Chapter LI - No Just Cause Or Impediment Why These Two Persons Should Not Be Joined Together

Mr Dorrit, on being informed by his elder daughter that she had accepted matrimonial overtures from Mr Sparkler, to whom she had plighted her troth, received the communication at once with great dignity and with a large display of parental pride; his dignity dilating with the widened prospect of advantageous ground from which to make acquaintances, and his parental pride being developed by Miss Fanny's ready sympathy with that great object of his existence. He gave her to understand that her noble ambition found harmonious echoes in his heart; and bestowed his blessing on her, as a child brimful of duty and good principle, self-devoted to the aggrandisement of the family name.

To Mr Sparkler, when Miss Fanny permitted him to appear, Mr Dorrit said, he would not disguise that the alliance Mr Sparkler did him the honour to propose was highly congenial to his feelings; both as being in unison with the spontaneous affections of his daughter Fanny, and as opening a family connection of a gratifying nature with Mr Merdle, the master spirit of the age. Mrs Merdle also, as a leading lady rich in distinction, elegance, grace, and beauty, he mentioned in very laudatory terms. He felt it his duty to remark (he was sure a gentleman of Mr Sparkler's fine sense would interpret him with all delicacy), that he could not consider this proposal definitely determined on, until he should have had the privilege of holding some correspondence with Mr Merdle; and of ascertaining it to be so far accordant with the views of that eminent gentleman as that his (Mr Dorrit's) daughter would be received on that footing which her station in life and her dowry and expectations warranted him in requiring that she should maintain in what he trusted he might be allowed, without the appearance of being mercenary, to call the Eye of the Great World. While saying this, which his character as a gentleman of some little station, and his character as a father, equally demanded of him, he would not be so diplomatic as to conceal that the proposal remained in hopeful abeyance and under conditional acceptance, and that he thanked Mr Sparkler for the compliment rendered to himself and to his family. He concluded with some further and more general observations on the - ha - character of an independent gentleman, and the - hum - character of a possibly too partial and admiring parent. To sum the whole up shortly, he received Mr Sparkler's offer very much as he would have received three or four half-crowns from him in the days that were gone.

Mr Sparkler, finding himself stunned by the words thus heaped upon his inoffensive head, made a brief though pertinent rejoinder; the same being neither more nor less than that he had long perceived Miss Fanny to have no nonsense about her, and that he had no doubt

of its being all right with his Governor. At that point the object of his affections shut him up like a box with a spring lid, and sent him away.

Proceeding shortly afterwards to pay his respects to the Bosom, Mr Dorrit was received by it with great consideration. Mrs Merdle had heard of this affair from Edmund. She had been surprised at first, because she had not thought Edmund a marrying man. Society had not thought Edmund a marrying man. Still, of course she had seen, as a woman (we women did instinctively see these things, Mr Dorrit!), that Edmund had been immensely captivated by Miss Dorrit, and she had openly said that Mr Dorrit had much to answer for in bringing so charming a girl abroad to turn the heads of his countrymen.

'Have I the honour to conclude, madam,' said Mr Dorrit, 'that the direction which Mr Sparkler's affections have taken, is - ha- approved of by you?'

'I assure you, Mr Dorrit,' returned the lady, 'that, personally, I am charmed.'

That was very gratifying to Mr Dorrit.

'Personally,' repeated Mrs Merdle, 'charmed.'

This casual repetition of the word 'personally,' moved Mr Dorrit to express his hope that Mr Merdle's approval, too, would not be wanting?

'I cannot,' said Mrs Merdle, 'take upon myself to answer positively for Mr Merdle; gentlemen, especially gentlemen who are what Society calls capitalists, having their own ideas of these matters. But I should think - merely giving an opinion, Mr Dorrit - I should think Mr Merdle would be upon the whole,' here she held a review of herself before adding at her leisure, 'quite charmed.'

At the mention of gentlemen whom Society called capitalists, Mr Dorrit had coughed, as if some internal demur were breaking out of him. Mrs Merdle had observed it, and went on to take up the cue.

'Though, indeed, Mr Dorrit, it is scarcely necessary for me to make that remark, except in the mere openness of saying what is uppermost to one whom I so highly regard, and with whom I hope I may have the pleasure of being brought into still more agreeable relations. For one cannot but see the great probability of your considering such things from Mr Merdle's own point of view, except indeed that circumstances have made it Mr Merdle's accidental fortune, or misfortune, to be engaged in business transactions, and that they, however vast, may a

little cramp his horizons. I am a very child as to having any notion of business,' said Mrs Merdle; 'but I am afraid, Mr Dorrit, it may have that tendency.'

This skilful see-saw of Mr Dorrit and Mrs Merdle, so that each of them sent the other up, and each of them sent the other down, and neither had the advantage, acted as a sedative on Mr Dorrit's cough. He remarked with his utmost politeness, that he must beg to protest against its being supposed, even by Mrs Merdle, the accomplished and graceful (to which compliment she bent herself), that such enterprises as Mr Merdle's, apart as they were from the puny undertakings of the rest of men, had any lower tendency than to enlarge and expand the genius in which they were conceived. 'You are generosity itself,' said Mrs Merdle in return, smiling her best smile; 'let us hope so. But I confess I am almost superstitious in my ideas about business.'

Mr Dorrit threw in another compliment here, to the effect that business, like the time which was precious in it, was made for slaves; and that it was not for Mrs Merdle, who ruled all hearts at her supreme pleasure, to have anything to do with it. Mrs Merdle laughed, and conveyed to Mr Dorrit an idea that the Bosom flushed - which was one of her best effects.

'I say so much,' she then explained, 'merely because Mr Merdle has always taken the greatest interest in Edmund, and has always expressed the strongest desire to advance his prospects. Edmund's public position, I think you know. His private position rests solely with Mr Merdle. In my foolish incapacity for business, I assure you I know no more.'

Mr Dorrit again expressed, in his own way, the sentiment that business was below the ken of enslavers and enchantresses. He then mentioned his intention, as a gentleman and a parent, of writing to Mr Merdle. Mrs Merdle concurred with all her heart - or with all her art, which was exactly the same thing - and herself despatched a preparatory letter by the next post to the eighth wonder of the world.

In his epistolary communication, as in his dialogues and discourses on the great question to which it related, Mr Dorrit surrounded the subject with flourishes, as writing-masters embellish copy-books and ciphering-books: where the titles of the elementary rules of arithmetic diverge into swans, eagles, griffins, and other calligraphic recreations, and where the capital letters go out of their minds and bodies into ecstasies of pen and ink. Nevertheless, he did render the purport of his letter sufficiently clear, to enable Mr Merdle to make a decent pretence of having learnt it from that source. Mr Merdle replied to it accordingly. Mr Dorrit replied to Mr Merdle; Mr Merdle replied to Mr

Dorrit; and it was soon announced that the corresponding powers had come to a satisfactory understanding.

Now, and not before, Miss Fanny burst upon the scene, completely arrayed for her new part. Now and not before, she wholly absorbed Mr Sparkler in her light, and shone for both, and twenty more. No longer feeling that want of a defined place and character which had caused her so much trouble, this fair ship began to steer steadily on a shaped course, and to swim with a weight and balance that developed her sailing qualities.

'The preliminaries being so satisfactorily arranged, I think I will now, my dear,' said Mr Dorrit, 'announce - ha - formally, to Mrs General - '

'Papa,' returned Fanny, taking him up short upon that name, 'I don't see what Mrs General has got to do with it.'

'My dear,' said Mr Dorrit, 'it will be an act of courtesy to - hum - a lady, well bred and refined - '

'Oh! I am sick of Mrs General's good breeding and refinement, papa,' said Fanny. 'I am tired of Mrs General.'

'Tired,' repeated Mr Dorrit in reproachful astonishment, 'of - ha - Mrs General.'

'Quite disgusted with her, papa,' said Fanny. 'I really don't see what she has to do with my marriage. Let her keep to her own matrimonial projects - if she has any.'

'Fanny,' returned Mr Dorrit, with a grave and weighty slowness upon him, contrasting strongly with his daughter's levity: 'I beg the favour of your explaining - ha - what it is you mean.' 'I mean, papa,' said Fanny, 'that if Mrs General should happen to have any matrimonial projects of her own, I dare say they are quite enough to occupy her spare time. And that if she has not, so much the better; but still I don't wish to have the honour of making announcements to her.'

'Permit me to ask you, Fanny,' said Mr Dorrit, 'why not?'

'Because she can find my engagement out for herself, papa,' retorted Fanny. 'She is watchful enough, I dare say. I think I have seen her so. Let her find it out for herself. If she should not find it out for herself, she will know it when I am married. And I hope you will not consider me wanting in affection for you, papa, if I say it strikes me that will be quite enough for Mrs General.'

'Fanny,' returned Mr Dorrit, 'I am amazed, I am displeased by this - hum - this capricious and unintelligible display of animosity towards - ha - Mrs General.'

'Do not, if you please, papa,' urged Fanny, 'call it animosity, because I assure you I do not consider Mrs General worth my animosity.'

At this, Mr Dorrit rose from his chair with a fixed look of severe reproof, and remained standing in his dignity before his daughter. His daughter, turning the bracelet on her arm, and now looking at him, and now looking from him, said, 'Very well, papa. I am truly sorry if you don't like it; but I can't help it. I am not a child, and I am not Amy, and I must speak.'

'Fanny,' gasped Mr Dorrit, after a majestic silence, 'if I request you to remain here, while I formally announce to Mrs General, as an exemplary lady, who is - hum - a trusted member of this family, the - ha - the change that is contemplated among us; if I - ha - not only request it, but - hum - insist upon it - '

'Oh, papa,' Fanny broke in with pointed significance, 'if you make so much of it as that, I have in duty nothing to do but comply. I hope I may have my thoughts upon the subject, however, for I really cannot help it under the circumstances.'So, Fanny sat down with a meekness which, in the junction of extremes, became defiance; and her father, either not deigning to answer, or not knowing what to answer, summoned Mr Tinkler into his presence.

'Mrs General.'

Mr Tinkler, unused to receive such short orders in connection with the fair varnisher, paused. Mr Dorrit, seeing the whole Marshalsea and all its testimonials in the pause, instantly flew at him with, 'How dare you, sir? What do you mean?'

'I beg your pardon, sir,' pleaded Mr Tinkler, 'I was wishful to know - ' 'You wished to know nothing, sir,' cried Mr Dorrit, highly flushed.

'Don't tell me you did. Ha. You didn't. You are guilty of mockery, sir.'

'I assure you, sir - ' Mr Tinkler began.

'Don't assure me!' said Mr Dorrit. 'I will not be assured by a domestic. You are guilty of mockery. You shall leave me - hum - the whole establishment shall leave me. What are you waiting for?'

'Only for my orders, sir.'

'It's false,' said Mr Dorrit, 'you have your orders. Ha - hum. MY compliments to Mrs General, and I beg the favour of her coming to me, if quite convenient, for a few minutes. Those are your orders.'

In his execution of this mission, Mr Tinkler perhaps expressed that Mr Dorrit was in a raging fume. However that was, Mrs General's skirts were very speedily heard outside, coming along - one might almost have said bouncing along - with unusual expedition. Albeit, they settled down at the door and swept into the room with their customary coolness.

'Mrs General,' said Mr Dorrit, 'take a chair.'

Mrs General, with a graceful curve of acknowledgment, descended into the chair which Mr Dorrit offered.

'Madam,' pursued that gentleman, 'as you have had the kindness to undertake the - hum - formation of my daughters, and as I am persuaded that nothing nearly affecting them can - ha - be indifferent to you - '

'Wholly impossible,' said Mrs General in the calmest of ways.

' - I therefore wish to announce to you, madam, that my daughter now present - '

Mrs General made a slight inclination of her head to Fanny, who made a very low inclination of her head to Mrs General, and came loftily upright again.

' - That my daughter Fanny is - ha - contracted to be married to Mr Sparkler, with whom you are acquainted. Hence, madam, you will be relieved of half your difficult charge - ha - difficult charge.' Mr Dorrit repeated it with his angry eye on Fanny. 'But not, I hope, to the - hum - diminution of any other portion, direct or indirect, of the footing you have at present the kindness to occupy in my family.'

'Mr Dorrit,' returned Mrs General, with her gloved hands resting on one another in exemplary repose, 'is ever considerate, and ever but too appreciative of my friendly services.'

(Miss Fanny coughed, as much as to say, 'You are right.')

'Miss Dorrit has no doubt exercised the soundest discretion of which the circumstances admitted, and I trust will allow me to offer her my sincere congratulations. When free from the trammels of passion,' Mrs General closed her eyes at the word, as if she could not utter it, and see anybody; 'when occurring with the approbation of near relatives;

and when cementing the proud structure of a family edifice; these are usually auspicious events.

I trust Miss Dorrit will allow me to offer her my best congratulations.'

Here Mrs General stopped, and added internally, for the setting of her face, 'Papa, potatoes, poultry, Prunes, and prism.'

'Mr Dorrit,' she superadded aloud, 'is ever most obliging; and for the attention, and I will add distinction, of having this confidence imparted to me by himself and Miss Dorrit at this early time, I beg to offer the tribute of my thanks. My thanks, and my congratulations, are equally the meed of Mr Dorrit and of Miss Dorrit.'

'To me,' observed Miss Fanny, 'they are excessively gratifying - inexpressibly so. The relief of finding that you have no objection to make, Mrs General, quite takes a load off my mind, I am sure. I hardly know what I should have done,' said Fanny, 'if you had interposed any objection, Mrs General.'

Mrs General changed her gloves, as to the right glove being uppermost and the left undermost, with a Prunes and Prism smile.

'To preserve your approbation, Mrs General,' said Fanny, returning the smile with one in which there was no trace of those ingredients, 'will of course be the highest object of my married life; to lose it, would of course be perfect wretchedness. I am sure your great kindness will not object, and I hope papa will not object, to my correcting a small mistake you have made, however. The best of us are so liable to mistakes, that even you, Mrs General, have fallen into a little error. The attention and distinction you have so impressively mentioned, Mrs General, as attaching to this confidence, are, I have no doubt, of the most complimentary and gratifying description; but they don't at all proceed from me. The merit of having consulted you on the subject would have been so great in me, that I feel I must not lay claim to it when it really is not mine. It is wholly papa's. I am deeply obliged to you for your encouragement and patronage, but it was papa who asked for it. I have to thank you, Mrs General, for relieving my breast of a great weight by so handsomely giving your consent to my engagement, but you have really nothing to thank me for. I hope you will always approve of my proceedings after I have left home and that my sister also may long remain the favoured object of your condescension, Mrs General.'

With this address, which was delivered in her politest manner, Fanny left the room with an elegant and cheerful air - to tear up- stairs with a flushed face as soon as she was out of hearing, pounce in upon her sister, call her a little Dormouse, shake her for the better opening of

her eyes, tell her what had passed below, and ask her what she thought of Pa now?

Towards Mrs Merdle, the young lady comported herself with great independence and self-possession; but not as yet with any more decided opening of hostilities. Occasionally they had a slight skirmish, as when Fanny considered herself patted on the back by that lady, or as when Mrs Merdle looked particularly young and well; but Mrs Merdle always soon terminated those passages of arms by sinking among her cushions with the gracefullest indifference, and finding her attention otherwise engaged. Society (for that mysterious creature sat upon the Seven Hills too) found Miss Fanny vastly improved by her engagement. She was much more accessible, much more free and engaging, much less exacting; insomuch that she now entertained a host of followers and admirers, to the bitter indignation of ladies with daughters to marry, who were to be regarded as Having revolted from Society on the Miss Dorrit grievance, and erected a rebellious standard. Enjoying the flutter she caused. Miss Dorrit not only haughtily moved through it in her own proper person, but haughtily, even Ostentatiously, led Mr Sparkler through it too: seeming to say to them all, 'If I think proper to march among you in triumphal procession attended by this weak captive in bonds, rather than a stronger one, that is my business. Enough that I choose to do it!' Mr Sparkler for his part, questioned nothing; but went wherever he was taken, did whatever he was told, felt that for his bride-elect to be distinguished was for him to be distinguished on the easiest terms, and was truly grateful for being so openly acknowledged.

The winter passing on towards the spring while this condition of affairs prevailed, it became necessary for Mr Sparkler to repair to England, and take his appointed part in the expression and direction of its genius, learning, commerce, spirit, and sense. The land of Shakespeare, Milton, Bacon, Newton, Watt, the land of a host of past and present abstract philosophers, natural philosophers, and subduers of Nature and Art in their myriad forms, called to Mr Sparkler to come and take care of it, lest it should perish. Mr Sparkler, unable to resist the agonised cry from the depths of his country's soul, declared that he must go.

It followed that the question was rendered pressing when, where, and how Mr Sparkler should be married to the foremost girl in all this world with no nonsense about her. Its solution, after some little mystery and secrecy, Miss Fanny herself announced to her sister.

'Now, my child,' said she, seeking her out one day, 'I am going to tell you something. It is only this moment broached; and naturally I hurry to you the moment it IS broached.'

'Your marriage, Fanny?'

'My precious child,' said Fanny, 'don't anticipate me. Let me impart my confidence to you, you flurried little thing, in my own way. As to your guess, if I answered it literally, I should answer no. For really it is not my marriage that is in question, half as much as it is Edmund's.'

Little Dorrit looked, and perhaps not altogether without cause, somewhat at a loss to understand this fine distinction.

'I am in no difficulty,' exclaimed Fanny, 'and in no hurry. I am not wanted at any public office, or to give any vote anywhere else.

But Edmund is. And Edmund is deeply dejected at the idea of going away by himself, and, indeed, I don't like that he should be trusted by himself. For, if it's possible - and it generally is - to do a foolish thing, he is sure to do it.'

As she concluded this impartial summary of the reliance that might be safely placed upon her future husband, she took off, with an air of business, the bonnet she wore, and dangled it by its strings upon the ground.

'It is far more Edmund's question, therefore, than mine. However, we need say no more about that. That is self-evident on the face of it. Well, my dearest Amy! The point arising, is he to go by himself, or is he not to go by himself, this other point arises, are we to be married here and shortly, or are we to be married at home months hence?'

'I see I am going to lose you, Fanny.'

'What a little thing you are,' cried Fanny, half tolerant and half impatient, 'for anticipating one! Pray, my darling, hear me out. That woman,' she spoke of Mrs Merdle, of course, 'remains here until after Easter; so, in the case of my being married here and going to London with Edmund, I should have the start of her. That is something. Further, Amy. That woman being out of the way, I don't know that I greatly object to Mr Merdle's proposal to Pa that Edmund and I should take up our abode in that house -.you know - where you once went with a dancer, my dear, until our own house can be chosen and fitted up. Further still, Amy. Papa having always intended to go to town himself, in the spring, - you see, if Edmund and I were married here, we might go off to Florence, where papa might join us, and we might all three travel home together. Mr Merdle has entreated Pa to stay with him in that same mansion I have mentioned, and I suppose he will. But he is master of his own actions; and upon that point (which is not at all material) I can't speak positively.' The difference between papa's being master of his own actions and Mr Sparkler's being

nothing of the sort, was forcibly expressed by Fanny in her manner of stating the case. Not that her sister noticed it; for she was divided between regret at the coming separation, and a lingering wish that she had been included in the plans for visiting England.

'And these are the arrangements, Fanny dear?'

'Arrangements!' repeated Fanny. 'Now, really, child, you are a little trying. You know I particularly guarded myself against laying my words open to any such construction. What I said was, that certain questions present themselves; and these are the questions.'

Little Dorrit's thoughtful eyes met hers, tenderly and quietly.

'Now, my own sweet girl,' said Fanny, weighing her bonnet by the strings with considerable impatience, 'it's no use staring. A little owl could stare. I look to you for advice, Amy. What do you advise me to do?'

'Do you think,' asked Little Dorrit, persuasively, after a short hesitation, 'do you think, Fanny, that if you were to put it off for a few months, it might be, considering all things, best?'

'No, little Tortoise,' retorted Fanny, with exceeding sharpness. 'I don't think anything of the kind.'

Here, she threw her bonnet from her altogether, and flounced into a chair. But, becoming affectionate almost immediately, she flounced out of it again, and kneeled down on the floor to take her sister, chair and all, in her arms.

'Don't suppose I am hasty or unkind, darling, because I really am not. But you are such a little oddity! You make one bite your head off, when one wants to be soothing beyond everything. Didn't I tell you, you dearest baby, that Edmund can't be trusted by himself? And don't you know that he can't?'

'Yes, yes, Fanny. You said so, I know.'

'And you know it, I know,' retorted Fanny. 'Well, my precious child! If he is not to be trusted by himself, it follows, I suppose, that I should go with him?'

'It - seems so, love,' said Little Dorrit.

'Therefore, having heard the arrangements that are feasible to carry out that object, am I to understand, dearest Amy, that on the whole you advise me to make them?'

'It - seems so, love,' said Little Dorrit again.

'Very well,' cried Fanny with an air of resignation, 'then I suppose it must be done! I came to you, my sweet, the moment I saw the doubt, and the necessity of deciding. I have now decided. So let it be.'

After yielding herself up, in this pattern manner, to sisterly advice and the force of circumstances, Fanny became quite benignant: as one who had laid her own inclinations at the feet of her dearest friend, and felt a glow of conscience in having made the sacrifice. 'After all, my Amy,' she said to her sister, 'you are the best of small creatures, and full of good sense; and I don't know what I shall ever do without you!'

With which words she folded her in a closer embrace, and a really fond one.

'Not that I contemplate doing without You, Amy, by any means, for I hope we shall ever be next to inseparable. And now, my pet, I am going to give you a word of advice. When you are left alone here with Mrs General - '

'I am to be left alone here with Mrs General?' said Little Dorrit, quietly.

'Why, of course, my precious, till papa comes back! Unless you call Edward company, which he certainly is not, even when he is here, and still more certainly is not when he is away at Naples or in Sicily. I was going to say - but you are such a beloved little Marplot for putting one out - when you are left alone here with Mrs General, Amy, don't you let her slide into any sort of artful understanding with you that she is looking after Pa, or that Pa is looking after her. She will if she can. I know her sly manner of feeling her way with those gloves of hers. But don't you comprehend her on any account. And if Pa should tell you when he comes back, that he has it in contemplation to make Mrs General your mama (which is not the less likely because I am going away), my advice to you is, that you say at once,' Papa, I beg to object most strongly. Fanny cautioned me about this, and she objected, and I object.' I don't mean to say that any objection from you, Amy, is likely to be of the smallest effect, or that I think you likely to make it with any degree of firmness. But there is a principle involved - a filial principle - and I implore you not to submit to be mother-in-lawed by Mrs General, without asserting it in making every one about you as uncomfortable as possible. I don't expect you to stand by it - indeed, I know you won't, Pa being concerned - but I wish to rouse you to a sense of duty. As to any help from me, or as to any opposition that I can offer to such a match, you shall not be left in the lurch , my love. Whatever weight I may derive from my position as a married girl not wholly devoid of attractions - used, as that position always shall be, to oppose that woman - I will bring to bear, you May depend upon it, on

the head and false hair (for I am confident it's not all real, ugly as it is and unlikely as it appears that any One in their Senses would go to the expense of buying it) of Mrs General!' Little Dorrit received this counsel without venturing to oppose it but without giving Fanny any reason to believe that she intended to act upon it. Having now, as it were, formally wound up her single life and arranged her worldly affairs, Fanny proceeded with characteristic ardour to prepare for the serious change in her condition.

The preparation consisted in the despatch of her maid to Paris under the protection of the Courier, for the purchase of that outfit for a bride on which it would be extremely low, in the present narrative, to bestow an English name, but to which (on a vulgar principle it observes of adhering to the language in which it professes to be written) it declines to give a French one. The rich and beautiful wardrobe purchased by these agents, in the course of a few weeks made its way through the intervening country, bristling with custom-houses, garrisoned by an immense army of shabby mendicants in uniform who incessantly repeated the Beggar's Petition over it, as if every individual warrior among them were the ancient Belisarius: and of whom there were so many Legions, that unless the Courier had expended just one bushel and a half of silver money relieving their distresses, they would have worn the wardrobe out before it got to Rome, by turning it over and over. Through all such dangers, however, it was triumphantly brought, inch by inch, and arrived at its journey's end in fine condition.

There it was exhibited to select companies of female viewers, in whose gentle bosoms it awakened implacable feelings. Concurrently, active preparations were made for the day on which some of its treasures were to be publicly displayed. Cards of breakfast- invitation were sent out to half the English in the city of Romulus; the other half made arrangements to be under arms, as criticising volunteers, at various outer points of the solemnity. The most high and illustrious English Signor Edgardo Dorrit, came post through the deep mud and ruts (from forming a surface under the improving Neapolitan nobility), to grace the occasion. The best hotel and all its culinary myrmidons, were set to work to prepare the feast. The drafts of Mr Dorrit almost constituted a run on the Torlonia Bank. The British Consul hadn't had such a marriage in the whole of his Consularity.

The day came, and the She-Wolf in the Capitol might have snarled with envy to see how the Island Savages contrived these things now-a-days. The murderous-headed statues of the wicked Emperors of the Soldiery, whom sculptors had not been able to flatter out of their villainous hideousness, might have come off their pedestals to run away with the Bride. The choked old fountain, where erst the gladiators washed, might have leaped into life again to honour the

ceremony. The Temple of Vesta might have sprung up anew from its ruins, expressly to lend its countenance to the occasion. Might have done; but did not. Like sentient things - even like the lords and ladies of creation sometimes - might have done much, but did nothing. The celebration went off with admirable pomp; monks in black robes, white robes, and russet robes stopped to look after the carriages; wandering peasants in fleeces of sheep, begged and piped under the house-windows; the English volunteers defiled; the day wore on to the hour of vespers; the festival wore away; the thousand churches rang their bells without any reference to it; and St Peter denied that he had anything to do with it.

But by that time the Bride was near the end of the first day's journey towards Florence. It was the peculiarity of the nuptials that they were all Bride. Nobody noticed the Bridegroom. Nobody noticed the first Bridesmaid. Few could have seen Little Dorrit (who held that post) for the glare, even supposing many to have sought her. So, the Bride had mounted into her handsome chariot, incidentally accompanied by the Bridegroom; and after rolling for a few minutes smoothly over a fair pavement, had begun to jolt through a Slough of Despond, and through a long, long avenue of wrack and ruin. Other nuptial carriages are said to have gone the same road, before and since.

If Little Dorrit found herself left a little lonely and a little low that night, nothing would have done so much against her feeling of depression as the being able to sit at work by her father, as in the old time, and help him to his supper and his rest. But that was not to be thought of now, when they sat in the state-equipage with Mrs General on the coach-box. And as to supper! If Mr Dorrit had wanted supper, there was an Italian cook and there was a Swiss confectioner, who must have put on caps as high as the Pope's Mitre, and have performed the mysteries of Alchemists in a copper- saucepaned laboratory below, before he could have got it.

He was sententious and didactic that night. If he had been simply loving, he would have done Little Dorrit more good; but she accepted him as he was - when had she not accepted him as he was ! - and made the most and best of him. Mrs General at length retired. Her retirement for the night was always her frostiest ceremony, as if she felt it necessary that the human imagination should be chilled into stone to prevent its following her. When she had gone through her rigid preliminaries, amounting to a sort of genteel platoon-exercise, she withdrew. Little Dorrit then put her arm round her father's neck, to bid him good night.

'Amy, my dear,' said Mr Dorrit, taking her by the hand, 'this is the close of a day, that has - ha - greatly impressed and gratified me.' 'A little tired you, dear, too?'

'No,' said Mr Dorrit, 'no: I am not sensible of fatigue when it arises from an occasion so - hum - replete with gratification of the purest kind.'

Little Dorrit was glad to find him in such heart, and smiled from her own heart.

'My dear,' he continued, 'this is an occasion - ha - teeming with a good example. With a good example, my favourite and attached child - hum - to you.'

Little Dorrit, fluttered by his words, did not know what to say, though he stopped as if he expected her to say something.

'Amy,' he resumed; 'your dear sister, our Fanny, has contracted ha hum - a marriage, eminently calculated to extend the basis of our - ha - connection, and to - hum - consolidate our social relations. My love, I trust that the time is not far distant when some - ha - eligible partner may be found for you.'

'Oh no! Let me stay with you. I beg and pray that I may stay with you! I want nothing but to stay and take care of you!' She said it like one in sudden alarm.

'Nay, Amy, Amy,' said Mr Dorrit. 'This is weak and foolish, weak and foolish. You have a - ha - responsibility imposed upon you by your position. It is to develop that position, and be - hum - worthy of that position. As to taking care of me; I can - ha - take care of myself. Or,' he added after a moment, 'if I should need to be taken care of, I - hum - can, with the - ha - blessing of Providence, be taken care of, I - ha hum - I cannot, my dear child, think of engrossing, and - ha - as it were, sacrificing you.'

O what a time of day at which to begin that profession of self- denial; at which to make it, with an air of taking credit for it; at which to believe it, if such a thing could be!

'Don't speak, Amy. I positively say I cannot do it. I - ha - must not do it. My - hum - conscience would not allow it. I therefore, my love, take the opportunity afforded by this gratifying and impressive occasion of - ha - solemnly remarking, that it is now a cherished wish and purpose of mine to see you - ha - eligibly (I repeat eligibly) married.'

'Oh no, dear! Pray!'

'Amy,' said Mr Dorrit, 'I am well persuaded that if the topic were referred to any person of superior social knowledge, of superior delicacy and sense - let us say, for instance, to - ha - Mrs General -

that there would not be two opinions as to the - hum - affectionate character and propriety of my sentiments. But, as I know your loving and dutiful nature from - hum - from experience, I am quite satisfied that it is necessary to say no more. I have - hum - no husband to propose at present, my dear: I have not even one in view. I merely wish that we should - ha - understand each other. Hum. Good night, my dear and sole remaining daughter. Good night.

God bless you!'

If the thought ever entered Little Dorrit's head that night, that he could give her up lightly now in his prosperity, and when he had it in his mind to replace her with a second wife, she drove it away. Faithful to him still, as in the worst times through which she had borne him single-handed, she drove the thought away; and entertained no harder reflection, in her tearful unrest, than that he now saw everything through their wealth, and through the care he always had upon him that they should continue rich, and grow richer.

They sat in their equipage of state, with Mrs General on the box, for three weeks longer, and then he started for Florence to join Fanny. Little Dorrit would have been glad to bear him company so far, only for the sake of her own love, and then to have turned back alone, thinking of dear England. But, though the Courier had gone on with the Bride, the Valet was next in the line; and the succession would not have come to her, as long as any one could be got for money.

Mrs General took life easily - as easily, that is, as she could take anything - when the Roman establishment remained in their sole occupation; and Little Dorrit would often ride out in a hired carriage that was left them, and alight alone and wander among the ruins of old Rome. The ruins of the vast old Amphitheatre, of the old Temples, of the old commemorative Arches, of the old trodden highways, of the old tombs, besides being what they were, to her were ruins of the old Marshalsea - ruins of her own old life - ruins of the faces and forms that of old peopled it - ruins of its loves, hopes, cares, and joys. Two ruined spheres of action and suffering were before the solitary girl often sitting on some broken fragment; and in the lonely places, under the blue sky, she saw them both together.

Up, then, would come Mrs General; taking all the colour out of everything, as Nature and Art had taken it out of herself; writing Prunes and Prism, in Mr Eustace's text, wherever she could lay a hand; looking everywhere for Mr Eustace and company, and seeing nothing else; scratching up the driest little bones of antiquity, and bolting them whole without any human visitings - like a Ghoule in gloves.