

Chapter 3

Very Decided

THE indefatigable Mrs. Sparsit, with a violent cold upon her, her voice reduced to a whisper, and her stately frame so racked by continual sneezes that it seemed in danger of dismemberment, gave chase to her patron until she found him in the metropolis; and there, majestically sweeping in upon him at his hotel in St. James's Street, exploded the combustibles with which she was charged, and blew up. Having executed her mission with infinite relish, this high-minded woman then fainted away on Mr. Bounderby's coat-collar.

Mr. Bounderby's first procedure was to shake Mrs. Sparsit off, and leave her to progress as she might through various stages of suffering on the floor. He next had recourse to the administration of potent restoratives, such as screwing the patient's thumbs, smiting her hands, abundantly watering her face, and inserting salt in her mouth. When these attentions had recovered her (which they speedily did), he hustled her into a fast train without offering any other refreshment, and carried her back to Coketown more dead than alive.

Regarded as a classical ruin, Mrs. Sparsit was an interesting spectacle on her arrival at her journey's end; but considered in any other light, the amount of damage she had by that time sustained was excessive, and impaired her claims to admiration. Utterly heedless of the wear and tear of her clothes and constitution, and adamant to her pathetic sneezes, Mr. Bounderby immediately crammed her into a coach, and bore her off to Stone Lodge.

'Now, Tom Gradgrind,' said Bounderby, bursting into his father-in-law's room late at night; 'here's a lady here - Mrs. Sparsit - you know Mrs. Sparsit - who has something to say to you that will strike you dumb.'

'You have missed my letter!' exclaimed Mr. Gradgrind, surprised by the apparition.

'Missed your letter, sir!' bawled Bounderby. 'The present time is no time for letters. No man shall talk to Josiah Bounderby of Coketown about letters, with his mind in the state it's in now.'

'Bounderby,' said Mr. Gradgrind, in a tone of temperate remonstrance, 'I speak of a very special letter I have written to you, in reference to Louisa.'

'Tom Gradgrind,' replied Bounderby, knocking the flat of his hand several times with great vehemence on the table, 'I speak of a very

special messenger that has come to me, in reference to Louisa. Mrs. Sparsit, ma'am, stand forward!

That unfortunate lady hereupon essaying to offer testimony, without any voice and with painful gestures expressive of an inflamed throat, became so aggravating and underwent so many facial contortions, that Mr. Bounderby, unable to bear it, seized her by the arm and shook her.

'If you can't get it out, ma'am,' said Bounderby, 'leave me to get it out. This is not a time for a lady, however highly connected, to be totally inaudible, and seemingly swallowing marbles. Tom Gradgrind, Mrs. Sparsit latterly found herself, by accident, in a situation to overhear a conversation out of doors between your daughter and your precious gentleman-friend, Mr. James Harthouse.'

'Indeed!' said Mr. Gradgrind.

'Ah! Indeed!' cried Bounderby. 'And in that conversation - '

'It is not necessary to repeat its tenor, Bounderby. I know what passed.'

'You do? Perhaps,' said Bounderby, staring with all his might at his so quiet and assuasive father-in-law, 'you know where your daughter is at the present time!'

'Undoubtedly. She is here.'

'Here?'

'My dear Bounderby, let me beg you to restrain these loud outbreaks, on all accounts. Louisa is here. The moment she could detach herself from that interview with the person of whom you speak, and whom I deeply regret to have been the means of introducing to you, Louisa hurried here, for protection. I myself had not been at home many hours, when I received her - here, in this room. She hurried by the train to town, she ran from town to this house, through a raging storm, and presented herself before me in a state of distraction. Of course, she has remained here ever since. Let me entreat you, for your own sake and for hers, to be more quiet.'

Mr. Bounderby silently gazed about him for some moments, in every direction except Mrs. Sparsit's direction; and then, abruptly turning upon the niece of Lady Scadgers, said to that wretched woman:

'Now, ma'am! We shall be happy to hear any little apology you may think proper to offer, for going about the country at express pace, with no other luggage than a Cock-and-a-Bull, ma'am!'

'Sir,' whispered Mrs. Sparsit, 'my nerves are at present too much shaken, and my health is at present too much impaired, in your service, to admit of my doing more than taking refuge in tears.' (Which she did.)

'Well, ma'am,' said Bounderby, 'without making any observation to you that may not be made with propriety to a woman of good family, what I have got to add to that, is that there is something else in which it appears to me you may take refuge, namely, a coach. And the coach in which we came here being at the door, you'll allow me to hand you down to it, and pack you home to the Bank: where the best course for you to pursue, will be to put your feet into the hottest water you can bear, and take a glass of scalding rum and butter after you get into bed.' With these words, Mr. Bounderby extended his right hand to the weeping lady, and escorted her to the conveyance in question, shedding many plaintive sneezes by the way. He soon returned alone.

'Now, as you showed me in your face, Tom Gradgrind, that you wanted to speak to me,' he resumed, 'here I am. But, I am not in a very agreeable state, I tell you plainly: not relishing this business, even as it is, and not considering that I am at any time as dutifully and submissively treated by your daughter, as Josiah Bounderby of Coketown ought to be treated by his wife. You have your opinion, I dare say; and I have mine, I know. If you mean to say anything to me to-night, that goes against this candid remark, you had better let it alone.'

Mr. Gradgrind, it will be observed, being much softened, Mr. Bounderby took particular pains to harden himself at all points. It was his amiable nature.

'My dear Bounderby,' Mr. Gradgrind began in reply.

'Now, you'll excuse me,' said Bounderby, 'but I don't want to be too dear. That, to start with. When I begin to be dear to a man, I generally find that his intention is to come over me. I am not speaking to you politely; but, as you are aware, I am not polite. If you like politeness, you know where to get it. You have your gentleman-friends, you know, and they'll serve you with as much of the article as you want. I don't keep it myself.'

'Bounderby,' urged Mr. Gradgrind, 'we are all liable to mistakes - '

'I thought you couldn't make 'em,' interrupted Bounderby.

'Perhaps I thought so. But, I say we are all liable to mistakes and I should feel sensible of your delicacy, and grateful for it, if you would spare me these references to Harthouse. I shall not associate him in our conversation with your intimacy and encouragement; pray do not persist in connecting him with mine.'

'I never mentioned his name!' said Bounderby.

'Well, well!' returned Mr. Gradgrind, with a patient, even a submissive, air. And he sat for a little while pondering. 'Bounderby, I see reason to doubt whether we have ever quite understood Louisa.'

'Who do you mean by We?'

'Let me say I, then,' he returned, in answer to the coarsely blurted question; 'I doubt whether I have understood Louisa. I doubt whether I have been quite right in the manner of her education.'

'There you hit it,' returned Bounderby. 'There I agree with you. You have found it out at last, have you? Education! I'll tell you what education is - To be tumbled out of doors, neck and crop, and put upon the shortest allowance of everything except blows. That's what I call education.'

'I think your good sense will perceive,' Mr. Gradgrind remonstrated in all humility, 'that whatever the merits of such a system may be, it would be difficult of general application to girls.'

'I don't see it at all, sir,' returned the obstinate Bounderby.

'Well,' sighed Mr. Gradgrind, 'we will not enter into the question. I assure you I have no desire to be controversial. I seek to repair what is amiss, if I possibly can; and I hope you will assist me in a good spirit, Bounderby, for I have been very much distressed.'

'I don't understand you, yet,' said Bounderby, with determined obstinacy, 'and therefore I won't make any promises.'

'In the course of a few hours, my dear Bounderby,' Mr. Gradgrind proceeded, in the same depressed and propitiatory manner, 'I appear to myself to have become better informed as to Louisa's character, than in previous years. The enlightenment has been painfully forced upon me, and the discovery is not mine. I think there are - Bounderby, you will be surprised to hear me say this - I think there are qualities in Louisa, which - which have been harshly neglected, and - and a little perverted. And - and I would suggest to you, that - that if you would kindly meet me in a timely endeavour to leave her to her better nature for a while - and to encourage it to develop itself by

tenderness and consideration - it - it would be the better for the happiness of all of us. Louisa,' said Mr. Gradgrind, shading his face with his hand, 'has always been my favourite child.'

The blustrous Bounderby crimsoned and swelled to such an extent on hearing these words, that he seemed to be, and probably was, on the brink of a fit. With his very ears a bright purple shot with crimson, he pent up his indignation, however, and said:

'You'd like to keep her here for a time?'

'I - I had intended to recommend, my dear Bounderby, that you should allow Louisa to remain here on a visit, and be attended by Sissy (I mean of course Cecilia Jupe), who understands her, and in whom she trusts.'

'I gather from all this, Tom Gradgrind,' said Bounderby, standing up with his hands in his pockets, 'that you are of opinion that there's what people call some incompatibility between Loo Bounderby and myself.'

'I fear there is at present a general incompatibility between Louisa, and - and - and almost all the relations in which I have placed her,' was her father's sorrowful reply.

'Now, look you here, Tom Gradgrind,' said Bounderby the flushed, confronting him with his legs wide apart, his hands deeper in his pockets, and his hair like a hayfield wherein his windy anger was boisterous. 'You have said your say; I am going to say mine. I am a Coketown man. I am Josiah Bounderby of Coketown. I know the bricks of this town, and I know the works of this town, and I know the chimneys of this town, and I know the smoke of this town, and I know the Hands of this town. I know 'em all pretty well. They're real. When a man tells me anything about imaginative qualities, I always tell that man, whoever he is, that I know what he means. He means turtle soup and venison, with a gold spoon, and that he wants to be set up with a coach and six. That's what your daughter wants. Since you are of opinion that she ought to have what she wants, I recommend you to provide it for her. Because, Tom Gradgrind, she will never have it from me.'

'Bounderby,' said Mr. Gradgrind, 'I hoped, after my entreaty, you would have taken a different tone.'

'Just wait a bit,' retorted Bounderby; 'you have said your say, I believe. I heard you out; hear me out, if you please. Don't make yourself a spectacle of unfairness as well as inconsistency, because, although I am sorry to see Tom Gradgrind reduced to his present

position, I should be doubly sorry to see him brought so low as that. Now, there's an incompatibility of some sort or another, I am given to understand by you, between your daughter and me. I'll give you to understand, in reply to that, that there unquestionably is an incompatibility of the first magnitude - to be summed up in this - that your daughter don't properly know her husband's merits, and is not impressed with such a sense as would become her, by George! of the honour of his alliance. That's plain speaking, I hope.'

'Boulderby,' urged Mr. Gradgrind, 'this is unreasonable.'

'Is it?' said Boulderby. 'I am glad to hear you say so. Because when Tom Gradgrind, with his new lights, tells me that what I say is unreasonable, I am convinced at once it must be devilish sensible. With your permission I am going on. You know my origin; and you know that for a good many years of my life I didn't want a shoeing-horn, in consequence of not having a shoe. Yet you may believe or not, as you think proper, that there are ladies - born ladies - belonging to families - Families! - who next to worship the ground I walk on.'

He discharged this like a Rocket, at his father-in-law's head.

'Whereas your daughter,' proceeded Boulderby, 'is far from being a born lady. That you know, yourself. Not that I care a pinch of candle-snuff about such things, for you are very well aware I don't; but that such is the fact, and you, Tom Gradgrind, can't change it. Why do I say this?'

'Not, I fear,' observed Mr. Gradgrind, in a low voice, 'to spare me.'

'Hear me out,' said Boulderby, 'and refrain from cutting in till your turn comes round. I say this, because highly connected females have been astonished to see the way in which your daughter has conducted herself, and to witness her insensibility. They have wondered how I have suffered it. And I wonder myself now, and I won't suffer it.'

'Boulderby,' returned Mr. Gradgrind, rising, 'the less we say to- night the better, I think.'

'On the contrary, Tom Gradgrind, the more we say to-night, the better, I think. That is,' the consideration checked him, 'till I have said all I mean to say, and then I don't care how soon we stop. I come to a question that may shorten the business. What do you mean by the proposal you made just now?'

'What do I mean, Boulderby?'

'By your visiting proposition,' said Bounderby, with an inflexible jerk of the hayfield.

'I mean that I hope you may be induced to arrange in a friendly manner, for allowing Louisa a period of repose and reflection here, which may tend to a gradual alteration for the better in many respects.'

'To a softening down of your ideas of the incompatibility?' said Bounderby.

'If you put it in those terms.'

'What made you think of this?' said Bounderby.

'I have already said, I fear Louisa has not been understood. Is it asking too much, Bounderby, that you, so far her elder, should aid in trying to set her right? You have accepted a great charge of her; for better for worse, for - '

Mr. Bounderby may have been annoyed by the repetition of his own words to Stephen Blackpool, but he cut the quotation short with an angry start.

'Come!' said he, 'I don't want to be told about that. I know what I took her for, as well as you do. Never you mind what I took her for; that's my look out.'

'I was merely going on to remark, Bounderby, that we may all be more or less in the wrong, not even excepting you; and that some yielding on your part, remembering the trust you have accepted, may not only be an act of true kindness, but perhaps a debt incurred towards Louisa.'

'I think differently,' blustered Bounderby. 'I am going to finish this business according to my own opinions. Now, I don't want to make a quarrel of it with you, Tom Gradgrind. To tell you the truth, I don't think it would be worthy of my reputation to quarrel on such a subject. As to your gentleman-friend, he may take himself off, wherever he likes best. If he falls in my way, I shall tell him my mind; if he don't fall in my way, I shan't, for it won't be worth my while to do it. As to your daughter, whom I made Loo Bounderby, and might have done better by leaving Loo Gradgrind, if she don't come home to-morrow, by twelve o'clock at noon, I shall understand that she prefers to stay away, and I shall send her wearing apparel and so forth over here, and you'll take charge of her for the future. What I shall say to people in general, of the incompatibility that led to my so laying down the law, will be this. I am Josiah Bounderby, and I had my bringing-

up; she's the daughter of Tom Gradgrind, and she had her bringing-up; and the two horses wouldn't pull together. I am pretty well known to be rather an uncommon man, I believe; and most people will understand fast enough that it must be a woman rather out of the common, also, who, in the long run, would come up to my mark.'

'Let me seriously entreat you to reconsider this, Bounderby,' urged Mr. Gradgrind, 'before you commit yourself to such a decision.'

'I always come to a decision,' said Bounderby, tossing his hat on: 'and whatever I do, I do at once. I should be surprised at Tom Gradgrind's addressing such a remark to Josiah Bounderby of Coketown, knowing what he knows of him, if I could be surprised by anything Tom Gradgrind did, after his making himself a party to sentimental humbug. I have given you my decision, and I have got no more to say. Good night!'

So Mr. Bounderby went home to his town house to bed. At five minutes past twelve o'clock next day, he directed Mrs. Bounderby's property to be carefully packed up and sent to Tom Gradgrind's; advertised his country retreat for sale by private contract; and resumed a bachelor life.