

Chapter LII - Getting On

The newly married pair, on their arrival in Harley Street, Cavendish Square, London, were received by the Chief Butler. That great man was not interested in them, but on the whole endured them. People must continue to be married and given in marriage, or Chief Butlers would not be wanted. As nations are made to be taxed, so families are made to be butlered. The Chief Butler, no doubt, reflected that the course of nature required the wealthy population to be kept up, on his account.

He therefore condescended to look at the carriage from the Hall- door without frowning at it, and said, in a very handsome way, to one of his men, 'Thomas, help with the luggage.' He even escorted the Bride upstairs into Mr Merdle's presence; but this must be considered as an act of homage to the sex (of which he was an admirer, being notoriously captivated by the charms of a certain Duchess), and not as a committal of himself with the family.

Mr Merdle was slinking about the hearthrug, waiting to welcome Mrs Sparkler. His hand seemed to retreat up his sleeve as he advanced to do so, and he gave her such a superfluity of coat-cuff that it was like being received by the popular conception of Guy Fawkes. When he put his lips to hers, besides, he took himself into custody by the wrists, and backed himself among the ottomans and chairs and tables as if he were his own Police officer, saying to himself, 'Now, none of that! Come! I've got you, you know, and you go quietly along with me!'

Mrs Sparkler, installed in the rooms of state - the innermost sanctuary of down, silk, chintz, and fine linen - felt that so far her triumph was good, and her way made, step by step. On the day before her marriage, she had bestowed on Mrs Merdle's maid with an air of gracious indifference, in Mrs Merdle's presence, a trifling little keepsake (bracelet, bonnet, and two dresses, all new) about four times as valuable as the present formerly made by Mrs Merdle to her. She was now established in Mrs Merdle's own rooms, to which some extra touches had been given to render them more worthy of her occupation. In her mind's eye, as she lounged there, surrounded by every luxurious accessory that wealth could obtain or invention devise, she saw the fair bosom that beat in unison with the exultation of her thoughts, competing with the bosom that had been famous so long, outshining it, and deposing it. Happy? Fanny must have been happy. No more wishing one's self dead now.

The Courier had not approved of Mr Dorrit's staying in the house of a friend, and had preferred to take him to an hotel in Brook Street, Grosvenor Square. Mr Merdle ordered his carriage to be ready early in the morning that he might wait upon Mr Dorrit immediately after

breakfast. Bright the carriage looked, sleek the horses looked, gleaming the harness looked, luscious and lasting the liveries looked. A rich, responsible turn-out. An equipage for a Merdle. Early people looked after it as it rattled along the streets, and said, with awe in their breath, 'There he goes!'

There he went, until Brook Street stopped him. Then, forth from its magnificent case came the jewel; not lustrous in itself, but quite the contrary.

Commotion in the office of the hotel. Merdle! The landlord, though a gentleman of a haughty spirit who had just driven a pair of thoroughbred horses into town, turned out to show him up- stairs. The clerks and servants cut him off by back-passages, and were found accidentally hovering in doorways and angles, that they might look upon him. Merdle! O ye sun, moon, and stars, the great man! The rich man, who had in a manner revised the New Testament, and already entered into the kingdom of Heaven. The man who could have any one he chose to dine with him, and who had made the money!

As he went up the stairs, people were already posted on the lower stairs, that his shadow might fall upon them when he came down. So were the sick brought out and laid in the track of the Apostle - who had NOT got into the good society, and had NOT made the money.

Mr Dorrit, dressing-gowned and newspapered, was at his breakfast. The Courier, with agitation in his voice, announced 'Miss Mairdale!' Mr Dorrit's overwrought heart bounded as he leaped up.

'Mr Merdle, this is - ha - indeed an honour. Permit me to express the - hum - sense, the high sense, I entertain of this - ha hum - highly gratifying act of attention. I am well aware, sir, of the many demands upon your time, and its - ha - enormous value,' Mr Dorrit could not say enormous roundly enough for his own satisfaction. 'That you should - ha - at this early hour, bestow any of your priceless time upon me, is - ha - a compliment that I acknowledge with the greatest esteem.' Mr Dorrit positively trembled in addressing the great man.

Mr Merdle uttered, in his subdued, inward, hesitating voice, a few sounds that were to no purpose whatever; and finally said, 'I am glad to see you, sir.'

'You are very kind,' said Mr Dorrit. 'Truly kind.' By this time the visitor was seated, and was passing his great hand over his exhausted forehead. 'You are well, I hope, Mr Merdle?'

'I am as well as I - yes, I am as well as I usually am,' said Mr Merdle.

'Your occupations must be immense.'

'Tolerably so. But - Oh dear no, there's not much the matter with me,' said Mr Merdle, looking round the room.

'A little dyspeptic?' Mr Dorrit hinted.

'Very likely. But I - Oh, I am well enough,' said Mr Merdle.

There were black traces on his lips where they met, as if a little train of gunpowder had been fired there; and he looked like a man who, if his natural temperament had been quicker, would have been very feverish that morning. This, and his heavy way of passing his hand over his forehead, had prompted Mr Dorrit's solicitous inquiries.

'Mrs Merdle,' Mr Dorrit insinuatingly pursued, 'I left, as you will be prepared to hear, the - ha - observed of all observers, the - hum - admired of all admirers, the leading fascination and charm of Society in Rome. She was looking wonderfully well when I quitted it.'

'Mrs Merdle,' said Mr Merdle, 'is generally considered a very attractive woman. And she is, no doubt. I am sensible of her being SO.'

'Who can be otherwise?' responded Mr Dorrit.

Mr Merdle turned his tongue in his closed mouth - it seemed rather a stiff and unmanageable tongue - moistened his lips, passed his hand over his forehead again, and looked all round the room again, principally under the chairs.

'But,' he said, looking Mr Dorrit in the face for the first time, and immediately afterwards dropping his eyes to the buttons of Mr Dorrit's waistcoat; 'if we speak of attractions, your daughter ought to be the subject of our conversation. She is extremely beautiful. Both in face and figure, she is quite uncommon. When the young people arrived last night, I was really surprised to see such charms.'

Mr Dorrit's gratification was such that he said - ha - he could not refrain from telling Mr Merdle verbally, as he had already done by letter, what honour and happiness he felt in this union of their families. And he offered his hand. Mr Merdle looked at the hand for a little while, took it on his for a moment as if his were a yellow salver or fish-slice, and then returned it to Mr Dorrit.

'I thought I would drive round the first thing,' said Mr Merdle, 'to offer my services, in case I can do anything for you; and to say that I hope you will at least do me the honour of dining with me to-day, and every day when you are not better engaged during your stay in town.'

Mr Dorrit was enraptured by these attentions.

'Do you stay long, sir?'

'I have not at present the intention,' said Mr Dorrit, 'of - ha - exceeding a fortnight.'

'That's a very short stay, after so long a journey,' returned Mr Merdle.

'Hum. Yes,' said Mr Dorrit. 'But the truth is - ha - my dear Mr Merdle, that I find a foreign life so well suited to my health and taste, that I - hum - have but two objects in my present visit to London. First, the - ha - the distinguished happiness and - ha - privilege which I now enjoy and appreciate; secondly, the arrangement - hum - the laying out, that is to say, in the best way, of - ha, hum - my money.'

'Well, sir,' said Mr Merdle, after turning his tongue again, 'if I can be of any use to you in that respect, you may command me.'

Mr Dorrit's speech had had more hesitation in it than usual, as he approached the ticklish topic, for he was not perfectly clear how so exalted a potentate might take it. He had doubts whether reference to any individual capital, or fortune, might not seem a wretchedly retail affair to so wholesale a dealer. Greatly relieved by Mr Merdle's affable offer of assistance, he caught at it directly, and heaped acknowledgments upon him.

'I scarcely - ha - dared,' said Mr Dorrit, 'I assure you, to hope for so - hum - vast an advantage as your direct advice and assistance. Though of course I should, under any circumstances, like the - ha, hum - rest of the civilised world, have followed in Mr Merdle's train.'

'You know we may almost say we are related, sir,' said Mr Merdle, curiously interested in the pattern of the carpet, 'and, therefore, you may consider me at your service.'

'Ha. Very handsome, indeed!' cried Mr Dorrit. 'Ha. Most handsome!'

'It would not,' said Mr Merdle, 'be at the present moment easy for what I may call a mere outsider to come into any of the good things - of course I speak of my own good things - '

'Of course, of course!' cried Mr Dorrit, in a tone implying that there were no other good things.

' - Unless at a high price. At what we are accustomed to term a very long figure.'

Mr Dorrit laughed in the buoyancy of his spirit. Ha, ha, ha! Long figure. Good. Ha. Very expressive to be sure!

'However,' said Mr Merdle, 'I do generally retain in my own hands the power of exercising some preference - people in general would be pleased to call it favour - as a sort of compliment for my care and trouble.' 'And public spirit and genius,' Mr Dorrit suggested.

Mr Merdle, with a dry, swallowing action, seemed to dispose of those qualities like a bolus; then added, 'As a sort of return for it. I will see, if you please, how I can exert this limited power (for people are jealous, and it is limited), to your advantage.' 'You are very good,' replied Mr Dorrit. 'You are very good.'

'Of course,' said Mr Merdle, 'there must be the strictest integrity and uprightness in these transactions; there must be the purest faith between man and man; there must be unimpeached and unimpeachable confidence; or business could not be carried on.' Mr Dorrit hailed these generous sentiments with fervour.

'Therefore,' said Mr Merdle, 'I can only give you a preference to a certain extent.'

'I perceive. To a defined extent,' observed Mr Dorrit.

'Defined extent. And perfectly above-board. As to my advice, however,' said Mr Merdle, 'that is another matter. That, such as it is - '

Oh! Such as it was! (Mr Dorrit could not bear the faintest appearance of its being depreciated, even by Mr Merdle himself.)

' - That, there is nothing in the bonds of spotless honour between myself and my fellow-man to prevent my parting with, if I choose. And that,' said Mr Merdle, now deeply intent upon a dust-cart that was passing the windows, 'shall be at your command whenever you think proper.'

New acknowledgments from Mr Dorrit. New passages of Mr Merdle's hand over his forehead. Calm and silence. Contemplation of Mr Dorrit's waistcoat buttons by Mr Merdle.

'My time being rather precious,' said Mr Merdle, suddenly getting up, as if he had been waiting in the interval for his legs and they had just come, 'I must be moving towards the City. Can I take you anywhere, sir? I shall be happy to set you down, or send you on. My carriage is at your disposal.'

Mr Dorrit bethought himself that he had business at his banker's. His banker's was in the City. That was fortunate; Mr Merdle would take him into the City. But, surely, he might not detain Mr Merdle while he assumed his coat? Yes, he might and must; Mr Merdle insisted on it. So Mr Dorrit, retiring into the next room, put himself under the hands of his valet, and in five minutes came back glorious.

Then said Mr Merdle, 'Allow me, sir. Take my arm!' Then leaning on Mr Merdle's arm, did Mr Dorrit descend the staircase, seeing the worshippers on the steps, and feeling that the light of Mr Merdle shone by reflection in himself. Then the carriage, and the ride into the City; and the people who looked at them; and the hats that flew off grey heads; and the general bowing and crouching before this wonderful mortal the like of which prostration of spirit was not to be seen - no, by high Heaven, no! It may be worth thinking of by Fawners of all denominations - in Westminster Abbey and Saint Paul's Cathedral put together, on any Sunday in the year. It was a rapturous dream to Mr Dorrit to find himself set aloft in this public car of triumph, making a magnificent progress to that befitting destination, the golden Street of the Lombards.

There Mr Merdle insisted on alighting and going his way a-foot, and leaving his poor equipage at Mr Dorrit's disposition. So the dream increased in rapture when Mr Dorrit came out of the bank alone, and people looked at him in default of Mr Merdle, and when, with the ears of his mind, he heard the frequent exclamation as he rolled glibly along, 'A wonderful man to be Mr Merdle's friend!'

At dinner that day, although the occasion was not foreseen and provided for, a brilliant company of such as are not made of the dust of the earth, but of some superior article for the present unknown, shed their lustrous benediction upon Mr Dorrit's daughter's marriage. And Mr Dorrit's daughter that day began, in earnest, her competition with that woman not present; and began it so well that Mr Dorrit could all but have taken his affidavit, if required, that Mrs Sparkler had all her life been lying at full length in the lap of luxury, and had never heard of such a rough word in the English tongue as Marshalsea.

Next day, and the day after, and every day, all graced by more dinner company, cards descended on Mr Dorrit like theatrical snow. As the friend and relative by marriage of the illustrious Merdle, Bar, Bishop, Treasury, Chorus, Everybody, wanted to make or improve Mr Dorrit's acquaintance. In Mr Merdle's heap of offices in the City, when Mr Dorrit appeared at any of them on his business taking him Eastward (which it frequently did, for it throve amazingly), the name of Dorrit was always a passport to the great presence of Merdle. So the dream

increased in rapture every hour, as Mr Dorrit felt increasingly sensible that this connection had brought him forward indeed.

Only one thing sat otherwise than auriferously, and at the same time lightly, on Mr Dorrit's mind. It was the Chief Butler. That stupendous character looked at him, in the course of his official looking at the dinners, in a manner that Mr Dorrit considered questionable. He looked at him, as he passed through the hall and up the staircase, going to dinner, with a glazed fixedness that Mr Dorrit did not like. Seated at table in the act of drinking, Mr Dorrit still saw him through his wine-glass, regarding him with a cold and ghostly eye. It misgave him that the Chief Butler must have known a Collegian, and must have seen him in the College - perhaps had been presented to him. He looked as closely at the Chief Butler as such a man could be looked at, and yet he did not recall that he had ever seen him elsewhere. Ultimately he was inclined to think that there was no reverence in the man, no sentiment in the great creature. But he was not relieved by that; for, let him think what he would, the Chief Butler had him in his supercilious eye, even when that eye was on the plate and other table-garniture; and he never let him out of it. To hint to him that this confinement in his eye was disagreeable, or to ask him what he meant, was an act too daring to venture upon; his severity with his employers and their visitors being terrific, and he never permitting himself to be approached with the slightest liberty.