ma'am?' said Mr. Bounderby; 'you don't see a Fire, do you?' 'Oh dear no, sir,' returned Mrs. Sparsit, 'I was thinking of the dew.' 'What have you got to do with the dew, ma'am?' said Mr. Bounderby. 'It's not myself, sir,' returned Mrs. Sparsit, 'I am fearful of Miss Gradgrind's taking cold.' 'She never takes cold,' said Mr. Bounderby. 'Really, sir?' said Mrs. Sparsit. And was affected with a cough in her throat.

When the time drew near for retiring, Mr. Bounderby took a glass of water. 'Oh, sir?' said Mrs. Sparsit. 'Not your sherry warm, with lemon-peel and nutmeg?' 'Why, I have got out of the habit of taking it now, ma'am,' said Mr. Bounderby. 'The more's the pity, sir,' returned Mrs. Sparsit; 'you are losing all your good old habits. Cheer up, sir! If Miss Gradgrind will permit me, I will offer to make it for you, as I have often done.'

Miss Gradgrind readily permitting Mrs. Sparsit to do anything she pleased, that considerate lady made the beverage, and handed it to



Mr. Bounderby. 'It will do you good, sir. It will warm your heart. It is the sort of thing you want, and ought to take, sir.' And when Mr. Bounderby said, 'Your health, ma'am!' she answered with great feeling, 'Thank you, sir. The same to you, and happiness also.' Finally, she wished him good night, with great pathos; and Mr. Bounderby went to bed, with a maudlin persuasion that he had been crossed in something tender, though he could not, for his life, have mentioned what it was.

Long after Louisa had undressed and lain down, she watched and waited for her brother's coming home. That could hardly be, she knew, until an hour past midnight; but in the country silence, which did anything but calm the trouble of her thoughts, time lagged wearily. At last, when the darkness and stillness had seemed for hours to thicken one another, she heard the bell at the gate. She felt as though she would have been glad that it rang on until daylight; but it ceased, and the circles of its last sound spread out fainter and wider in the air, and all was dead again.

She waited yet some quarter of an hour, as she judged. Then she arose, put on a loose robe, and went out of her room in the dark, and up the staircase to her brother's room. His door being shut, she softly opened it and spoke to him, approaching his bed with a noiseless step.

She kneeled down beside it, passed her arm over his neck, and drew his face to hers. She knew that he only feigned to be asleep, but she said nothing to him.

He started by and by as if he were just then awakened, and asked who that was, and what was the matter?

'Tom, have you anything to tell me? If ever you loved me in your life, and have anything concealed from every one besides, tell it to me.'

'I don't know what you mean, Loo. You have been dreaming.'

'My dear brother:' she laid her head down on his pillow, and her hair flowed over him as if she would hide him from every one but herself: 'is there nothing that you have to tell me? Is there nothing you can tell me if you will? You can tell me nothing that will change me. O Tom, tell me the truth!'

'I don't know what you mean, Loo!'

'As you lie here alone, my dear, in the melancholy night, so you must lie somewhere one night, when even I, if I am living then, shall have left you. As I am here beside you, barefoot, unclothed,

undistinguishable in darkness, so must I lie through all the night of my decay, until I am dust. In the name of that time, Tom, tell me the truth now!

'What is it you want to know?'

'You may be certain;' in the energy of her love she took him to her bosom as if he were a child; 'that I will not reproach you. You may be certain that I will be compassionate and true to you. You may be certain that I will save you at whatever cost. O Tom, have you nothing to tell me? Whisper very softly. Say only "yes," and I shall understand you!'

She turned her ear to his lips, but he remained doggedly silent.

'Not a word, Tom?'

'How can I say Yes, or how can I say No, when I don't know what you mean? Loo, you are a brave, kind girl, worthy I begin to think of a better brother than I am. But I have nothing more to say. Go to bed, go to bed.'

'You are tired,' she whispered presently, more in her usual way.

'Yes, I am quite tired out.'

'You have been so hurried and disturbed to-day. Have any fresh discoveries been made?'

'Only those you have heard of, from - him.'

'Tom, have you said to any one that we made a visit to those people, and that we saw those three together?'

'No. Didn't you yourself particularly ask me to keep it quiet when you asked me to go there with you?'

'Yes. But I did not know then what was going to happen.'

'Nor I neither. How could I?'

He was very quick upon her with this retort.

'Ought I to say, after what has happened,' said his sister, standing by the bed - she had gradually withdrawn herself and risen, 'that I made that visit? Should I say so? Must I say so?'

'Good Heavens, Loo,' returned her brother, 'you are not in the habit of asking my advice. say what you like. If you keep it to yourself, I shall keep it to myself. If you disclose it, there's an end of it.'

It was too dark for either to see the other's face; but each seemed very attentive, and to consider before speaking.

'Tom, do you believe the man I gave the money to, is really implicated in this crime?'

'I don't know. I don't see why he shouldn't be.'

'He seemed to me an honest man.'

'Another person may seem to you dishonest, and yet not be so.' There was a pause, for he had hesitated and stopped.

'In short,' resumed Tom, as if he had made up his mind, 'if you come to that, perhaps I was so far from being altogether in his favour, that I took him outside the door to tell him quietly, that I thought he might consider himself very well off to get such a windfall as he had got from my sister, and that I hoped he would make good use of it. You remember whether I took him out or not. I say nothing against the man; he may be a very good fellow, for anything I know; I hope he is.'

'Was he offended by what you said?'

'No, he took it pretty well; he was civil enough. Where are you, Loo?' He sat up in bed and kissed her. 'Good night, my dear, good night.'

'You have nothing more to tell me?'

'No. What should I have? You wouldn't have me tell you a lie!'

'I wouldn't have you do that to-night, Tom, of all the nights in your life; many and much happier as I hope they will be.'

'Thank you, my dear Loo. I am so tired, that I am sure I wonder I don't say anything to get to sleep. Go to bed, go to bed.'

Kissing her again, he turned round, drew the coverlet over his head, and lay as still as if that time had come by which she had adjured him. She stood for some time at the bedside before she slowly moved away. She stopped at the door, looked back when she had opened it, and asked him if he had called her? But he lay still, and she softly closed the door and returned to her room.

Then the wretched boy looked cautiously up and found her gone, crept out of bed, fastened his door, and threw himself upon his pillow again: tearing his hair, morosely crying, grudgingly loving her, hatefully but impenitently spurning himself, and no less hatefully and unprofitably spurning all the good in the world.