## Chapter XLI - Something Wrong Somewhere

The family had been a month or two at Venice, when Mr Dorrit, who was much among Counts and Marquises, and had but scant leisure, set an hour of one day apart, beforehand, for the purpose of holding some conference with Mrs General.

The time he had reserved in his mind arriving, he sent Mr Tinkler, his valet, to Mrs General's apartment (which would have absorbed about a third of the area of the Marshalsea), to present his compliments to that lady, and represent him as desiring the favour of an interview. It being that period of the forenoon when the various members of the family had coffee in their own chambers, some couple of hours before assembling at breakfast in a faded hall which had once been sumptuous, but was now the prey of watery vapours and a settled melancholy, Mrs General was accessible to the valet. That envoy found her on a little square of carpet, so extremely diminutive in reference to the size of her stone and marble floor that she looked as if she might have had it spread for the trying on of a ready-made pair of shoes; or as if she had come into possession of the enchanted piece of carpet, bought for forty purses by one of the three princes in the Arabian Nights, and had that moment been transported on it, at a wish, into a palatial saloon with which it had no connection.

Mrs General, replying to the envoy, as she set down her empty coffee-cup, that she was willing at once to proceed to Mr Dorrit's apartment, and spare him the trouble of coming to her (which, in his gallantry, he had proposed), the envoy threw open the door, and escorted Mrs General to the presence. It was quite a walk, by mysterious staircases and corridors, from Mrs General's apartment, - hoodwinked by a narrow side street with a low gloomy bridge in it, and dungeon-like opposite tenements, their walls besmeared with a thousand downward stains and streaks, as if every crazy aperture in them had been weeping tears of rust into the Adriatic for centuries - to Mr Dorrit's apartment: with a whole English house- front of window, a prospect of beautiful church-domes rising into the blue sky sheer out of the water which reflected them, and a hushed murmur of the Grand Canal laving the doorways below, where his gondolas and gondoliers attended his pleasure, drowsily swinging in a little forest of piles.

Mr Dorrit, in a resplendent dressing-gown and cap - the dormant grub that had so long bided its time among the Collegians had burst into a rare butterfly - rose to receive Mrs General. A chair to Mrs General. An easier chair, sir; what are you doing, what are you about, what do you mean? Now, leave us!

'Mrs General,' said Mr Dorrit, 'I took the liberty - '

'By no means,' Mrs General interposed. 'I was quite at your disposition. I had had my coffee.'

' - I took the liberty,' said Mr Dorrit again, with the magnificent placidity of one who was above correction, 'to solicit the favour of a little private conversation with you, because I feel rather worried respecting my - ha - my younger daughter. You will have observed a great difference of temperament, madam, between my two daughters?'

Said Mrs General in response, crossing her gloved hands (she was never without gloves, and they never creased and always fitted), 'There is a great difference.'

'May I ask to be favoured with your view of it?' said Mr Dorrit, with a deference not incompatible with majestic serenity.

'Fanny,' returned Mrs General, 'has force of character and self-reliance. Amy, none.'

None? O Mrs General, ask the Marshalsea stones and bars. O Mrs General, ask the milliner who taught her to work, and the dancing-master who taught her sister to dance. O Mrs General, Mrs General, ask me, her father, what I owe her; and hear my testimony touching the life of this slighted little creature from her childhood up!

No such adjuration entered Mr Dorrit's head. He looked at Mrs General, seated in her usual erect attitude on her coach-box behind the proprieties, and he said in a thoughtful manner, 'True, madam.'

'I would not,' said Mrs General, 'be understood to say, observe, that there is nothing to improve in Fanny. But there is material there - perhaps, indeed, a little too much.'

'Will you be kind enough, madam,' said Mr Dorrit, 'to be - ha - more explicit? I do not quite understand my elder daughter's having - hum - too much material. What material?'

'Fanny,' returned Mrs General, 'at present forms too many opinions.

Perfect breeding forms none, and is never demonstrative.'

Lest he himself should be found deficient in perfect breeding, Mr Dorrit hastened to reply, 'Unquestionably, madam, you are right.' Mrs General returned, in her emotionless and expressionless manner, 'I believe so.'

'But you are aware, my dear madam,' said Mr Dorrit, 'that my daughters had the misfortune to lose their lamented mother when

they were very young; and that, in consequence of my not having been until lately the recognised heir to my property, they have lived with me as a comparatively poor, though always proud, gentleman, in - ha hum - retirement!'

'I do not,' said Mrs General, 'lose sight of the circumstance.' 'Madam,'pursued Mr Dorrit, 'of my daughter Fanny, under her present guidance and with such an example constantly before her - '

(Mrs General shut her eyes.)

- 'I have no misgivings. There is adaptability of character in Fanny. But my younger daughter, Mrs General, rather worries and vexes my thoughts. I must inform you that she has always been my favourite.'

'There is no accounting,' said Mrs General, 'for these partialities.'

'Ha - no,' assented Mr Dorrit. 'No. Now, madam, I am troubled by noticing that Amy is not, so to speak, one of ourselves. She does not Care to go about with us; she is lost in the society we have here; our tastes are evidently not her tastes. Which,' said Mr Dorrit, summing up with judicial gravity, 'is to say, in other words, that there is something wrong in - ha - Amy.'

'May we incline to the supposition,' said Mrs General, with a little touch of varnish, 'that something is referable to the novelty of the position?'

'Excuse me, madam,' observed Mr Dorrit, rather quickly. 'The daughter of a gentleman, though - ha - himself at one time comparatively far from affluent - comparatively - and herself reared in - hum - retirement, need not of necessity find this position so very novel.'

'True,' said Mrs General, 'true.'

'Therefore, madam,' said Mr Dorrit, 'I took the liberty' (he laid an emphasis on the phrase and repeated it, as though he stipulated, with urbane firmness, that he must not be contradicted again), 'I took the liberty of requesting this interview, in order that I might mention the topic to you, and inquire how you would advise me?'

'Mr Dorrit,' returned Mrs General, 'I have conversed with Amy several times since we have been residing here, on the general subject of the formation of a demeanour. She has expressed herself to me as wondering exceedingly at Venice. I have mentioned to her that it is better not to wonder. I have pointed out to her that the celebrated Mr Eustace, the classical tourist, did not think much of it; and that he

compared the Rialto, greatly to its disadvantage, with Westminster and Blackfriars Bridges. I need not add, after what you have said, that I have not yet found my arguments successful. You do me the honour to ask me what to advise. It always appears to me (if this should prove to be a baseless assumption, I shall be pardoned), that Mr Dorrit has been accustomed to exercise influence over the minds of others.'

'Hum - madam,' said Mr Dorrit, 'I have been at the head of - ha of a considerable community. You are right in supposing that I am not unaccustomed to - an influential position.'

'I am happy,' returned Mrs General, 'to be so corroborated. I would therefore the more confidently recommend that Mr Dorrit should speak to Amy himself, and make his observations and wishes known to her. Being his favourite, besides, and no doubt attached to him, she is all the more likely to yield to his influence.'

'I had anticipated your suggestion, madam,' said Mr Dorrit, 'but - ha - was not sure that I might - hum - not encroach on - '

'On my province, Mr Dorrit?' said Mrs General, graciously. 'Do not mention it.'

'Then, with your leave, madam,' resumed Mr Dorrit, ringing his little bell to summon his valet, 'I will send for her at once.'

'Does Mr Dorrit wish me to remain?'

'Perhaps, if you have no other engagement, you would not object for a minute or two - '

'Not at all.'

So, Tinkler the valet was instructed to find Miss Amy's maid, and to request that subordinate to inform Miss Amy that Mr Dorrit wished to see her in his own room. In delivering this charge to Tinkler, Mr Dorrit looked severely at him, and also kept a jealous eye upon him until he went out at the door, mistrusting that he might have something in his mind prejudicial to the family dignity; that he might have even got wind of some Collegiate joke before he came into the service, and might be derisively reviving its remembrance at the present moment. If Tinkler had happened to smile, however faintly and innocently, nothing would have persuaded Mr Dorrit, to the hour of his death, but that this was the case. As Tinkler happened, however, very fortunately for himself, to be of a serious and composed countenance, he escaped the secret danger that threatened him. And as on his return - when Mr Dorrit eyed him again - he announced Miss Amy as if she had come to a funeral, he left a vague impression on Mr Dorrit's mind that

he was a well- conducted young fellow, who had been brought up in the study of his Catechism by a widowed mother.

'Amy,' said Mr Dorrit, 'you have just now been the subject of some conversation between myself and Mrs General. We agree that you scarcely seem at home here. Ha - how is this?'

A pause.

'I think, father, I require a little time.'

'Papa is a preferable mode of address,' observed Mrs General. 'Father is rather vulgar, my dear. The word Papa, besides, gives a pretty form to the lips. Papa, potatoes, poultry, prunes, and prism are all very good words for the lips: especially prunes and prism. You will find it serviceable, in the formation of a demeanour, if you sometimes say to yourself in company - on entering a room, for instance - Papa, potatoes, poultry, prunes and prism, prunes and prism.'

'Pray, my child,' said Mr Dorrit, 'attend to the - hum - precepts of Mrs General.'

Poor Little Dorrit, with a rather forlorn glance at that eminent varnisher, promised to try.

'You say, Amy,' pursued Mr Dorrit, 'that you think you require time. Time for what?'

Another pause.

'To become accustomed to the novelty of my life, was all I meant,' said Little Dorrit, with her loving eyes upon her father; whom she had very nearly addressed as poultry, if not prunes and prism too, in her desire to submit herself to Mrs General and please him.

Mr Dorrit frowned, and looked anything but pleased. 'Amy,' he returned, 'it appears to me, I must say, that you have had abundance of time for that. Ha - you surprise me. You disappoint me. Fanny has conquered any such little difficulties, and - hum - why not you?'

'I hope I shall do better soon,' said Little Dorrit.

'I hope so,' returned her father. 'I - ha - I most devoutly hope so, Amy. I sent for you, in order that I might say - hum - impressively say, in the presence of Mrs General, to whom we are all so much indebted for obligingly being present among us, on - ha - on this or any other occasion,' Mrs General shut her eyes, 'that I - ha hum - am not pleased with you. You make Mrs General's a thankless task. You - ha

- embarrass me very much. You have always (as I have informed Mrs General) been my favourite child; I have always made you a - hum - a friend and companion; in return, I beg - I - ha - I do beg, that you accommodate yourself better to - hum - circumstances, and dutifully do what becomes your - your station.'

Mr Dorrit was even a little more fragmentary than usual, being excited on the subject and anxious to make himself particularly emphatic.

'I do beg,' he repeated, 'that this may be attended to, and that you will seriously take pains and try to conduct yourself in a manner both becoming your position as - ha - Miss Amy Dorrit, and satisfactory to myself and Mrs General.'

That lady shut her eyes again, on being again referred to; then, slowly opening them and rising, added these words: 'If Miss Amy Dorrit will direct her own attention to, and will accept of my poor assistance in, the formation of a surface, Mr Dorrit will have no further cause of anxiety. May I take this opportunity of remarking, as an instance in point, that it is scarcely delicate to look at vagrants with the attention which I have seen bestowed upon them by a very dear young friend of mine? They should not be looked at. Nothing disagreeable should ever be looked at. Apart from such a habit standing in the way of that graceful equanimity of surface which is so expressive of good breeding, it hardly seems compatible with refinement of mind. A truly refined mind will seem to be ignorant of the existence of anything that is not perfectly proper, placid, and pleasant.' Having delivered this exalted sentiment, Mrs General made a sweeping obeisance, and retired with an expression of mouth indicative of Prunes and Prism.

Little Dorrit, whether speaking or silent, had preserved her quiet earnestness and her loving look. It had not been clouded, except for a passing moment, until now. But now that she was left alone with him the fingers of her lightly folded hands were agitated, and there was repressed emotion in her face.

Not for herself. She might feel a little wounded, but her care was not for herself. Her thoughts still turned, as they always had turned, to him. A faint misgiving, which had hung about her since their accession to fortune, that even now she could never see him as he used to be before the prison days, had gradually begun to assume form in her mind. She felt that, in what he had just now said to her and in his whole bearing towards her, there was the well-known shadow of the Marshalsea wall. It took a new shape, but it was the old sad shadow. She began with sorrowful unwillingness to acknowledge to herself that she was not strong enough to keep off the fear that no space in the life of man could overcome that quarter of a century behind the prison bars. She had no blame to bestow upon him,

therefore: nothing to reproach him with, no emotions in her faithful heart but great compassion and unbounded tenderness.

This is why it was, that, even as he sat before her on his sofa, in the brilliant light of a bright Italian day, the wonderful city without and the splendours of an old palace within, she saw him at the moment in the long-familiar gloom of his Marshalsea lodging, and wished to take her seat beside him, and comfort him, and be again full of confidence with him, and of usefulness to him. If he divined what was in her thoughts, his own were not in tune with it.

After some uneasy moving in his seat, he got up and walked about, looking very much dissatisfied.

'Is there anything else you wish to say to me, dear father?'

'No, no. Nothing else.'

'I am sorry you have not been pleased with me, dear. I hope you will not think of me with displeasure now. I am going to try, more than ever, to adapt myself as you wish to what surrounds me - for indeed I have tried all along, though I have failed, I know.'

'Amy,' he returned, turning short upon her. 'You - ha - habitually hurt me.'

'Hurt you, father! I!'

'There is a - hum - a topic,' said Mr Dorrit, looking all about the ceiling of the room, and never at the attentive, uncomplainingly shocked face, 'a painful topic, a series of events which I wish - ha - altogether to obliterate. This is understood by your sister, who has already remonstrated with you in my presence; it is understood by your brother; it is understood by - ha hum - by every one of delicacy and sensitiveness except yourself - ha - I am sorry to say, except yourself. You, Amy - hum - you alone and only you - constantly revive the topic, though not in words.'

She laid her hand on his arm. She did nothing more. She gently touched him. The trembling hand may have said, with some expression, 'Think of me, think how I have worked, think of my many cares!' But she said not a syllable herself.

There was a reproach in the touch so addressed to him that she had not foreseen, or she would have withheld her hand. He began to justify himself in a heated, stumbling, angry manner, which made nothing of it.

'I was there all those years. I was - ha - universally acknowledged as the head of the place. I - hum - I caused you to be respected there, Amy. I - ha hum - I gave my family a position there. I deserve a return. I claim a return. I say, sweep it off the face of the earth and begin afresh. Is that much? I ask, is that much?' He did not once look at her, as he rambled on in this way; but gesticulated at, and appealed to, the empty air.

'I have suffered. Probably I know how much I have suffered better than any one - ha - I say than any one! If I can put that aside, if I can eradicate the marks of what I have endured, and can emerge before the world - a - ha - gentleman unspoiled, unspotted - is it a great deal to expect - I say again, is it a great deal to expect - that my children should - hum - do the same and sweep that accursed experience off the face of the earth?'

In spite of his flustered state, he made all these exclamations in a carefully suppressed voice, lest the valet should overhear anything.

'Accordingly, they do it. Your sister does it. Your brother does it. You alone, my favourite child, whom I made the friend and companion of my life when you were a mere - hum - Baby, do not do it.

You alone say you can't do it. I provide you with valuable assistance to do it. I attach an accomplished and highly bred lady - ha - Mrs General, to you, for the purpose of doing it. Is it surprising that I should be displeased? Is it necessary that I should defend myself for expressing my displeasure? No!'

Notwithstanding which, he continued to defend himself, without any abatement of his flushed mood.

'I am careful to appeal to that lady for confirmation, before I express any displeasure at all. I - hum - I necessarily make that appeal within limited bounds, or I - ha - should render legible, by that lady, what I desire to be blotted out. Am I selfish? Do I complain for my own sake? No. No. Principally for - ha hum - your sake, Amy.'

This last consideration plainly appeared, from his manner of pursuing it, to have just that instant come into his head.

'I said I was hurt. So I am. So I - ha - am determined to be, whatever is advanced to the contrary. I am hurt that my daughter, seated in the - hum - lap of fortune, should mope and retire and proclaim herself unequal to her destiny. I am hurt that she should - ha - systematically reproduce what the rest of us blot out; and seem - hum - I had almost said positively anxious - to announce to wealthy and distinguished society that she was born and bred in - ha hum - a

place that I myself decline to name. But there is no inconsistency - ha - not the least, in my feeling hurt, and yet complaining principally for your sake, Amy. I do; I say again, I do. It is for your sake that I wish you, under the auspices of Mrs General, to form a - hum - a surface. It is for your sake that I wish you to have a - ha - truly refined mind, and (in the striking words of Mrs General) to be ignorant of everything that is not perfectly proper, placid, and pleasant.'

He had been running down by jerks, during his last speech, like a sort of ill-adjusted alarum. The touch was still upon his arm. He fell silent; and after looking about the ceiling again for a little while, looked down at her. Her head drooped, and he could not see her face; but her touch was tender and quiet, and in the expression of her dejected figure there was no blame - nothing but love. He began to whimper, just as he had done that night in the prison when she afterwards sat at his bedside till morning; exclaimed that he was a poor ruin and a poor wretch in the midst of his wealth; and clasped her in his arms. 'Hush, hush, my own dear! Kiss me!' was all she said to him. His tears were soon dried, much sooner than on the former occasion; and he was presently afterwards very high with his valet, as a way of righting himself for having shed any.

With one remarkable exception, to be recorded in its place, this was the only time, in his life of freedom and fortune, when he spoke to his daughter Amy of the old days.

But, now, the breakfast hour arrived; and with it Miss Fanny from her apartment, and Mr Edward from his apartment. Both these young persons of distinction were something the worse for late hours. As to Miss Fanny, she had become the victim of an insatiate mania for what she called 'going into society;'and would have gone into it head-foremost fifty times between sunset and sunrise, if so many opportunities had been at her disposal. As to Mr Edward, he, too, had a large acquaintance, and was generally engaged (for the most part, in diceing circles, or others of a kindred nature), during the greater part of every night. For this gentleman, when his fortunes changed, had stood at the great advantage of being already prepared for the highest associates, and having little to learn: so much was he indebted to the happy accidents which had made him acquainted with horse-dealing and billiard-marking.

At breakfast, Mr Frederick Dorrit likewise appeared. As the old gentleman inhabited the highest story of the palace, where he might have practised pistol-shooting without much chance of discovery by the other inmates, his younger niece had taken courage to propose the restoration to him of his clarionet, which Mr Dorrit had ordered to be confiscated, but which she had ventured to preserve. Notwithstanding some objections from Miss Fanny, that it was a low instrument, and

that she detested the sound of it, the concession had been made. But it was then discovered that he had had enough of it, and never played it, now that it was no longer his means of getting bread. He had insensibly acquired a new habit of shuffling into the picture-galleries, always with his twisted paper of snuff in his hand (much to the indignation of Miss Fanny, who had proposed the purchase of a gold box for him that the family might not be discredited, which he had absolutely refused to carry when it was bought); and of passing hours and hours before the portraits of renowned Venetians. It was never made out what his dazed eyes saw in them; whether he had an interest in them merely as pictures, or whether he confusedly identified them with a glory that was departed, like the strength of his own mind. But he paid his court to them with great exactness, and clearly derived pleasure from the pursuit. After the first few days, Little Dorrit happened one morning to assist at these attentions. It so evidently heightened his gratification that she often accompanied him afterwards, and the greatest delight of which the old man had shown himself susceptible since his ruin, arose out of these excursions, when he would carry a chair about for her from picture to picture, and stand behind it, in spite of all her remonstrances, silently presenting her to the noble Venetians.

It fell out that, at this family breakfast, he referred to their having seen in a gallery, on the previous day, the lady and gentleman whom they had encountered on the Great Saint Bernard, 'I forget the name,' said he. 'I dare say you remember them, William?

I dare say you do, Edward?'

'*I* remember 'em well enough,' said the latter.

'I should think so,' observed Miss Fanny, with a toss of her head and a glance at her sister. 'But they would not have been recalled to our remembrance, I suspect, if Uncle hadn't tumbled over the subject.'

'My dear, what a curious phrase,' said Mrs General. 'Would not inadvertently lighted upon, or accidentally referred to, be better?'

'Thank you very much, Mrs General,' returned the young lady, no ) I think not. On the whole I prefer my own expression.' This was always Miss Fanny's way of receiving a suggestion from Mrs General. But she always stored it up in her mind, and adopted it at another time.

'I should have mentioned our having met Mr and Mrs Gowan, Fanny,' said Little Dorrit, 'even if Uncle had not. I have scarcely seen you since, you know. I meant to have spoken of it at breakfast; because I should like to pay a visit to Mrs Gowan, and to become better acquainted with her, if Papa and Mrs General do not object.'

'Well, Amy,' said Fanny, 'I am sure I am glad to find you at last expressing a wish to become better acquainted with anybody in Venice. Though whether Mr and Mrs Gowan are desirable acquaintances, remains to be determined.'

'Mrs Gowan I spoke of, dear.'

'No doubt,' said Fanny. 'But you can't separate her from her husband, I believe, without an Act of Parliament.'

'Do you think, Papa,' inquired Little Dorrit, with diffidence and hesitation, 'there is any objection to my making this visit?'

'Really,' he replied, 'I - ha - what is Mrs General's view?'

Mrs General's view was, that not having the honour of any acquaintance with the lady and gentleman referred to, she was not in a position to varnish the present article. She could only remark, as a general principle observed in the varnishing trade, that much depended on the quarter from which the lady under consideration was accredited to a family so conspicuously niched in the social temple as the family of Dorrit.

At this remark the face of Mr Dorrit gloomed considerably. He was about (connecting the accrediting with an obtrusive person of the name of Clennam, whom he imperfectly remembered in some former state of existence) to black-ball the name of Gowan finally, when Edward Dorrit, Esquire, came into the conversation, with his glass in his eye, and the preliminary remark of 'I say - you there! Go out, will you!' - which was addressed to a couple of men who were handing the dishes round, as a courteous intimation that their services could be temporarily dispensed with.

Those menials having obeyed the mandate, Edward Dorrit, Esquire, proceeded.

'Perhaps it's a matter of policy to let you all know that these Gowans - in whose favour, or at least the gentleman's, I can't be supposed to be much prepossessed myself - are known to people of importance, if that makes any difference.'

'That, I would say,' observed the fair varnisher, 'Makes the greatest difference. The connection in question, being really people of importance and consideration - '

'As to that,' said Edward Dorrit, Esquire, 'I'll give you the means of judging for yourself. You are acquainted, perhaps, with the famous name of Merdle?'

'The great Merdle!' exclaimed Mrs General.

'THE Merdle,' said Edward Dorrit, Esquire. 'They are known to him.

Mrs Gowan - I mean the dowager, my polite friend's mother - is intimate with Mrs Merdle, and I know these two to be on their visiting list.'

'If so, a more undeniable guarantee could not be given,' said Mrs General to Mr Dorrit, raising her gloves and bowing her head, as if she were doing homage to some visible graven image.

'I beg to ask my son, from motives of - ah - curiosity,' Mr Dorrit observed, with a decided change in his manner, 'how he becomes possessed of this - hum - timely information?'

'It's not a long story, sir,' returned Edward Dorrit, Esquire, 'and you shall have it out of hand. To begin with, Mrs Merdle is the lady you had the parley with at what's-his-name place.'

'Martigny,' interposed Miss Fanny with an air of infinite languor.

'Martigny,' assented her brother, with a slight nod and a slight wink; in acknowledgment of which, Miss Fanny looked surprised, and laughed and reddened.

'How can that be, Edward?' said Mr Dorrit. 'You informed me that the name of the gentleman with whom you conferred was - ha - Sparkler. Indeed, you showed me his card. Hum. Sparkler.'

'No doubt of it, father; but it doesn't follow that his mother's name must be the same. Mrs Merdle was married before, and he is her son. She is in Rome now; where probably we shall know more of her, as you decide to winter there. Sparkler is just come here. I passed last evening in company with Sparkler. Sparkler is a very good fellow on the whole, though rather a bore on one subject, in consequence of being tremendously smitten with a certain young lady.' Here Edward Dorrit, Esquire, eyed Miss Fanny through his glass across the table. 'We happened last night to compare notes about our travels, and I had the information I have given you from Sparkler himself.' Here he ceased; continuing to eye Miss Fanny through his glass, with a face much twisted, and not ornamentally so, in part by the action of keeping his glass in his eye, and in part by the great subtlety of his smile. 'Under these circumstances,' said Mr Dorrit, 'I believe I express the sentiments of - ha - Mrs General, no less than my own, when I say that there is no objection, but - ha hum - quite the contrary - to your gratifying your desire, Amy. I trust I may - ha - hail - this desire,' said Mr Dorrit, in an encouraging and forgiving manner, 'as an auspicious

omen. It is quite right to know these people. It is a very proper thing. Mr Merdle's is a name of - ha - world- wide repute. Mr Merdle's undertakings are immense. They bring him in such vast sums of money that they are regarded as - hum - national benefits. Mr Merdle is the man of this time. The name of Merdle is the name of the age. Pray do everything on my behalf that is civil to Mr and Mrs Gowan, for we will - ha - we will certainly notice them.'

This magnificent accordance of Mr Dorrit's recognition settled the matter. It was not observed that Uncle had pushed away his plate, and forgotten his breakfast; but he was not much observed at any time, except by Little Dorrit. The servants were recalled, and the meal proceeded to its conclusion. Mrs General rose and left the table. Little Dorrit rose and left the table. When Edward and Fanny remained whispering together across it, and when Mr Dorrit remained eating figs and reading a French newspaper, Uncle suddenly fixed the attention of all three by rising out of his chair, striking his hand upon the table, and saying, 'Brother! I protest against it!'

If he had made a proclamation in an unknown tongue, and given up the ghost immediately afterwards, he could not have astounded his audience more. The paper fell from Mr Dorrit's hand, and he sat petrified, with a fig half way to his mouth.

'Brother!' said the old man, conveying a surprising energy into his trembling voice, 'I protest against it! I love you; you know I love you dearly. In these many years I have never been untrue to you in a single thought. Weak as I am, I would at any time have struck any man who spoke ill of you. But, brother, brother, brother, I protest against it!'

It was extraordinary to see of what a burst of earnestness such a decrepit man was capable. His eyes became bright, his grey hair rose on his head, markings of purpose on his brow and face which had faded from them for five-and-twenty years, started out again, and there was an energy in his hand that made its action nervous once more.

'My dear Frederick!' exclaimed Mr Dorrit faintly. 'What is wrong? What is the matter?'

'How dare you,' said the old man, turning round on Fanny, 'how dare you do it? Have you no memory? Have you no heart?'

'Uncle?' cried Fanny, affrighted and bursting into tears, 'why do you attack me in this cruel manner? What have I done?'

'Done?' returned the old man, pointing to her sister's place, 'where's your affectionate invaluable friend? Where's your devoted guardian? Where's your more than mother? How dare you set up superiorities against all these characters combined in your sister?

For shame, you false girl, for shame!' 'I love Amy,' cried Miss Fanny, sobbing and weeping, 'as well as I love my life - better than I love my life. I don't deserve to be so treated. I am as grateful to Amy, and as fond of Amy, as it's possible for any human being to be. I wish I was dead. I never was so wickedly wronged. And only because I am anxious for the family credit.'

'To the winds with the family credit!' cried the old man, with great scorn and indignation. 'Brother, I protest against pride. I protest against ingratitude. I protest against any one of us here who have known what we have known, and have seen what we have seen, setting up any pretension that puts Amy at a moment's disadvantage, or to the cost of a moment's pain. We may know that it's a base pretension by its having that effect. It ought to bring a judgment on us. Brother, I protest against it in the sight of God!'

As his hand went up above his head and came down on the table, it might have been a blacksmith's. After a few moments' silence, it had relaxed into its usual weak condition. He went round to his brother with his ordinary shuffling step, put the hand on his shoulder, and said, in a softened voice, 'William, my dear, I felt obliged to say it; forgive me, for I felt obliged to say it!' and then went, in his bowed way, out of the palace hall, just as he might have gone out of the Marshalsea room.

All this time Fanny had been sobbing and crying, and still continued to do so. Edward, beyond opening his mouth in amazement, had not opened his lips, and had done nothing but stare. Mr Dorrit also had been utterly discomfited, and quite unable to assert himself in any way. Fanny was now the first to speak.

'I never, never, never was so used!' she sobbed. 'There never was anything so harsh and unjustifiable, so disgracefully violent and cruel! Dear, kind, quiet little Amy, too, what would she feel if she could know that she had been innocently the means of exposing me to such treatment! But I'll never tell her! No, good darling, I'll never tell her!'

This helped Mr Dorrit to break his silence.

'My dear,' said he, 'I - ha - approve of your resolution. It will be - ha hum - much better not to speak of this to Amy. It might - hum - it might distress her. Ha. No doubt it would distress her greatly. It is

considerate and right to avoid doing so. We will - ha - keep this to ourselves.'

'But the cruelty of Uncle!' cried Miss Fanny. 'O, I never can forgive the wanton cruelty of Uncle!'

'My dear,' said Mr Dorrit, recovering his tone, though he remained unusually pale, 'I must request you not to say so. You must remember that your uncle is - ha - not what he formerly was. You must remember that your uncle's state requires - hum - great forbearance from us, great forbearance.'

'I am sure,' cried Fanny, piteously, 'it is only charitable to suppose that there Must be something wrong in him somewhere, or he never could have so attacked Me, of all the people in the world.'

'Fanny,' returned Mr Dorrit in a deeply fraternal tone, 'you know, with his innumerable good points, what a - hum - wreck your uncle is; an[] I entreat you by the fondness that I have for him, and by the fidelity that you know I have always shown him, to - ha - to draw your own conclusions, and to spare my brotherly feelings.'

This ended the scene; Edward Dorrit, Esquire, saying nothing throughout, but looking, to the last, perplexed and doubtful. Miss Fanny awakened much affectionate uneasiness in her sister's mind that day by passing the greater part of it in violent fits of embracing her, and in alternately giving her brooches, and wishing herself dead.