

Chapter XLVIII - In Which A Great Patriotic Conference Is Holden

The famous name of Merdle became, every day, more famous in the land. Nobody knew that the Merdle of such high renown had ever done any good to any one, alive or dead, or to any earthly thing; nobody knew that he had any capacity or utterance of any sort in him, which had ever thrown, for any creature, the feeblest farthing-candle ray of light on any path of duty or diversion, pain or pleasure, toil or rest, fact or fancy, among the multiplicity of paths in the labyrinth trodden by the sons of Adam; nobody had the smallest reason for supposing the clay of which this object of worship was made, to be other than the commonest clay, with as clogged a wick smouldering inside of it as ever kept an image of humanity from tumbling to pieces. All people knew (or thought they knew) that he had made himself immensely rich; and, for that reason alone, prostrated themselves before him, more degradedly and less excusably than the darkest savage creeps out of his hole in the ground to propitiate, in some log or reptile, the Deity of his benighted soul.

Nay, the high priests of this worship had the man before them as a protest against their meanness. The multitude worshipped on trust - though always distinctly knowing why - but the officiators at the altar had the man habitually in their view. They sat at his feasts, and he sat at theirs. There was a spectre always attendant on him, saying to these high priests, 'Are such the signs you trust, and love to honour; this head, these eyes, this mode of speech, the tone and manner of this man? You are the levers of the Circumlocution Office, and the rulers of men. When half-a-dozen of you fall out by the ears, it seems that mother earth can give birth to no other rulers. Does your qualification lie in the superior knowledge of men which accepts, courts, and puffs this man? Or, if you are competent to judge aright the signs I never fail to show you when he appears among you, is your superior honesty your qualification?' Two rather ugly questions these, always going about town with Mr Merdle; and there was a tacit agreement that they must be stifled. In Mrs Merdle's absence abroad, Mr Merdle still kept the great house open for the passage through it of a stream of visitors. A few of these took affable possession of the establishment. Three or four ladies of distinction and liveliness used to say to one another, 'Let us dine at our dear Merdle's next Thursday. Whom shall we have?' Our dear Merdle would then receive his instructions; and would sit heavily among the company at table and wander lumpishly about his drawing-rooms afterwards, only remarkable for appearing to have nothing to do with the entertainment beyond being in its way.

The Chief Butler, the Avenging Spirit of this great man's life, relaxed nothing of his severity. He looked on at these dinners when the bosom was not there, as he looked on at other dinners when the bosom was

there; and his eye was a basilisk to Mr Merdle. He was a hard man, and would never bate an ounce of plate or a bottle of wine. He would not allow a dinner to be given, unless it was up to his mark. He set forth the table for his own dignity. If the guests chose to partake of what was served, he saw no objection; but it was served for the maintenance of his rank. As he stood by the sideboard he seemed to announce, 'I have accepted office to look at this which is now before me, and to look at nothing less than this.' If he missed the presiding bosom, it was as a part of his own state of which he was, from unavoidable circumstances, temporarily deprived. just as he might have missed a centre-piece, or a choice wine-cooler, which had been sent to the Banker's.

Mr Merdle issued invitations for a Barnacle dinner. Lord Decimus was to be there, Mr Tite Barnacle was to be there, the pleasant young Barnacle was to be there; and the Chorus of Parliamentary Barnacles who went about the provinces when the House was up, warbling the praises of their Chief, were to be represented there. It was understood to be a great occasion. Mr Merdle was going to take up the Barnacles. Some delicate little negotiations had occurred between him and the noble Decimus - the young Barnacle of engaging manners acting as negotiator - and Mr Merdle had decided to cast the weight of his great probity and great riches into the Barnacle scale. jobbery was suspected by the malicious; perhaps because it was indisputable that if the adherence of the immortal Enemy of Mankind could have been secured by a job, the Barnacles would have jobbed him - for the good of the country, for the good of the country.

Mrs Merdle had written to this magnificent spouse of hers, whom it was heresy to regard as anything less than all the British Merchants since the days of Whittington rolled into one, and gilded three feet deep all over - had written to this spouse of hers, several letters from Rome, in quick succession, urging upon him with importunity that now or never was the time to provide for Edmund Sparkler. Mrs Merdle had shown him that the case of Edmund was urgent, and that infinite advantages might result from his having some good thing directly. In the grammar of Mrs Merdle's verbs on this momentous subject, there was only one mood, the Imperative; and that Mood had only one Tense, the Present. Mrs Merdle's verbs were so pressingly presented to Mr Merdle to conjugate, that his sluggish blood and his long coat-cuffs became quite agitated.

In which state of agitation, Mr Merdle, evasively rolling his eyes round the Chief Butler's shoes without raising them to the index of that stupendous creature's thoughts, had signified to him his intention of giving a special dinner: not a very large dinner, but a very special dinner. The Chief Butler had signified, in return, that he had no

objection to look on at the most expensive thing in that way that could be done; and the day of the dinner was now come.

Mr Merdle stood in one of his drawing-rooms, with his back to the fire, waiting for the arrival of his important guests. He seldom or never took the liberty of standing with his back to the fire unless he was quite alone. In the presence of the Chief Butler, he could not have done such a deed. He would have clasped himself by the wrists in that constabulary manner of his, and have paced up and down the hearthrug, or gone creeping about among the rich objects of furniture, if his oppressive retainer had appeared in the room at that very moment. The sly shadows which seemed to dart out of hiding when the fire rose, and to dart back into it when the fire fell, were sufficient witnesses of his making himself so easy.

They were even more than sufficient, if his uncomfortable glances at them might be taken to mean anything.

Mr Merdle's right hand was filled with the evening paper, and the evening paper was full of Mr Merdle. His wonderful enterprise, his wonderful wealth, his wonderful Bank, were the fattening food of the evening paper that night. The wonderful Bank, of which he was the chief projector, establisher, and manager, was the latest of the many Merdle wonders. So modest was Mr Merdle withal, in the midst of these splendid achievements, that he looked far more like a man in possession of his house under a distrait, than a commercial Colossus bestriding his own hearthrug, while the little ships were sailing into dinner.

Behold the vessels coming into port! The engaging young Barnacle was the first arrival; but Bar overtook him on the staircase. Bar, strengthened as usual with his double eye-glass and his little jury droop, was overjoyed to see the engaging young Barnacle; and opined that we were going to sit in Banco, as we lawyers called it, to take a special argument?

'Indeed,' said the sprightly young Barnacle, whose name was Ferdinand; 'how so?'

'Nay,' smiled Bar. 'If you don't know, how can I know? You are in the innermost sanctuary of the temple; I am one of the admiring concourse on the plain without.'

Bar could be light in hand, or heavy in hand, according to the customer he had to deal with. With Ferdinand Barnacle he was gossamer. Bar was likewise always modest and self-depreciatory - in his way. Bar was a man of great variety; but one leading thread ran through the woof of all his patterns. Every man with whom he had to

do was in his eyes a jury-man; and he must get that jury-man over, if he could.

'Our illustrious host and friend,' said Bar; 'our shining mercantile star; - going into politics?'

'Going? He has been in Parliament some time, you know,' returned the engaging young Barnacle.

'True,' said Bar, with his light-comedy laugh for special jury-men, which was a very different thing from his low-comedy laugh for comic tradesmen on common juries: 'he has been in Parliament for some time. Yet hitherto our star has been a vacillating and wavering star? Humph?'

An average witness would have been seduced by the Humph? into an affirmative answer, But Ferdinand Barnacle looked knowingly at Bar as he strolled up-stairs, and gave him no answer at all.

'Just so, just so,' said Bar, nodding his head, for he was not to be put off in that way, 'and therefore I spoke of our sitting in Banco to take a special argument - meaning this to be a high and solemn occasion, when, as Captain Macheath says, 'the judges are met: a terrible show!' We lawyers are sufficiently liberal, you see, to quote the Captain, though the Captain is severe upon us. Nevertheless, I think I could put in evidence an admission of the Captain's,' said Bar, with a little jocose roll of his head; for, in his legal current of speech, he always assumed the air of rallying himself with the best grace in the world; 'an admission of the Captain's that Law, in the gross, is at least intended to be impartial. For what says the Captain, if I quote him correctly - and if not,' with a light-comedy touch of his double eye-glass on his companion's shoulder, 'my learned friend will set me right:

'Since laws were made for every degree, To curb vice in others as well as in me, I wonder we ha'n't better company Upon Tyburn Tree!'

These words brought them to the drawing-room, where Mr Merdle stood before the fire. So immensely astounded was Mr Merdle by the entrance of Bar with such a reference in his mouth, that Bar explained himself to have been quoting Gay. 'Assuredly not one of our Westminster Hall authorities,' said he, 'but still no despicable one to a man possessing the largely-practical Mr Merdle's knowledge of the world.'

Mr Merdle looked as if he thought he would say something, but subsequently looked as if he thought he wouldn't. The interval afforded time for Bishop to be announced. Bishop came in with

meechness, and yet with a strong and rapid step as if he wanted to get his seven-league dress-shoes on, and go round the world to see that everybody was in a satisfactory state. Bishop had no idea that there was anything significant in the occasion. That was the most remarkable trait in his demeanour. He was crisp, fresh, cheerful, affable, bland; but so surprisingly innocent.

Bar sidled up to prefer his politest inquiries in reference to the health of Mrs Bishop. Mrs Bishop had been a little unfortunate in the article of taking cold at a Confirmation, but otherwise was well. Young Mr Bishop was also well. He was down, with his young wife and little family, at his Cure of Souls. The representatives of the Barnacle Chorus dropped in next, and Mr Merdle's physician dropped in next. Bar, who had a bit of one eye and a bit of his double eye-glass for every one who came in at the door, no matter with whom he was conversing or what he was talking about, got among them all by some skilful means, without being seen to get at them, and touched each individual gentleman of the jury on his own individual favourite spot. With some of the Chorus, he laughed about the sleepy member who had gone out into the lobby the other night, and voted the wrong way: with others, he deplored that innovating spirit in the time which could not even be prevented from taking an unnatural interest in the public service and the public money: with the physician he had a word to say about the general health; he had also a little information to ask him for, concerning a professional man of unquestioned erudition and polished manners - but those credentials in their highest development he believed were the possession of other professors of the healing art (jury droop) - whom he had happened to have in the witness-box the day before yesterday, and from whom he had elicited in cross-examination that he claimed to be one of the exponents of this new mode of treatment which appeared to Bar to - eh? - well, Bar thought so; Bar had thought, and hoped, Physician would tell him so. Without presuming to decide where doctors disagreed, it did appear to Bar, viewing it as a question of common sense and not of so-called legal penetration, that this new system was - might be, in the presence of so great an authority - say, Humbug? Ah! Fortified by such encouragement, he could venture to say Humbug; and now Bar's mind was relieved.

Mr Tite Barnacle, who, like Dr Johnson's celebrated acquaintance, had only one idea in his head and that was a wrong one, had appeared by this time. This eminent gentleman and Mr Merdle, seated diverse ways and with ruminating aspects on a yellow ottoman in the light of the fire, holding no verbal communication with each other, bore a strong general resemblance to the two cows in the Cuyyp picture over against them.

But now, Lord Decimus arrived. The Chief Butler, who up to this time had limited himself to a branch of his usual function by looking at the company as they entered (and that, with more of defiance than favour), put himself so far out of his way as to come up-stairs with him and announce him. Lord Decimus being an overpowering peer, a bashful young member of the Lower House who was the last fish but one caught by the Barnacles, and who had been invited on this occasion to commemorate his capture, shut his eyes when his Lordship came in.

Lord Decimus, nevertheless, was glad to see the Member. He was also glad to see Mr Merdle, glad to see Bishop, glad to see Bar, glad to see Physician, glad to see Tite Barnacle, glad to see Chorus, glad to see Ferdinand his private secretary. Lord Decimus, though one of the greatest of the earth, was not remarkable for ingratiatory manners, and Ferdinand had coached him up to the point of noticing all the fellows he might find there, and saying he was glad to see them. When he had achieved this rush of vivacity and condescension, his Lordship composed himself into the picture after Cuyp, and made a third cow in the group.

Bar, who felt that he had got all the rest of the jury and must now lay hold of the Foreman, soon came sidling up, double eye-glass in hand. Bar tendered the weather, as a subject neatly aloof from official reserve, for the Foreman's consideration. Bar said that he was told (as everybody always is told, though who tells them, and why, will ever remain a mystery), that there was to be no wall-fruit this year. Lord Decimus had not heard anything amiss of his peaches, but rather believed, if his people were correct, he was to have no apples. No apples? Bar was lost in astonishment and concern. It would have been all one to him, in reality, if there had not been a pippin on the surface of the earth, but his show of interest in this apple question was positively painful. Now, to what, Lord Decimus - for we troublesome lawyers loved to gather information, and could never tell how useful it might prove to us - to what, Lord Decimus, was this to be attributed? Lord Decimus could not undertake to propound any theory about it. This might have stopped another man; but Bar, sticking to him fresh as ever, said, 'As to pears, now?'

Long after Bar got made Attorney-General, this was told of him as a master-stroke. Lord Decimus had a reminiscence about a pear-tree formerly growing in a garden near the back of his dame's house at Eton, upon which pear-tree the only joke of his life perennially bloomed. It was a joke of a compact and portable nature, turning on the difference between Eton pears and Parliamentary pairs; but it was a joke, a refined relish of which would seem to have appeared to Lord Decimus impossible to be had without a thorough and intimate acquaintance with the tree. Therefore, the story at first had no idea of

such a tree, sir, then gradually found it in winter, carried it through the changing season, saw it bud, saw it blossom, saw it bear fruit, saw the fruit ripen; in short, cultivated the tree in that diligent and minute manner before it got out of the bed-room window to steal the fruit, that many thanks had been offered up by belated listeners for the trees having been planted and grafted prior to Lord Decimus's time. Bar's interest in apples was so overtopped by the wrapt suspense in which he pursued the changes of these pears, from the moment when Lord Decimus solemnly opened with 'Your mentioning pears recalls to my remembrance a pear-tree,' down to the rich conclusion, 'And so we pass, through the various changes of life, from Eton pears to Parliamentary pairs,' that he had to go down-stairs with Lord Decimus, and even then to be seated next to him at table in order that he might hear the anecdote out. By that time, Bar felt that he had secured the Foreman, and might go to dinner with a good appetite.

It was a dinner to provoke an appetite, though he had not had one. The rarest dishes, sumptuously cooked and sumptuously served; the choicest fruits; the most exquisite wines; marvels of workmanship in gold and silver, china and glass; innumerable things delicious to the senses of taste, smell, and sight, were insinuated into its composition. O, what a wonderful man this Merdle, what a great man, what a master man, how blessedly and enviably endowed - in one word, what a rich man!

He took his usual poor eighteenpennyworth of food in his usual indigestive way, and had as little to say for himself as ever a wonderful man had. Fortunately Lord Decimus was one of those sublimities who have no occasion to be talked to, for they can be at any time sufficiently occupied with the contemplation of their own greatness. This enabled the bashful young Member to keep his eyes open long enough at a time to see his dinner. But, whenever Lord Decimus spoke, he shut them again.

The agreeable young Barnacle, and Bar, were the talkers of the party. Bishop would have been exceedingly agreeable also, but that his innocence stood in his way. He was so soon left behind. When there was any little hint of anything being in the wind, he got lost directly. Worldly affairs were too much for him; he couldn't make them out at all.

This was observable when Bar said, incidentally, that he was happy to have heard that we were soon to have the advantage of enlisting on the good side, the sound and plain sagacity - not demonstrative or ostentatious, but thoroughly sound and practical - of our friend Mr Sparkler.

Ferdinand Barnacle laughed, and said oh yes, he believed so. A vote was a vote, and always acceptable.

Bar was sorry to miss our good friend Mr Sparkler to-day, Mr Merdle.

'He is away with Mrs Merdle,' returned that gentleman, slowly coming out of a long abstraction, in the course of which he had been fitting a tablespoon up his sleeve. 'It is not indispensable for him to be on the spot.'

'The magic name of Merdle,' said Bar, with the jury droop, 'no doubt will suffice for all.'

'Why - yes - I believe so,' assented Mr Merdle, putting the spoon aside, and clumsily hiding each of his hands in the coat-cuff of the other hand. 'I believe the people in my interest down there will not make any difficulty.'

'Model people!' said Bar. 'I am glad you approve of them,' said Mr Merdle.

'And the people of those other two places, now,' pursued Bar, with a bright twinkle in his keen eye, as it slightly turned in the direction of his magnificent neighbour; 'we lawyers are always curious, always inquisitive, always picking up odds and ends for our patchwork minds, since there is no knowing when and where they may fit into some corner; - the people of those other two places now? Do they yield so laudably to the vast and cumulative influence of such enterprise and such renown; do those little rills become absorbed so quietly and easily, and, as it were by the influence of natural laws, so beautifully, in the swoop of the majestic stream as it flows upon its wondrous way enriching the surrounding lands; that their course is perfectly to be calculated, and distinctly to be predicated?'

Mr Merdle, a little troubled by Bar's eloquence, looked fitfully about the nearest salt-cellar for some moments, and then said hesitating:

'They are perfectly aware, sir, of their duty to Society. They will return anybody I send to them for that purpose.'

'Cheering to know,' said Bar. 'Cheering to know.'

The three places in question were three little rotten holes in this Island, containing three little ignorant, drunken, guzzling, dirty, out-of-the-way constituencies, that had reeled into Mr Merdle's pocket. Ferdinand Barnacle laughed in his easy way, and airily said they were a nice set of fellows. Bishop, mentally perambulating among paths of peace, was altogether swallowed up in absence of mind.

'Pray,' asked Lord Decimus, casting his eyes around the table, 'what is this story I have heard of a gentleman long confined in a debtors' prison proving to be of a wealthy family, and having come into the inheritance of a large sum of money? I have met with a variety of allusions to it. Do you know anything of it, Ferdinand?'

'I only know this much,' said Ferdinand, 'that he has given the Department with which I have the honour to be associated;' this sparkling young Barnacle threw off the phrase sportively, as who should say, We know all about these forms of speech, but we must keep it up, we must keep the game alive; 'no end of trouble, and has put us into innumerable fixes.'

'Fixes?' repeated Lord Decimus, with a majestic pausing and pondering on the word that made the bashful Member shut his eyes quite tight. 'Fixes?'

'A very perplexing business indeed,' observed Mr Tite Barnacle, with an air of grave resentment.

'What,' said Lord Decimus, 'was the character of his business; what was the nature of these - a - Fixes, Ferdinand?'

'Oh, it's a good story, as a story,' returned that gentleman; 'as good a thing of its kind as need be. This Mr Dorrit (his name is Dorrit) had incurred a responsibility to us, ages before the fairy came out of the Bank and gave him his fortune, under a bond he had signed for the performance of a contract which was not at all performed. He was a partner in a house in some large way - spirits, or buttons, or wine, or blacking, or oatmeal, or woollen, or pork, or hooks and eyes, or iron, or treacle, or shoes, or something or other that was wanted for troops, or seamen, or somebody - and the house burst, and we being among the creditors, detainees were lodged on the part of the Crown in a scientific manner, and all the rest Of it. When the fairy had appeared and he wanted to pay us off, Egad we had got into such an exemplary state of checking and counter-checking, signing and counter-signing, that it was six months before we knew how to take the money, or how to give a receipt for it. It was a triumph of public business,' said this handsome young Barnacle, laughing heartily, 'You never saw such a lot of forms in your life. 'Why,' the attorney said to me one day, 'if I wanted this office to give me two or three thousand pounds instead of take it, I couldn't have more trouble about it.' 'You are right, old fellow,' I told him, 'and in future you'll know that we have something to do here.'" The pleasant young Barnacle finished by once more laughing heartily. He was a very easy, pleasant fellow indeed, and his manners were exceedingly winning.

Mr Tite Barnacle's view of the business was of a less airy character. He took it ill that Mr Dorrit had troubled the Department by wanting to pay the money, and considered it a grossly informal thing to do after so many years. But Mr Tite Barnacle was a buttoned-up man, and consequently a weighty one. All buttoned-up men are weighty. All buttoned-up men are believed in. Whether or no the reserved and never-exercised power of unbuttoning, fascinates mankind; whether or no wisdom is supposed to condense and augment when buttoned up, and to evaporate when unbuttoned; it is certain that the man to whom importance is accorded is the buttoned-up man. Mr Tite Barnacle never would have passed for half his current value, unless his coat had been always buttoned-up to his white cravat.

'May I ask,' said Lord Decimus, 'if Mr Darrit - or Dorrit - has any family?'

Nobody else replying, the host said, 'He has two daughters, my lord.'

'Oh! you are acquainted with him?' asked Lord Decimus.

'Mrs Merdle is. Mr Sparkler is, too. In fact,' said Mr Merdle, 'I rather believe that one of the young ladies has made an impression on Edmund Sparkler. He is susceptible, and - I - think - the conquest - ' Here Mr Merdle stopped, and looked at the table-cloth, as he usually did when he found himself observed or listened to.

Bar was uncommonly pleased to find that the Merdle family, and this family, had already been brought into contact. He submitted, in a low voice across the table to Bishop, that it was a kind of analogical illustration of those physical laws, in virtue of which Like flies to Like. He regarded this power of attraction in wealth to draw wealth to it, as something remarkably interesting and curious - something indefinitely allied to the loadstone and gravitation. Bishop, who had ambled back to earth again when the present theme was broached, acquiesced. He said it was indeed highly important to Society that one in the trying situation of unexpectedly finding himself invested with a power for good or for evil in Society, should become, as it were, merged in the superior power of a more legitimate and more gigantic growth, the influence of which (as in the case of our friend at whose board we sat) was habitually exercised in harmony with the best interests of Society.

Thus, instead of two rival and contending flames, a larger and a lesser, each burning with a lurid and uncertain glare, we had a blended and a softened light whose genial ray diffused an equable warmth throughout the land. Bishop seemed to like his own way of putting the case very much, and rather dwelt upon it; Bar, meanwhile (not to throw away a jury-man), making a show of sitting at his feet and feeding on his precepts.

The dinner and dessert being three hours long, the bashful Member cooled in the shadow of Lord Decimus faster than he warmed with food and drink, and had but a chilly time of it. Lord Decimus, like a tall tower in a flat country, seemed to project himself across the table-cloth, hide the light from the honourable Member, cool the honourable Member's marrow, and give him a woeful idea of distance. When he asked this unfortunate traveller to take wine, he encompassed his faltering steps with the gloomiest of shades; and when he said, 'Your health sir!' all around him was barrenness and desolation.

At length Lord Decimus, with a coffee-cup in his hand, began to hover about among the pictures, and to cause an interesting speculation to arise in all minds as to the probabilities of his ceasing to hover, and enabling the smaller birds to flutter up- stairs; which could not be done until he had urged his noble pinions in that direction. After some delay, and several stretches of his wings which came to nothing, he soared to the drawing-rooms.

And here a difficulty arose, which always does arise when two people are specially brought together at a dinner to confer with one another. Everybody (except Bishop, who had no suspicion of it) knew perfectly well that this dinner had been eaten and drunk, specifically to the end that Lord Decimus and Mr Merdle should have five minutes' conversation together. The opportunity so elaborately prepared was now arrived, and it seemed from that moment that no mere human ingenuity could so much as get the two chieftains into the same room. Mr Merdle and his noble guest persisted in prowling about at opposite ends of the perspective. It was in vain for the engaging Ferdinand to bring Lord Decimus to look at the bronze horses near Mr Merdle. Then Mr Merdle evaded, and wandered away. It was in vain for him to bring Mr Merdle to Lord Decimus to tell him the history of the unique Dresden vases. Then Lord Decimus evaded and wandered away, while he was getting his man up to the mark.

'Did you ever see such a thing as this?' said Ferdinand to Bar when he had been baffled twenty times.

'Often,' returned Bar.

'Unless I butt one of them into an appointed corner, and you butt the other,' said Ferdinand, 'it will not come off after all.'

'Very good,' said Bar. 'I'll butt Merdle, if you like; but not my lord.'

Ferdinand laughed, in the midst of his vexation. 'Confound them both!' said he, looking at his watch. 'I want to get away. Why the deuce can't they come together! They both know what they want and mean to do. Look at them!'

They were still looming at opposite ends of the perspective, each with an absurd pretence of not having the other on his mind, which could not have been more transparently ridiculous though his real mind had been chalked on his back. Bishop, who had just now made a third with Bar and Ferdinand, but whose innocence had again cut him out of the subject and washed him in sweet oil, was seen to approach Lord Decimus and glide into conversation.

'I must get Merdle's doctor to catch and secure him, I suppose,' said Ferdinand; 'and then I must lay hold of my illustrious kinsman, and decoy him if I can - drag him if I can't - to the conference.'

'Since you do me the honour,' said Bar, with his slyest smile, to ask for my poor aid, it shall be yours with the greatest pleasure. I don't think this is to be done by one man. But if you will undertake to pen my lord into that furthest drawing-room where he is now so profoundly engaged, I will undertake to bring our dear Merdle into the presence, without the possibility of getting away.'

'Done!' said Ferdinand.

'Done!' said Bar.

Bar was a sight wondrous to behold, and full of matter, when, jauntily waving his double eye-glass by its ribbon, and jauntily drooping to an Universe of jurymen, he, in the most accidental manner ever seen, found himself at Mr Merdle's shoulder, and embraced that opportunity of mentioning a little point to him, on which he particularly wished to be guided by the light of his practical knowledge. (Here he took Mr Merdle's arm and walked him gently away.) A banker, whom we would call A. B., advanced a considerable sum of money, which we would call fifteen thousand pounds, to a client or customer of his, whom he would call P. q. (Here, as they were getting towards Lord Decimus, he held Mr Merdle tight.) As a security for the repayment of this advance to P. Q. whom we would call a widow lady, there were placed in A. B.'s hands the title-deeds of a freehold estate, which we would call Blinkiter Doddles. Now, the point was this. A limited right of felling and lopping in the woods of Blinkiter Doddles, lay in the son of P. Q. then past his majority, and whom we would call X. Y. - but really this was too bad! In the presence of Lord Decimus, to detain the host with chopping our dry chaff of law, was really too bad! Another time! Bar was truly repentant, and would not say another syllable. Would Bishop favour him with half-a-dozen words? (He had now set Mr Merdle down on a couch, side by side with Lord Decimus, and to it they must go, now or never.)

And now the rest of the company, highly excited and interested, always excepting Bishop, who had not the slightest idea that anything

was going on, formed in one group round the fire in the next drawing-room, and pretended to be chatting easily on the infinite variety of small topics, while everybody's thoughts and eyes were secretly straying towards the secluded pair. The Chorus were excessively nervous, perhaps as labouring under the dreadful apprehension that some good thing was going to be diverted from them! Bishop alone talked steadily and evenly. He conversed with the great Physician on that relaxation of the throat with which young curates were too frequently afflicted, and on the means of lessening the great prevalence of that disorder in the church. Physician, as a general rule, was of opinion that the best way to avoid it was to know how to read, before you made a profession of reading. Bishop said dubiously, did he really think so? And Physician said, decidedly, yes he did.

Ferdinand, meanwhile, was the only one of the party who skirmished on the outside of the circle; he kept about mid-way between it and the two, as if some sort of surgical operation were being performed by Lord Decimus on Mr Merdle, or by Mr Merdle on Lord Decimus, and his services might at any moment be required as Dresser. In fact, within a quarter of an hour Lord Decimus called to him 'Ferdinand!' and he went, and took his place in the conference for some five minutes more. Then a half-suppressed gasp broke out among the Chorus; for Lord Decimus rose to take his leave. Again coached up by Ferdinand to the point of making himself popular, he shook hands in the most brilliant manner with the whole company, and even said to Bar, 'I hope you were not bored by my pears?' To which Bar retorted, 'Eton, my lord, or Parliamentary?' neatly showing that he had mastered the joke, and delicately insinuating that he could never forget it while his life remained.

All the grave importance that was buttoned up in Mr Tite Barnacle, took itself away next; and Ferdinand took himself away next, to the opera. Some of the rest lingered a little, marrying golden liqueur glasses to Buhl tables with sticky rings; on the desperate chance of Mr Merdle's saying something. But Merdle, as usual, oozed sluggishly and muddily about his drawing-room, saying never a word.

In a day or two it was announced to all the town, that Edmund Sparkler, Esquire, son-in-law of the eminent Mr Merdle of worldwide renown, was made one of the Lords of the Circumlocution Office; and proclamation was issued, to all true believers, that this admirable appointment was to be hailed as a graceful and gracious mark of homage, rendered by the graceful and gracious Decimus, to that commercial interest which must ever in a great commercial country - and all the rest of it, with blast of trumpet. So, bolstered by this mark of Government homage, the wonderful Bank and all the other wonderful undertakings went on and went up; and gapers came to

Harley Street, Cavendish Square, only to look at the house where the golden wonder lived.

And when they saw the Chief Butler looking out at the hall-door in his moments of condescension, the gapers said how rich he looked, and wondered how much money he had in the wonderful Bank. But, if they had known that respectable Nemesis better, they would not have wondered about it, and might have stated the amount with the utmost precision.