

Chapter 2

Very Ridiculous

MR. JAMES HARTHOUSE passed a whole night and a day in a state of so much hurry, that the World, with its best glass in his eye, would scarcely have recognized him during that insane interval, as the brother Jem of the honourable and jocular member. He was positively agitated. He several times spoke with an emphasis, similar to the vulgar manner. He went in and went out in an unaccountable way, like a man without an object. He rode like a highwayman. In a word, he was so horribly bored by existing circumstances, that he forgot to go in for boredom in the manner prescribed by the authorities.

After putting his horse at Coketown through the storm, as if it were a leap, he waited up all night: from time to time ringing his bell with the greatest fury, charging the porter who kept watch with delinquency in withholding letters or messages that could not fail to have been entrusted to him, and demanding restitution on the spot. The dawn coming, the morning coming, and the day coming, and neither message nor letter coming with either, he went down to the country house. There, the report was, Mr. Bounderby away, and Mrs. Bounderby in town. Left for town suddenly last evening. Not even known to be gone until receipt of message, importing that her return was not to be expected for the present.

In these circumstances he had nothing for it but to follow her to town. He went to the house in town. Mrs. Bounderby not there. He looked in at the Bank. Mr. Bounderby away and Mrs. Sparsit away. Mrs. Sparsit away? Who could have been reduced to sudden extremity for the company of that griffin!

'Well! I don't know,' said Tom, who had his own reasons for being uneasy about it. 'She was off somewhere at daybreak this morning. She's always full of mystery; I hate her. So I do that white chap; he's always got his blinking eyes upon a fellow.'

'Where were you last night, Tom?'

'Where was I last night!' said Tom. 'Come! I like that. I was waiting for you, Mr. Harthouse, till it came down as I never saw it come down before. Where was I too! Where were you, you mean.'

'I was prevented from coming - detained.'

'Detained!' murmured Tom. 'Two of us were detained. I was detained looking for you, till I lost every train but the mail. It would have been a

pleasant job to go down by that on such a night, and have to walk home through a pond. I was obliged to sleep in town after all.'

'Where?'

'Where? Why, in my own bed at Bounderby's.'

'Did you see your sister?'

'How the deuce,' returned Tom, staring, 'could I see my sister when she was fifteen miles off?'

Cursing these quick retorts of the young gentleman to whom he was so true a friend, Mr. Harthouse disembarassed himself of that interview with the smallest conceivable amount of ceremony, and debated for the hundredth time what all this could mean? He made only one thing clear. It was, that whether she was in town or out of town, whether he had been premature with her who was so hard to comprehend, or she had lost courage, or they were discovered, or some mischance or mistake, at present incomprehensible, had occurred, he must remain to confront his fortune, whatever it was. The hotel where he was known to live when condemned to that region of blackness, was the stake to which he was tied. As to all the rest - What will be, will be.

'So, whether I am waiting for a hostile message, or an assignation, or a penitent remonstrance, or an impromptu wrestle with my friend Bounderby in the Lancashire manner - which would seem as likely as anything else in the present state of affairs - I'll dine,' said Mr. James Harthouse. 'Bounderby has the advantage in point of weight; and if anything of a British nature is to come off between us, it may be as well to be in training.'

Therefore he rang the bell, and tossing himself negligently on a sofa, ordered 'Some dinner at six - with a beefsteak in it,' and got through the intervening time as well as he could. That was not particularly well; for he remained in the greatest perplexity, and, as the hours went on, and no kind of explanation offered itself, his perplexity augmented at compound interest.

However, he took affairs as coolly as it was in human nature to do, and entertained himself with the facetious idea of the training more than once. 'It wouldn't be bad,' he yawned at one time, 'to give the waiter five shillings, and throw him.' At another time it occurred to him, 'Or a fellow of about thirteen or fourteen stone might be hired by the hour.' But these jests did not tell materially on the afternoon, or his suspense; and, sooth to say, they both lagged fearfully.

It was impossible, even before dinner, to avoid often walking about in the pattern of the carpet, looking out of the window, listening at the door for footsteps, and occasionally becoming rather hot when any steps approached that room. But, after dinner, when the day turned to twilight, and the twilight turned to night, and still no communication was made to him, it began to be as he expressed it, 'like the Holy Office and slow torture.' However, still true to his conviction that indifference was the genuine high-breeding (the only conviction he had), he seized this crisis as the opportunity for ordering candles and a newspaper.

He had been trying in vain, for half an hour, to read this newspaper, when the waiter appeared and said, at once mysteriously and apologetically:

'Beg your pardon, sir. You're wanted, sir, if you please.'

A general recollection that this was the kind of thing the Police said to the swell mob, caused Mr. Harthouse to ask the waiter in return, with bristling indignation, what the Devil he meant by 'wanted'?

'Beg your pardon, sir. Young lady outside, sir, wishes to see you.'

'Outside? Where?'

'Outside this door, sir.'

Giving the waiter to the personage before mentioned, as a block-head duly qualified for that consignment, Mr. Harthouse hurried into the gallery. A young woman whom he had never seen stood there. Plainly dressed, very quiet, very pretty. As he conducted her into the room and placed a chair for her, he observed, by the light of the candles, that she was even prettier than he had at first believed. Her face was innocent and youthful, and its expression remarkably pleasant. She was not afraid of him, or in any way disconcerted; she seemed to have her mind entirely preoccupied with the occasion of her visit, and to have substituted that consideration for herself.

'I speak to Mr. Harthouse?' she said, when they were alone.

'To Mr. Harthouse.' He added in his mind, 'And you speak to him with the most confiding eyes I ever saw, and the most earnest voice (though so quiet) I ever heard.'

'If I do not understand - and I do not, sir' - said Sissy, 'what your honour as a gentleman binds you to, in other matters:' the blood really rose in his face as she began in these words: 'I am sure I may

rely upon it to keep my visit secret, and to keep secret what I am going to say. I will rely upon it, if you will tell me I may so far trust - ‘

‘You may, I assure you.’

‘I am young, as you see; I am alone, as you see. In coming to you, sir, I have no advice or encouragement beyond my own hope.’ He thought, ‘But that is very strong,’ as he followed the momentary upward glance of her eyes. He thought besides, ‘This is a very odd beginning. I don’t see where we are going.’

‘I think,’ said Sissy, ‘you have already guessed whom I left just now!’

‘I have been in the greatest concern and uneasiness during the last four-and-twenty hours (which have appeared as many years),’ he returned, ‘on a lady’s account. The hopes I have been encouraged to form that you come from that lady, do not deceive me, I trust.’

‘I left her within an hour.’

‘At - !’

‘At her father’s.’

Mr. Harthouse’s face lengthened in spite of his coolness, and his perplexity increased. ‘Then I certainly,’ he thought, ‘do not see where we are going.’

‘She hurried there last night. She arrived there in great agitation, and was insensible all through the night. I live at her father’s, and was with her. You may be sure, sir, you will never see her again as long as you live.’

Mr. Harthouse drew a long breath; and, if ever man found himself in the position of not knowing what to say, made the discovery beyond all question that he was so circumstanced. The child-like ingenuousness with which his visitor spoke, her modest fearlessness, her truthfulness which put all artifice aside, her entire forgetfulness of herself in her earnest quiet holding to the object with which she had come; all this, together with her reliance on his easily given promise - which in itself shamed him - presented something in which he was so inexperienced, and against which he knew any of his usual weapons would fall so powerless; that not a word could he rally to his relief.

At last he said:

‘So startling an announcement, so confidently made, and by such lips, is really disconcerting in the last degree. May I be permitted to

inquire, if you are charged to convey that information to me in those hopeless words, by the lady of whom we speak?’

‘I have no charge from her.’

‘The drowning man catches at the straw. With no disrespect for your judgment, and with no doubt of your sincerity, excuse my saying that I cling to the belief that there is yet hope that I am not condemned to perpetual exile from that lady’s presence.’

‘There is not the least hope. The first object of my coming here, sir, is to assure you that you must believe that there is no more hope of your ever speaking with her again, than there would be if she had died when she came home last night.’

‘Must believe? But if I can’t - or if I should, by infirmity of nature, be obstinate - and won’t - ‘

‘It is still true. There is no hope.’

James Harthouse looked at her with an incredulous smile upon his lips; but her mind looked over and beyond him, and the smile was quite thrown away.

He bit his lip, and took a little time for consideration.

‘Well! If it should unhappily appear,’ he said, ‘after due pains and duty on my part, that I am brought to a position so desolate as this banishment, I shall not become the lady’s persecutor. But you said you had no commission from her?’

‘I have only the commission of my love for her, and her love for me. I have no other trust, than that I have been with her since she came home, and that she has given me her confidence. I have no further trust, than that I know something of her character and her marriage. O Mr. Harthouse, I think you had that trust too!’

He was touched in the cavity where his heart should have been - in that nest of addled eggs, where the birds of heaven would have lived if they had not been whistled away - by the fervour of this reproach.

‘I am not a moral sort of fellow,’ he said, ‘and I never make any pretensions to the character of a moral sort of fellow. I am as immoral as need be. At the same time, in bringing any distress upon the lady who is the subject of the present conversation, or in unfortunately compromising her in any way, or in committing myself by any expression of sentiments towards her, not perfectly reconcilable with - in fact with - the domestic hearth; or in taking any advantage of her

father's being a machine, or of her brother's being a whelp, or of her husband's being a bear; I beg to be allowed to assure you that I have had no particularly evil intentions, but have glided on from one step to another with a smoothness so perfectly diabolical, that I had not the slightest idea the catalogue was half so long until I began to turn it over. Whereas I find,' said Mr. James Harthouse, in conclusion, 'that it is really in several volumes.'

Though he said all this in his frivolous way, the way seemed, for that once, a conscious polishing of but an ugly surface. He was silent for a moment; and then proceeded with a more self-possessed air, though with traces of vexation and disappointment that would not be polished out.

'After what has been just now represented to me, in a manner I find it impossible to doubt - I know of hardly any other source from which I could have accepted it so readily - I feel bound to say to you, in whom the confidence you have mentioned has been reposed, that I cannot refuse to contemplate the possibility (however unexpected) of my seeing the lady no more. I am solely to blame for the thing having come to this - and - and, I cannot say,' he added, rather hard up for a general peroration, 'that I have any sanguine expectation of ever becoming a moral sort of fellow, or that I have any belief in any moral sort of fellow whatever.'

Sissy's face sufficiently showed that her appeal to him was not finished.

'You spoke,' he resumed, as she raised her eyes to him again, 'of your first object. I may assume that there is a second to be mentioned?'

'Yes.'

'Will you oblige me by confiding it?'

'Mr. Harthouse,' returned Sissy, with a blending of gentleness and steadiness that quite defeated him, and with a simple confidence in his being bound to do what she required, that held him at a singular disadvantage, 'the only reparation that remains with you, is to leave here immediately and finally. I am quite sure that you can mitigate in no other way the wrong and harm you have done. I am quite sure that it is the only compensation you have left it in your power to make. I do not say that it is much, or that it is enough; but it is something, and it is necessary. Therefore, though without any other authority than I have given you, and even without the knowledge of any other person than yourself and myself, I ask you to depart from this place to-night, under an obligation never to return to it.'

If she had asserted any influence over him beyond her plain faith in the truth and right of what she said; if she had concealed the least doubt or irresolution, or had harboured for the best purpose any reserve or pretence; if she had shown, or felt, the lightest trace of any sensitiveness to his ridicule or his astonishment, or any remonstrance he might offer; he would have carried it against her at this point. But he could as easily have changed a clear sky by looking at it in surprise, as affect her.

‘But do you know,’ he asked, quite at a loss, ‘the extent of what you ask? You probably are not aware that I am here on a public kind of business, preposterous enough in itself, but which I have gone in for, and sworn by, and am supposed to be devoted to in quite a desperate manner? You probably are not aware of that, but I assure you it’s the fact.’

It had no effect on Sissy, fact or no fact.

‘Besides which,’ said Mr. Harthouse, taking a turn or two across the room, dubiously, ‘it’s so alarmingly absurd. It would make a man so ridiculous, after going in for these fellows, to back out in such an incomprehensible way.’

‘I am quite sure,’ repeated Sissy, ‘that it is the only reparation in your power, sir. I am quite sure, or I would not have come here.’

He glanced at her face, and walked about again. ‘Upon my soul, I don’t know what to say. So immensely absurd!’

It fell to his lot, now, to stipulate for secrecy.

‘If I were to do such a very ridiculous thing,’ he said, stopping again presently, and leaning against the chimney-piece, ‘it could only be in the most inviolable confidence.’

‘I will trust to you, sir,’ returned Sissy, ‘and you will trust to me.’

His leaning against the chimney-piece reminded him of the night with the whelp. It was the self-same chimney-piece, and somehow he felt as if he were the whelp to-night. He could make no way at all.

‘I suppose a man never was placed in a more ridiculous position,’ he said, after looking down, and looking up, and laughing, and frowning, and walking off, and walking back again. ‘But I see no way out of it. What will be, will be. This will be, I suppose. I must take off myself, I imagine - in short, I engage to do it.’

Sissy rose. She was not surprised by the result, but she was happy in it, and her face beamed brightly.

'You will permit me to say,' continued Mr. James Harthouse, 'that I doubt if any other ambassador, or ambassadress, could have addressed me with the same success. I must not only regard myself as being in a very ridiculous position, but as being vanquished at all points. Will you allow me the privilege of remembering my enemy's name?'

'My name?' said the ambassadress.

'The only name I could possibly care to know, to-night.'

'Sissy Jupe.'

'Pardon my curiosity at parting. Related to the family?'

'I am only a poor girl,' returned Sissy. 'I was separated from my father - he was only a stroller - and taken pity on by Mr. Gradgrind. I have lived in the house ever since.'

She was gone.

'It wanted this to complete the defeat,' said Mr. James Harthouse, sinking, with a resigned air, on the sofa, after standing transfixed a little while. 'The defeat may now be considered perfectly accomplished. Only a poor girl - only a stroller - only James Harthouse made nothing of - only James Harthouse a Great Pyramid of failure.'

The Great Pyramid put it into his head to go up the Nile. He took a pen upon the instant, and wrote the following note (in appropriate hieroglyphics) to his brother:

Dear Jack, - All up at Coketown. Bored out of the place, and going in for camels. Affectionately, JEM,

He rang the bell.

'Send my fellow here.'

'Gone to bed, sir.'

'Tell him to get up, and pack up.'

He wrote two more notes. One, to Mr. Bounderby, announcing his retirement from that part of the country, and showing where he would be found for the next fortnight. The other, similar in effect, to Mr.

Gradgrind. Almost as soon as the ink was dry upon their superscriptions, he had left the tall chimneys of Coketown behind, and was in a railway carriage, tearing and glaring over the dark landscape.

The moral sort of fellows might suppose that Mr. James Harthouse derived some comfortable reflections afterwards, from this prompt retreat, as one of his few actions that made any amends for anything, and as a token to himself that he had escaped the climax of a very bad business. But it was not so, at all. A secret sense of having failed and been ridiculous - a dread of what other fellows who went in for similar sorts of things, would say at his expense if they knew it - so oppressed him, that what was about the very best passage in his life was the one of all others he would not have owned to on any account, and the only one that made him ashamed of himself.