

## Chapter XXI - Mr Merdle's Complaint

Upon that establishment of state, the Merdle establishment in Harley Street, Cavendish Square, there was the shadow of no more common wall than the fronts of other establishments of state on the opposite side of the street. Like unexceptionable Society, the opposing rows of houses in Harley Street were very grim with one another. Indeed, the mansions and their inhabitants were so much alike in that respect, that the people were often to be found drawn up on opposite sides of dinner-tables, in the shade of their own loftiness, staring at the other side of the way with the dullness of the houses.

Everybody knows how like the street the two dinner-rows of people who take their stand by the street will be. The expressionless uniform twenty houses, all to be knocked at and rung at in the same form, all approachable by the same dull steps, all fended off by the same pattern of railing, all with the same impracticable fire-escapes, the same inconvenient fixtures in their heads, and everything without exception to be taken at a high valuation - who has not dined with these? The house so drearily out of repair, the occasional bow-window, the stuccoed house, the newly-fronted house, the corner house with nothing but angular rooms, the house with the blinds always down, the house with the hatchment always up, the house where the collector has called for one quarter of an Idea, and found nobody at home - who has not dined with these? The house that nobody will take, and is to be had a bargain - who does not know her? The showy house that was taken for life by the disappointed gentleman, and which does not suit him at all - who is unacquainted with that haunted habitation?

Harley Street, Cavendish Square, was more than aware of Mr and Mrs Merdle. Intruders there were in Harley Street, of whom it was not aware; but Mr and Mrs Merdle it delighted to honour. Society was aware of Mr and Mrs Merdle. Society had said 'Let us license them; let us know them.'

Mr Merdle was immensely rich; a man of prodigious enterprise; a Midas without the ears, who turned all he touched to gold. He was in everything good, from banking to building. He was in Parliament, of course. He was in the City, necessarily. He was Chairman of this, Trustee of that, President of the other. The weightiest of men had said to projectors, 'Now, what name have you got? Have you got Merdle?' And, the reply being in the negative, had said, 'Then I won't look at you.'

This great and fortunate man had provided that extensive bosom which required so much room to be unfeeling enough in, with a nest of crimson and gold some fifteen years before. It was not a bosom to

repose upon, but it was a capital bosom to hang jewels upon. Mr Merdle wanted something to hang jewels upon, and he bought it for the purpose. Storr and Mortimer might have married on the same speculation.

Like all his other speculations, it was sound and successful. The jewels showed to the richest advantage. The bosom moving in Society with the jewels displayed upon it, attracted general admiration. Society approving, Mr Merdle was satisfied. He was the most disinterested of men, - did everything for Society, and got as little for himself out of all his gain and care, as a man might.

That is to say, it may be supposed that he got all he wanted, otherwise with unlimited wealth he would have got it. But his desire was to the utmost to satisfy Society (whatever that was), and take up all its drafts upon him for tribute. He did not shine in company; he had not very much to say for himself; he was a reserved man, with a broad, overhanging, watchful head, that particular kind of dull red colour in his cheeks which is rather stale than fresh, and a somewhat uneasy expression about his coat-cuffs, as if they were in his confidence, and had reasons for being anxious to hide his hands. In the little he said, he was a pleasant man enough; plain, emphatic about public and private confidence, and tenacious of the utmost deference being shown by every one, in all things, to Society. In this same Society (if that were it which came to his dinners, and to Mrs Merdle's receptions and concerts), he hardly seemed to enjoy himself much, and was mostly to be found against walls and behind doors. Also when he went out to it, instead of its coming home to him, he seemed a little fatigued, and upon the whole rather more disposed for bed; but he was always cultivating it nevertheless, and always moving in it - and always laying out money on it with the greatest liberality.

Mrs Merdle's first husband had been a colonel, under whose auspices the bosom had entered into competition with the snows of North America, and had come off at little disadvantage in point of whiteness, and at none in point of coldness. The colonel's son was Mrs Merdle's only child. He was of a chuckle-headed, high-shouldered make, with a general appearance of being, not so much a young man as a swelled boy. He had given so few signs of reason, that a by-word went among his companions that his brain had been frozen up in a mighty frost which prevailed at St John's, New Brunswick, at the period of his birth there, and had never thawed from that hour. Another by-word represented him as having in his infancy, through the negligence of a nurse, fallen out of a high window on his head, which had been heard by responsible witnesses to crack. It is probable that both these representations were of ex post facto origin; the young gentleman (whose expressive name was Sparkler) being monomaniacal in offering marriage to all manner of undesirable young ladies, and in remarking

of every successive young lady to whom he tendered a matrimonial proposal that she was 'a doosed fine gal - well educated too - with no biggodd nonsense about her.'

A son-in-law with these limited talents, might have been a clog upon another man; but Mr Merdle did not want a son-in-law for himself; he wanted a son-in-law for Society. Mr Sparkler having been in the Guards, and being in the habit of frequenting all the races, and all the lounges, and all the parties, and being well known, Society was satisfied with its son-in-law. This happy result Mr Merdle would have considered well attained, though Mr Sparkler had been a more expensive article. And he did not get Mr Sparkler by any means cheap for Society, even as it was. There was a dinner giving in the Harley Street establishment, while Little Dorrit was stitching at her father's new shirts by his side that night; and there were magnates from the Court and magnates from the City, magnates from the Commons and magnates from the Lords, magnates from the bench and magnates from the bar, Bishop magnates, Treasury magnates, Horse Guard magnates, Admiralty magnates, - all the magnates that keep us going, and sometimes trip us up.

'I am told,' said Bishop magnate to Horse Guards, 'that Mr Merdle has made another enormous hit. They say a hundred thousand pounds.'

Horse Guards had heard two.

Treasury had heard three.

Bar, handling his persuasive double eye-glass, was by no means clear but that it might be four. It was one of those happy strokes of calculation and combination, the result of which it was difficult to estimate. It was one of those instances of a comprehensive grasp, associated with habitual luck and characteristic boldness, of which an age presented us but few. But here was Brother Bellows, who had been in the great Bank case, and who could probably tell us more. What did Brother Bellows put this new success at?

Brother Bellows was on his way to make his bow to the bosom, and could only tell them in passing that he had heard it stated, with great appearance of truth, as being worth, from first to last, half-a-million of money.

Admiralty said Mr Merdle was a wonderful man, Treasury said he was a new power in the country, and would be able to buy up the whole House of Commons. Bishop said he was glad to think that this wealth flowed into the coffers of a gentleman who was always disposed to maintain the best interests of Society.

Mr Merdle himself was usually late on these occasions, as a man still detained in the clutch of giant enterprises when other men had shaken off their dwarfs for the day. On this occasion, he was the last arrival. Treasury said Merdle's work punished him a little. Bishop said he was glad to think that this wealth flowed into the coffers of a gentleman who accepted it with meekness.

Powder! There was so much Powder in waiting, that it flavoured the dinner. Pulverous particles got into the dishes, and Society's meats had a seasoning of first-rate footmen. Mr Merdle took down a countess who was secluded somewhere in the core of an immense dress, to which she was in the proportion of the heart to the overgrown cabbage. If so low a simile may be admitted, the dress went down the staircase like a richly brocaded Jack in the Green, and nobody knew what sort of small person carried it.

Society had everything it could want, and could not want, for dinner. It had everything to look at, and everything to eat, and everything to drink. It is to be hoped it enjoyed itself; for Mr Merdle's own share of the repast might have been paid for with eighteenpence. Mrs Merdle was magnificent. The chief butler was the next magnificent institution of the day. He was the stateliest man in the company. He did nothing, but he looked on as few other men could have done. He was Mr Merdle's last gift to Society. Mr Merdle didn't want him, and was put out of countenance when the great creature looked at him; but insatiable Society would have him - and had got him.

The invisible countess carried out the Green at the usual stage of the entertainment, and the file of beauty was closed up by the bosom. Treasury said, Juno. Bishop said, Judith.

Bar fell into discussion with Horse Guards concerning courts-martial. Brothers Bellows and Bench struck in. Other magnates paired off. Mr Merdle sat silent, and looked at the table-cloth. Sometimes a magnate addressed him, to turn the stream of his own particular discussion towards him; but Mr Merdle seldom gave much attention to it, or did more than rouse himself from his calculations and pass the wine.

When they rose, so many of the magnates had something to say to Mr Merdle individually that he held little levees by the sideboard, and checked them off as they went out at the door.

Treasury hoped he might venture to congratulate one of England's world-famed capitalists and merchant-princes (he had turned that original sentiment in the house a few times, and it came easy to him) on a new achievement. To extend the triumphs of such men was to extend the triumphs and resources of the nation; and Treasury felt - he gave Mr Merdle to understand - patriotic on the subject.

'Thank you, my lord,' said Mr Merdle; 'thank you. I accept your congratulations with pride, and I am glad you approve.'

'Why, I don't unreservedly approve, my dear Mr Merdle. Because,' smiling Treasury turned him by the arm towards the sideboard and spoke banteringly, 'it never can be worth your while to come among us and help us.'

Mr Merdle felt honoured by the -

'No, no,' said Treasury, 'that is not the light in which one so distinguished for practical knowledge and great foresight, can be expected to regard it. If we should ever be happily enabled, by accidentally possessing the control over circumstances, to propose to one so eminent to - to come among us, and give us the weight of his influence, knowledge, and character, we could only propose it to him as a duty. In fact, as a duty that he owed to Society.'

Mr Merdle intimated that Society was the apple of his eye, and that its claims were paramount to every other consideration. Treasury moved on, and Bar came up. Bar, with his little insinuating jury droop, and fingering his persuasive double eye-glass, hoped he might be excused if he mentioned to one of the greatest converters of the root of all evil into the root of all good, who had for a long time reflected a shining lustre on the annals even of our commercial country - if he mentioned, disinterestedly, and as, what we lawyers called in our pedantic way, *amicus curiae*, a fact that had come by accident within his knowledge. He had been required to look over the title of a very considerable estate in one of the eastern counties - lying, in fact, for Mr Merdle knew we lawyers loved to be particular, on the borders of two of the eastern counties. Now, the title was perfectly sound, and the estate was to be purchased by one who had the command of - Money (jury droop and persuasive eye-glass), on remarkably advantageous terms. This had come to Bar's knowledge only that day, and it had occurred to him, 'I shall have the honour of dining with my esteemed friend Mr Merdle this evening, and, strictly between ourselves, I will mention the opportunity.' Such a purchase would involve not only a great legitimate political influence, but some half-dozen church presentations of considerable annual value. Now, that Mr Merdle was already at no loss to discover means of occupying even his capital, and of fully employing even his active and vigorous intellect, Bar well knew: but he would venture to suggest that the question arose in his mind, whether one who had deservedly gained so high a position and so European a reputation did not owe it - we would not say to himself, but we would say to Society, to possess himself of such influences as these; and to exercise them - we would not say for his own, or for his party's, but we would say for Society's - benefit.

Mr Merdle again expressed himself as wholly devoted to that object of his constant consideration, and Bar took his persuasive eye-glass up the grand staircase. Bishop then came undesignedly sidling in the direction of the sideboard.

Surely the goods of this world, it occurred in an accidental way to Bishop to remark, could scarcely be directed into happier channels than when they accumulated under the magic touch of the wise and sagacious, who, while they knew the just value of riches (Bishop tried here to look as if he were rather poor himself), were aware of their importance, judiciously governed and rightly distributed, to the welfare of our brethren at large.

Mr Merdle with humility expressed his conviction that Bishop couldn't mean him, and with inconsistency expressed his high gratification in Bishop's good opinion.

Bishop then - jauntily stepping out a little with his well-shaped right leg, as though he said to Mr Merdle 'don't mind the apron; a mere form!' put this case to his good friend:

Whether it had occurred to his good friend, that Society might not unreasonably hope that one so blest in his undertakings, and whose example on his pedestal was so influential with it, would shed a little money in the direction of a mission or so to Africa?

Mr Merdle signifying that the idea should have his best attention, Bishop put another case:

Whether his good friend had at all interested himself in the proceedings of our Combined Additional Endowed Dignitaries Committee, and whether it had occurred to him that to shed a little money in that direction might be a great conception finely executed?

Mr Merdle made a similar reply, and Bishop explained his reason for inquiring.

Society looked to such men as his good friend to do such things. It was not that HE looked to them, but that Society looked to them.

just as it was not Our Committee who wanted the Additional Endowed Dignitaries, but it was Society that was in a state of the most agonising uneasiness of mind until it got them. He begged to assure his good friend that he was extremely sensible of his good friend's regard on all occasions for the best interests of Society; and he considered that he was at once consulting those interests and expressing the feeling of Society, when he wished him continued

prosperity, continued increase of riches, and continued things in general.

Bishop then betook himself up-stairs, and the other magnates gradually floated up after him until there was no one left below but Mr Merdle. That gentleman, after looking at the table-cloth until the soul of the chief butler glowed with a noble resentment, went slowly up after the rest, and became of no account in the stream of people on the grand staircase. Mrs Merdle was at home, the best of the jewels were hung out to be seen, Society got what it came for, Mr Merdle drank twopennyworth of tea in a corner and got more than he wanted.

Among the evening magnates was a famous physician, who knew everybody, and whom everybody knew. On entering at the door, he came upon Mr Merdle drinking his tea in a corner, and touched him on the arm.

Mr Merdle started. 'Oh! It's you!'

'Any better to-day?'

'No,' said Mr Merdle, 'I am no better.'

'A pity I didn't see you this morning. Pray come to me to-morrow, or let me come to you.'

'Well!' he replied. 'I will come to-morrow as I drive by.' Bar and Bishop had both been bystanders during this short dialogue, and as Mr Merdle was swept away by the crowd, they made their remarks upon it to the Physician. Bar said, there was a certain point of mental strain beyond which no man could go; that the point varied with various textures of brain and peculiarities of constitution, as he had had occasion to notice in several of his learned brothers; but the point of endurance passed by a line's breadth, depression and dyspepsia ensued. Not to intrude on the sacred mysteries of medicine, he took it, now (with the jury droop and persuasive eye-glass), that this was Merdle's case? Bishop said that when he was a young man, and had fallen for a brief space into the habit of writing sermons on Saturdays, a habit which all young sons of the church should sedulously avoid, he had frequently been sensible of a depression, arising as he supposed from an over-taxed intellect, upon which the yolk of a new-laid egg, beaten up by the good woman in whose house he at that time lodged, with a glass of sound sherry, nutmeg, and powdered sugar acted like a charm. Without presuming to offer so simple a remedy to the consideration of so profound a professor of the great healing art, he would venture to inquire whether the strain, being by way of intricate calculations, the spirits might not (humanly speaking) be restored to their tone by a gentle and yet generous stimulant?

'Yes,' said the physician, 'yes, you are both right. But I may as well tell you that I can find nothing the matter with Mr Merdle. He has the constitution of a rhinoceros, the digestion of an ostrich, and the concentration of an oyster. As to nerves, Mr Merdle is of a cool temperament, and not a sensitive man: is about as invulnerable, I should say, as Achilles. How such a man should suppose himself unwell without reason, you may think strange. But I have found nothing the matter with him. He may have some deep-seated recondite complaint. I can't say. I only say, that at present I have not found it out.'

There was no shadow of Mr Merdle's complaint on the bosom now displaying precious stones in rivalry with many similar superb jewel-stands; there was no shadow of Mr Merdle's complaint on young Sparkler hovering about the rooms, monomaniacally seeking any sufficiently ineligible young lady with no nonsense about her; there was no shadow of Mr Merdle's complaint on the Barnacles and Stiltstalkings, of whom whole colonies were present; or on any of the company. Even on himself, its shadow was faint enough as he moved about among the throng, receiving homage.

Mr Merdle's complaint. Society and he had so much to do with one another in all things else, that it is hard to imagine his complaint, if he had one, being solely his own affair. Had he that deep-seated recondite complaint, and did any doctor find it out? Patience. in the meantime, the shadow of the Marshalsea wall was a real darkening influence, and could be seen on the Dorrit Family at any stage of the sun's course.