Chapter L - Taking Advice

When it became known to the Britons on the shore of the yellow Tiber that their intelligent compatriot, Mr Sparkler, was made one of the Lords of their Circumlocution Office, they took it as a piece of news with which they had no nearer concern than with any other piece of news - any other Accident or Offence - in the English papers. Some laughed; some said, by way of complete excuse, that the post was virtually a sinecure, and any fool who could spell his name was good enough for it; some, and these the more solemn political oracles, said that Decimus did wisely to strengthen himself, and that the sole constitutional purpose of all places within the gift of Decimus, was, that Decimus should strengthen himself. A few bilious Britons there were who would not subscribe to this article of faith; but their objection was purely theoretical. In a practical point of view, they listlessly abandoned the matter, as being the business of some other Britons unknown, somewhere, or nowhere. In like manner, at home, great numbers of Britons maintained, for as long as four-and-twenty consecutive hours, that those invisible and anonymous Britons 'ought to take it up;' and that if they quietly acquiesced in it, they deserved it. But of what class the remiss Britons were composed, and where the unlucky creatures hid themselves, and why they hid themselves, and how it constantly happened that they neglected their interests, when so many other Britons were quite at a loss to account for their not looking after those interests, was not, either upon the shore of the yellow Tiber or the shore of the black Thames, made apparent to men.

Mrs Merdle circulated the news, as she received congratulations on it, with a careless grace that displayed it to advantage, as the setting displays the jewel. Yes, she said, Edmund had taken the place. Mr Merdle wished him to take it, and he had taken it. She hoped Edmund might like it, but really she didn't know. It would keep him in town a good deal, and he preferred the country. Still, it was not a disagreeable position - and it was a position. There was no denying that the thing was a compliment to Mr Merdle, and was not a bad thing for Edmund if he liked it. It was just as well that he should have something to do, and it was just as well that he should have something for doing it. Whether it would be more agreeable to Edmund than the army, remained to be seen.

Thus the Bosom; accomplished in the art of seeming to make things of small account, and really enhancing them in the process. While Henry Gowan, whom Decimus had thrown away, went through the whole round of his acquaintance between the Gate of the People and the town of Albano, vowing, almost (but not quite) with tears in his eyes, that Sparkler was the sweetest-tempered, simplest-hearted, altogether most lovable jackass that ever grazed on the public common; and that only one circumstance could have delighted him (Gowan) more, than

his (the beloved jackass's) getting this post, and that would have been his (Gowan's) getting it himself. He said it was the very thing for Sparkler. There was nothing to do, and he would do it charmingly; there was a handsome salary to draw, and he would draw it charmingly; it was a delightful, appropriate, capital appointment; and he almost forgave the donor his slight of himself, in his joy that the dear donkey for whom he had so great an affection was so admirably stabled. Nor did his benevolence stop here. He took pains, on all social occasions, to draw Mr Sparkler out, and make him conspicuous before the company; and, although the considerate action always resulted in that young gentleman's making a dreary and forlorn mental spectacle of himself, the friendly intention was not to be doubted.

Unless, indeed, it chanced to be doubted by the object of Mr Sparkler's affections. Miss Fanny was now in the difficult situation of being universally known in that light, and of not having dismissed Mr Sparkler, however capriciously she used him. Hence, she was sufficiently identified with the gentleman to feel compromised by his being more than usually ridiculous; and hence, being by no means deficient in quickness, she sometimes came to his rescue against Gowan, and did him very good service. But, while doing this, she was ashamed of him, undetermined whether to get rid of him or more decidedly encourage him, distracted with apprehensions that she was every day becoming more and more immeshed in her uncertainties, and tortured by misgivings that Mrs Merdle triumphed in her distress. With this tumult in her mind, it is no subject for surprise that Miss Fanny came home one night in a state of agitation from a concert and ball at Mrs Merdle's house, and on her sister affectionately trying to soothe her, pushed that sister away from the toilette-table at which she sat angrily trying to cry, and declared with a heaving bosom that she detested everybody, and she wished she was dead.

'Dear Fanny, what is the matter? Tell me.'

'Matter, you little Mole,' said Fanny. 'If you were not the blindest of the blind, you would have no occasion to ask me. The idea of daring to pretend to assert that you have eyes in your head, and yet ask me what's the matter!'

'Is it Mr Sparkler, dear?' 'Mis-ter Spark-ler!' repeated Fanny, with unbounded scorn, as if he were the last subject in the Solar system that could possibly be near her mind. 'No, Miss Bat, it is not.'

Immediately afterwards, she became remorseful for having called her sister names; declaring with sobs that she knew she made herself hateful, but that everybody drove her to it.

'I don't think you are well to-night, dear Fanny.'

'Stuff and nonsense!' replied the young lady, turning angry again; 'I am as well as you are. Perhaps I might say better, and yet make no boast of it.'

Poor Little Dorrit, not seeing her way to the offering of any soothing words that would escape repudiation, deemed it best to remain quiet. At first, Fanny took this ill, too; protesting to her looking-glass, that of all the trying sisters a girl could have, she did think the most trying sister was a flat sister. That she knew she was at times a wretched temper; that she knew she made herself hateful; that when she made herself hateful, nothing would do her half the good as being told so; but that, being afflicted with a flat sister, she never WAS told so, and the consequence resulted that she was absolutely tempted and goaded into making herself disagreeable. Besides (she angrily told her looking-glass), she didn't want to be forgiven. It was not a right example, that she should be constantly stooping to be forgiven by a younger sister. And this was the Art of it - that she was always being placed in the position of being forgiven, whether she liked it or not. Finally she burst into violent weeping, and, when her sister came and sat close at her side to comfort her, said, 'Amy, you're an Angel!'

'But, I tell you what, my Pet,' said Fanny, when her sister's gentleness had calmed her, 'it now comes to this; that things cannot and shall not go on as they are at present going on, and that there must be an end of this, one way or another.'

As the announcement was vague, though very peremptory, Little Dorrit returned, 'Let us talk about it.'

'Quite so, my dear,' assented Fanny, as she dried her eyes. 'Let us talk about it. I am rational again now, and you shall advise me. Will you advise me, my sweet child?'

Even Amy smiled at this notion, but she said, 'I will, Fanny, as well as I can.'

'Thank you, dearest Amy,' returned Fanny, kissing her. 'You are my anchor.'

Having embraced her Anchor with great affection, Fanny took a bottle of sweet toilette water from the table, and called to her maid for a fine handkerchief. She then dismissed that attendant for the night, and went on to be advised; dabbing her eyes and forehead from time to time to cool them.

'My love,' Fanny began, 'our characters and points of view are sufficiently different (kiss me again, my darling), to make it very probable that I shall surprise you by what I am going to say. What I am going to say, my dear, is, that notwithstanding our property, we labour, socially speaking, under disadvantages. You don't quite understand what I mean, Amy?'

'I have no doubt I shall,' said Amy, mildly, 'after a few words more.'

'Well, my dear, what I mean is, that we are, after all, newcomers into fashionable life.'

'I am sure, Fanny,' Little Dorrit interposed in her zealous admiration, 'no one need find that out in you.'

'Well, my dear child, perhaps not,' said Fanny, 'though it's most kind and most affectionate in you, you precious girl, to say so.' Here she dabbed her sister's forehead, and blew upon it a little. 'But you are,' resumed Fanny, 'as is well known, the dearest little thing that ever was! To resume, my child. Pa is extremely gentlemanly and extremely well informed, but he is, in some trifling respects, a little different from other gentlemen of his fortune: partly on account of what he has gone through, poor dear: partly, I fancy, on account of its often running in his mind that other people are thinking about that, while he is talking to them. Uncle, my love, is altogether unpresentable. Though a dear creature to whom I am tenderly attached, he is, socially speaking, shocking. Edward is frightfully expensive and dissipated. I don't mean that there is anything ungenteel in that itself - far from it - but I do mean that he doesn't do it well, and that he doesn't, if I may so express myself, get the money's-worth in the sort of dissipated reputation that attaches to him.'

'Poor Edward!' sighed Little Dorrit, with the whole family history in the sigh.

'Yes. And poor you and me, too,' returned Fanny, rather sharply.

'Very true! Then, my dear, we have no mother, and we have a Mrs General. And I tell you again, darling, that Mrs General, if I may reverse a common proverb and adapt it to her, is a cat in gloves who WILL catch mice. That woman, I am quite sure and confident, will be our mother-in-law.'

'I can hardly think, Fanny-' Fanny stopped her.

'Now, don't argue with me about it, Amy,' said she, 'because I know better.' Feeling that she had been sharp again, she dabbed her sister's forehead again, and blew upon it again. 'To resume once more, my

dear. It then becomes a question with me (I am proud and spirited, Amy, as you very well know: too much so, I dare say) whether I shall make up my mind to take it upon myself to carry the family through.' 'How?' asked her sister, anxiously.

'I will not,' said Fanny, without answering the question, 'submit to be mother-in-lawed by Mrs General; and I will not submit to be, in any respect whatever, either patronised or tormented by Mrs Merdle.'

Little Dorrit laid her hand upon the hand that held the bottle of sweet water, with a still more anxious look. Fanny, quite punishing her own forehead with the vehement dabs she now began to give it, fitfully went on.

'That he has somehow or other, and how is of no consequence, attained a very good position, no one can deny. That it is a very good connection, no one can deny. And as to the question of clever or not clever, I doubt very much whether a clever husband would be suitable to me. I cannot submit. I should not be able to defer to him enough.'

'O, my dear Fanny!' expostulated Little Dorrit, upon whom a kind of terror had been stealing as she perceived what her sister meant. 'If you loved any one, all this feeling would change. If you loved any one, you would no more be yourself, but you would quite lose and forget yourself in your devotion to him. If you loved him, Fanny - ' Fanny had stopped the dabbing hand, and was looking at her fixedly.

'O, indeed!' cried Fanny. 'Really? Bless me, how much some people know of some subjects! They say every one has a subject, and I certainly seem to have hit upon yours, Amy. There, you little thing, I was only in fun,' dabbing her sister's forehead; 'but don't you be a silly puss, and don't you think flightily and eloquently about degenerate impossibilities. There! Now, I'll go back to myself.'

'Dear Fanny, let me say first, that I would far rather we worked for a scanty living again than I would see you rich and married to Mr Sparkler.'

'Let you say, my dear?' retorted Fanny. 'Why, of course, I will let you say anything. There is no constraint upon you, I hope. We are together to talk it over. And as to marrying Mr Sparkler, I have not the slightest intention of doing so to-night, my dear, or to-morrow morning either.'

'But at some time?'

'At no time, for anything I know at present,' answered Fanny, with indifference. Then, suddenly changing her indifference into a burning restlessness, she added, 'You talk about the clever men, you little

thing! It's all very fine and easy to talk about the clever men; but where are they? I don't see them anywhere near me!'

'My dear Fanny, so short a time - '

'Short time or long time,' interrupted Fanny. 'I am impatient of our situation. I don't like our situation, and very little would induce me to change it. Other girls, differently reared and differently circumstanced altogether, might wonder at what I say or may do. Let them. They are driven by their lives and characters; I am driven by mine.'

'Fanny, my dear Fanny, you know that you have qualities to make you the wife of one very superior to Mr Sparkler.'

'Amy, my dear Amy,' retorted Fanny, parodying her words, 'I know that I wish to have a more defined and distinct position, in which I can assert myself with greater effect against that insolent woman.'

'Would you therefore - forgive my asking, Fanny - therefore marry her son?'

'Why, perhaps,' said Fanny, with a triumphant smile. 'There may be many less promising ways of arriving at an end than that, MY dear. That piece of insolence may think, now, that it would be a great success to get her son off upon me, and shelve me. But, perhaps, she little thinks how I would retort upon her if I married her son.

I would oppose her in everything, and compete with her. I would make it the business of my life.'

Fanny set down the bottle when she came to this, and walked about the room; always stopping and standing still while she spoke.

'One thing I could certainly do, my child: I could make her older. And I would!'

This was followed by another walk.

'I would talk of her as an old woman. I would pretend to know - if I didn't, but I should from her son - all about her age. And she should hear me say, Amy: affectionately, quite dutifully and affectionately: how well she looked, considering her time of life. I could make her seem older at once, by being myself so much younger. I may not be as handsome as she is; I am not a fair judge of that question, I suppose; but I know I am handsome enough to be a thorn in her side. And I would be!'

'My dear sister, would you condemn yourself to an unhappy life for this?'

'It wouldn't be an unhappy life, Amy. It would be the life I am fitted for. Whether by disposition, or whether by circumstances, is no matter; I am better fitted for such a life than for almost any other.'

There was something of a desolate tone in those words; but, with a short proud laugh she took another walk, and after passing a great looking-glass came to another stop.

'Figure! Figure, Amy! Well. The woman has a good figure. I will give her her due, and not deny it. But is it so far beyond all others that it is altogether unapproachable? Upon my word, I am not so sure of it. Give some much younger woman the latitude as to dress that she has, being married; and we would see about that, my dear!'

Something in the thought that was agreeable and flattering, brought her back to her seat in a gayer temper. She took her sister's hands in hers, and clapped all four hands above her head as she looked in her sister's face laughing:

'And the dancer, Amy, that she has quite forgotten - the dancer who bore no sort of resemblance to me, and of whom I never remind her, oh dear no! - should dance through her life, and dance in her way, to such a tune as would disturb her insolent placidity a little. just a little, my dear Amy, just a little!'

Meeting an earnest and imploring look in Amy's face, she brought the four hands down, and laid only one on Amy's lips.

'Now, don't argue with me, child,' she said in a sterner way, 'because it is of no use. I understand these subjects much better than you do. I have not nearly made up my mind, but it may be. Now we have talked this over comfortably, and may go to bed. You best and dearest little mouse, Good night!' With those words Fanny weighed her Anchor, and - having taken so much advice - left off being advised for that occasion.

Thenceforward, Amy observed Mr Sparkler's treatment by his enslaver, with new reasons for attaching importance to all that passed between them. There were times when Fanny appeared quite unable to endure his mental feebleness, and when she became so sharply impatient of it that she would all but dismiss him for good. There were other times when she got on much better with him; when he amused her, and when her sense of superiority seemed to counterbalance that opposite side of the scale. If Mr Sparkler had been other than the faithfullest and most submissive of swains, he was sufficiently hard

pressed to have fled from the scene of his trials, and have set at least the whole distance from Rome to London between himself and his enchantress. But he had no greater will of his own than a boat has when it is towed by a steam-ship; and he followed his cruel mistress through rough and smooth, on equally strong compulsion.

Mrs Merdle, during these passages, said little to Fanny, but said more about her. She was, as it were, forced to look at her through her eye-glass, and in general conversation to allow commendations of her beauty to be wrung from her by its irresistible demands. The defiant character it assumed when Fanny heard these extollings (as it generally happened that she did), was not expressive of concessions to the impartial bosom; but the utmost revenge the bosom took was, to say audibly, 'A spoilt beauty - but with that face and shape, who could wonder?'

It might have been about a month or six weeks after the night of the new advice, when Little Dorrit began to think she detected some new understanding between Mr Sparkler and Fanny. Mr Sparkler, as if in attendance to some compact, scarcely ever spoke without first looking towards Fanny for leave. That young lady was too discreet ever to look back again; but, if Mr Sparkler had permission to speak, she remained silent; if he had not, she herself spoke. Moreover, it became plain whenever Henry Gowan attempted to perform the friendly office of drawing him out, that he was not to be drawn. And not only that, but Fanny would presently, without any pointed application in the world, chance to say something with such a sting in it that Gowan would draw back as if he had put his hand into a bee-hive.

There was yet another circumstance which went a long way to confirm Little Dorrit in her fears, though it was not a great circumstance in itself. Mr Sparkler's demeanour towards herself changed. It became fraternal. Sometimes, when she was in the outer circle of assemblies - at their own residence, at Mrs Merdle's, or elsewhere - she would find herself stealthily supported round the waist by Mr Sparkler's arm. Mr Sparkler never offered the slightest explanation of this attention; but merely smiled with an air of blundering, contented, good-natured proprietorship, which, in so heavy a gentleman, was ominously expressive.

Little Dorrit was at home one day, thinking about Fanny with a heavy heart. They had a room at one end of their drawing-room suite, nearly all irregular bay-window, projecting over the street, and commanding all the picturesque life and variety of the Corso, both up and down. At three or four o'clock in the afternoon, English time, the view from this window was very bright and peculiar; and Little Dorrit used to sit and muse here, much as she had been used to while away the time in her balcony at Venice. Seated thus one day, she was softly touched on the

shoulder, and Fanny said, 'Well, Amy dear,' and took her seat at her side. Their seat was a part of the window; when there was anything in the way of a procession going on, they used to have bright draperies hung out of the window, and used to kneel or sit on this seat, and look out at it, leaning on the brilliant colour. But there was no procession that day, and Little Dorrit was rather surprised by Fanny's being at home at that hour, as she was generally out on horseback then.

'Well, Amy,' said Fanny, 'what are you thinking of, little one?' 'I was thinking of you, Fanny.'

'No? What a coincidence! I declare here's some one else. You were not thinking of this some one else too; were you, Amy?'

Amy HAD been thinking of this some one else too; for it was Mr Sparkler. She did not say so, however, as she gave him her hand. Mr Sparkler came and sat down on the other side of her, and she felt the fraternal railing come behind her, and apparently stretch on to include Fanny.

'Well, my little sister,' said Fanny with a sigh, 'I suppose you know what this means?'

'She's as beautiful as she's doated on,' stammered Mr Sparkler - 'and there's no nonsense about her - it's arranged - '

'You needn't explain, Edmund,' said Fanny.

'No, my love,' said Mr Sparkler.

'In short, pet,' proceeded Fanny, 'on the whole, we are engaged. We must tell papa about it either to-night or to-morrow, according to the opportunities. Then it's done, and very little more need be said.'

'My dear Fanny,' said Mr Sparkler, with deference, 'I should like to say a word to Amy.'

'Well, well! Say it for goodness' sake,' returned the young lady.

'I am convinced, my dear Amy,' said Mr Sparkler, 'that if ever there was a girl, next to your highly endowed and beautiful sister, who had no nonsense about her - '

'We know all about that, Edmund,' interposed Miss Fanny. 'Never mind that. Pray go on to something else besides our having no nonsense about us.'

'Yes, my love,' said Mr Sparkler. 'And I assure you, Amy, that nothing can be a greater happiness to myself, myself - next to the happiness of being so highly honoured with the choice of a glorious girl who hasn't an atom of - '

'Pray, Edmund, pray!' interrupted Fanny, with a slight pat of her pretty foot upon the floor.

'My love, you're quite right,' said Mr Sparkler, 'and I know I have a habit of it. What I wished to declare was, that nothing can be a greater happiness to myself, myself-next to the happiness of being united to pre-eminently the most glorious of girls - than to have the happiness of cultivating the affectionate acquaintance of Amy. I may not myself,' said Mr Sparkler manfully, 'be up to the mark on some other subjects at a short notice, and I am aware that if you were to poll Society the general opinion would be that I am not; but on the subject of Amy I am up to the mark!'

Mr Sparkler kissed her, in witness thereof.

'A knife and fork and an apartment,' proceeded Mr Sparkler, growing, in comparison with his oratorical antecedents, quite diffuse, 'will ever be at Amy's disposal. My Governor, I am sure, will always be proud to entertain one whom I so much esteem. And regarding my mother,' said Mr Sparkler, 'who is a remarkably fine woman, with - '

'Edmund, Edmund!' cried Miss Fanny, as before.

'With submission, my soul,' pleaded Mr Sparkler. 'I know I have a habit of it, and I thank you very much, my adorable girl, for taking the trouble to correct it; but my mother is admitted on all sides to be a remarkably fine woman, and she really hasn't any.'

'That may be, or may not be,' returned Fanny, 'but pray don't mention it any more.'

'I will not, my love,' said Mr Sparkler.

'Then, in fact, you have nothing more to say, Edmund; have you?' inquired Fanny.

'So far from it, my adorable girl,' answered Mr Sparkler, 'I apologise for having said so much.'

Mr Sparkler perceived, by a kind of inspiration, that the question implied had he not better go? He therefore withdrew the fraternal railing, and neatly said that he thought he would, with submission, take his leave. He did not go without being congratulated by Amy, as

well as she could discharge that office in the flutter and distress of her spirits.

When he was gone, she said, 'O Fanny, Fanny!' and turned to her sister in the bright window, and fell upon her bosom and cried there. Fanny laughed at first; but soon laid her face against her sister's and cried too - a little. It was the last time Fanny ever showed that there was any hidden, suppressed, or conquered feeling in her on the matter. From that hour the way she had chosen lay before her, and she trod it with her own imperious self-willed step.