Chapter XIV

Having the Misfortune to treat of none but Common People, is necessarily of a Mean and Vulgar Character

In that quarter of London in which Golden Square is situated, there is a bygone, faded, tumble-down street, with two irregular rows of tall meagre houses, which seem to have stared each other out of countenance years ago. The very chimneys appear to have grown dismal and melancholy, from having had nothing better to look at than the chimneys over the way. Their tops are battered, and broken, and blackened with smoke; and, here and there, some taller stack than the rest, inclining heavily to one side, and toppling over the roof, seems to mediate taking revenge for half a century's neglect, by crushing the inhabitants of the garrets beneath.

The fowls who peck about the kennels, jerking their bodies hither and thither with a gait which none but town fowls are ever seen to adopt, and which any country cock or hen would be puzzled to understand, are perfectly in keeping with the crazy habitations of their owners. Dingy, ill-plumed, drowsy flutterers, sent, like many of the neighbouring children, to get a livelihood in the streets, they hop, from stone to stone, in forlorn search of some hidden eatable in the mud, and can scarcely raise a crow among them. The only one with anything approaching to a voice, is an aged bantam at the baker's; and even he is hoarse, in consequence of bad living in his last place.

To judge from the size of the houses, they have been, at one time, tenanted by persons of better condition than their present occupants; but they are now let off, by the week, in floors or rooms, and every door has almost as many plates or bell-handles as there are apartments within. The windows are, for the same reason, sufficiently diversified in appearance, being ornamented with every variety of common blind and curtain that can easily be imagined; while every doorway is blocked up, and rendered nearly impassable, by a motley collection of children and porter pots of all sizes, from the baby in arms and the half-pint pot, to the full-grown girl and half-gallon can.

In the parlour of one of these houses, which was perhaps a thought dirtier than any of its neighbours; which exhibited more bell-handles, children, and porter pots, and caught in all its freshness the first gust of the thick black smoke that poured forth, night and day, from a large brewery hard by; hung a bill, announcing that there was yet one room to let within its walls, though on what story the vacant room could be - regard being had to the outward tokens of many lodgers which the whole front displayed, from the mangle in the kitchen window to the flower-pots on the parapet - it would have been beyond the power of a calculating boy to discover.

The common stairs of this mansion were bare and carpetless; but a curious visitor who had to climb his way to the top, might have observed that there were not wanting indications of the progressive poverty of the inmates, although their rooms were shut. Thus, the first-floor lodgers, being flush of furniture, kept an old mahogany table - real mahogany - on the landing-place outside, which was only taken in, when occasion required. On the second story, the spare furniture dwindled down to a couple of old deal chairs, of which one, belonging to the back-room, was shorn of a leg, and bottomless. The story above, boasted no greater excess than a worm-eaten wash-tub; and the garret landing-place displayed no costlier articles than two crippled pitchers, and some broken blacking-bottles.

It was on this garret landing-place that a hard-featured square-faced man, elderly and shabby, stopped to unlock the door of the front attic, into which, having surmounted the task of turning the rusty key in its still more rusty wards, he walked with the air of legal owner.

This person wore a wig of short, coarse, red hair, which he took off with his hat, and hung upon a nail. Having adopted in its place a dirty cotton nightcap, and groped about in the dark till he found a remnant of candle, he knocked at the partition which divided the two garrets, and inquired, in a loud voice, whether Mr Noggs had a light.

The sounds that came back were stifled by the lath and plaster, and it seemed moreover as though the speaker had uttered them from the interior of a mug or other drinking vessel; but they were in the voice of Newman, and conveyed a reply in the affirmative.

'A nasty night, Mr Noggs!' said the man in the nightcap, stepping in to light his candle.

'Does it rain?' asked Newman.

'Does it?' replied the other pettishly. 'I am wet through.'

'It doesn't take much to wet you and me through, Mr Crowl,' said Newman, laying his hand upon the lappel of his threadbare coat.

'Well; and that makes it the more vexatious,' observed Mr Crowl, in the same pettish tone.

Uttering a low querulous growl, the speaker, whose harsh countenance was the very epitome of selfishness, raked the scanty fire nearly out of the grate, and, emptying the glass which Noggs had pushed towards him, inquired where he kept his coals.

Newman Noggs pointed to the bottom of a cupboard, and Mr Crowl, seizing the shovel, threw on half the stock: which Noggs very deliberately took off again, without saying a word.

'You have not turned saving, at this time of day, I hope?' said Crowl.

Newman pointed to the empty glass, as though it were a sufficient refutation of the charge, and briefly said that he was going downstairs to supper.

'To the Kenwigses?' asked Crowl.

Newman nodded assent.

'Think of that now!' said Crowl. 'If I didn't - thinking that you were certain not to go, because you said you wouldn't - tell Kenwigs I couldn't come, and make up my mind to spend the evening with you!'

'I was obliged to go,' said Newman. 'They would have me.'

'Well; but what's to become of me?' urged the selfish man, who never thought of anybody else. 'It's all your fault. I'll tell you what - I'll sit by your fire till you come back again.'

Newman cast a despairing glance at his small store of fuel, but, not having the courage to say no - a word which in all his life he never had said at the right time, either to himself or anyone else - gave way to the proposed arrangement. Mr Crowl immediately went about making himself as comfortable, with Newman Nogg's means, as circumstances would admit of his being made.

The lodgers to whom Crowl had made allusion under the designation of 'the Kenwigses,' were the wife and olive branches of one Mr Kenwigs, a turner in ivory, who was looked upon as a person of some consideration on the premises, inasmuch as he occupied the whole of the first floor, comprising a suite of two rooms. Mrs Kenwigs, too, was quite a lady in her manners, and of a very genteel family, having an uncle who collected a water-rate; besides which distinction, the two eldest of her little girls went twice a week to a dancing school in the neighbourhood, and had flaxen hair, tied with blue ribbons, hanging in luxuriant pigtails down their backs; and wore little white trousers with frills round the ankles - for all of which reasons, and many more equally valid but too numerous to mention, Mrs Kenwigs was considered a very desirable person to know, and was the constant theme of all the gossips in the street, and even three or four doors round the corner at both ends.

It was the anniversary of that happy day on which the Church of England as by law established, had bestowed Mrs Kenwigs upon Mr Kenwigs; and in grateful commemoration of the same, Mrs Kenwigs had invited a few select friends to cards and a supper in the first floor, and had put on a new gown to receive them in: which gown, being of a flaming colour and made upon a juvenile principle, was so successful that Mr Kenwigs said the eight years of matrimony and the five children seemed all a dream, and Mrs Kenwigs younger and more blooming than on the very first Sunday he had kept company with her.

Beautiful as Mrs Kenwigs looked when she was dressed though, and so stately that you would have supposed she had a cook and housemaid at least, and nothing to do but order them about, she had a world of trouble with the preparations; more, indeed, than she, being of a delicate and genteel constitution, could have sustained, had not the pride of housewifery upheld her. At last, however, all the things that had to be got together were got together, and all the things that had to be got out of the way were got out of the way, and everything was ready, and the collector himself having promised to come, fortune smiled upon the occasion.

The party was admirably selected. There were, first of all, Mr Kenwigs and Mrs Kenwigs, and four olive Kenwigses who sat up to supper; firstly, because it was but right that they should have a treat on such a day; and secondly, because their going to bed, in presence of the company, would have been inconvenient, not to say improper. Then, there was a young lady who had made Mrs Kenwigs's dress, and who - it was the most convenient thing in the world - living in the two-pair back, gave up her bed to the baby, and got a little girl to watch it. Then, to match this young lady, was a young man, who had known Mr Kenwigs when he was a bachelor, and was much esteemed by the ladies, as bearing the reputation of a rake. To these were added a newly-married couple, who had visited Mr and Mrs Kenwigs in their courtship; and a sister of Mrs Kenwigs's, who was quite a beauty; besides whom, there was another young man, supposed to entertain honourable designs upon the lady last mentioned; and Mr Noggs, who was a genteel person to ask, because he had been a gentleman once. There were also an elderly lady from the back-parlour, and one more young lady, who, next to the collector, perhaps was the great lion of the party, being the daughter of a theatrical fireman, who 'went on' in the pantomime, and had the greatest turn for the stage that was ever known, being able to sing and recite in a manner that brought the tears into Mrs Kenwigs's eyes. There was only one drawback upon the pleasure of seeing such friends, and that was, that the lady in the back-parlour, who was very fat, and turned of sixty, came in a low book-muslin dress and short kid gloves, which so exasperated Mrs Kenwigs, that that lady assured her visitors, in private, that if it

hadn't happened that the supper was cooking at the back-parlour grate at that moment, she certainly would have requested its representative to withdraw.

'My dear,' said Mr Kenwigs, 'wouldn't it be better to begin a round game?'

'Kenwigs, my dear,' returned his wife, 'I am surprised at you. Would you begin without my uncle?'

'I forgot the collector,' said Kenwigs; 'oh no, that would never do.'

'He's so particular,' said Mrs Kenwigs, turning to the other married lady, 'that if we began without him, I should be out of his will for ever.'

'Dear!' cried the married lady.

'You've no idea what he is,' replied Mrs Kenwigs; 'and yet as good a creature as ever breathed.'

'The kindest-hearted man as ever was,' said Kenwigs.

'It goes to his heart, I believe, to be forced to cut the water off, when the people don't pay,' observed the bachelor friend, intending a joke.

'George,' said Mr Kenwigs, solemnly, 'none of that, if you please.'

'It was only my joke,' said the friend, abashed.

'George,' rejoined Mr Kenwigs, 'a joke is a wery good thing - a wery good thing - but when that joke is made at the expense of Mrs Kenwigs's feelings, I set my face against it. A man in public life expects to be sneered at - it is the fault of his elewated sitiwation, and not of himself. Mrs Kenwigs's relation is a public man, and that he knows, George, and that he can bear; but putting Mrs Kenwigs out of the question (if I COULD put Mrs Kenwigs out of the question on such an occasion as this), I have the honour to be connected with the collector by marriage; and I cannot allow these remarks in my - ' Mr Kenwigs was going to say 'house,' but he rounded the sentence with 'apartments'.

At the conclusion of these observations, which drew forth evidences of acute feeling from Mrs Kenwigs, and had the intended effect of impressing the company with a deep sense of the collector's dignity, a ring was heard at the bell.

'That's him,' whispered Mr Kenwigs, greatly excited. 'Morleena, my dear, run down and let your uncle in, and kiss him directly you get the door open. Hem! Let's be talking.'

Adopting Mr Kenwigs's suggestion, the company spoke very loudly, to look easy and unembarrassed; and almost as soon as they had begun to do so, a short old gentleman in drabs and gaiters, with a face that might have been carved out of LIGNUM VITAE, for anything that appeared to the contrary, was led playfully in by Miss Morleena Kenwigs, regarding whose uncommon Christian name it may be here remarked that it had been invented and composed by Mrs Kenwigs previous to her first lying-in, for the special distinction of her eldest child, in case it should prove a daughter.

'Oh, uncle, I am SO glad to see you,' said Mrs Kenwigs, kissing the collector affectionately on both cheeks. 'So glad!'

'Many happy returns of the day, my dear,' replied the collector, returning the compliment.

Now, this was an interesting thing. Here was a collector of water-rates, without his book, without his pen and ink, without his double knock, without his intimidation, kissing - actually kissing - an agreeable female, and leaving taxes, summonses, notices that he had called, or announcements that he would never call again, for two quarters' due, wholly out of the question. It was pleasant to see how the company looked on, quite absorbed in the sight, and to behold the nods and winks with which they expressed their gratification at finding so much humanity in a tax-gatherer.

'Where will you sit, uncle?' said Mrs Kenwigs, in the full glow of family pride, which the appearance of her distinguished relation occasioned.

'Anywheres, my dear,' said the collector, 'I am not particular.'

Not particular! What a meek collector! If he had been an author, who knew his place, he couldn't have been more humble.

'Mr Lillyvick,' said Kenwigs, addressing the collector, 'some friends here, sir, are very anxious for the honour of - thank you - Mr and Mrs Cutler, Mr Lillyvick.'

'Proud to know you, sir,' said Mr Cutler; 'I've heerd of you very often.' These were not mere words of ceremony; for, Mr Cutler, having kept house in Mr Lillyvick's parish, had heard of him very often indeed. His attention in calling had been quite extraordinary.

'George, you know, I think, Mr Lillyvick,' said Kenwigs; 'lady from downstairs - Mr Lillyvick. Mr Snewkes - Mr Lillyvick. Miss Green - Mr Lillyvick. Mr Lillyvick - Miss Petowker of the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane. Very glad to make two public characters acquainted! Mrs Kenwigs, my dear, will you sort the counters?'

Mrs Kenwigs, with the assistance of Newman Noggs, (who, as he performed sundry little acts of kindness for the children, at all times and seasons, was humoured in his request to be taken no notice of, and was merely spoken about, in a whisper, as the decayed gentleman), did as he was desired; and the greater part of the guests sat down to speculation, while Newman himself, Mrs Kenwigs, and Miss Petowker of the Theatre Royal Drury Lane, looked after the supper-table.

While the ladies were thus busying themselves, Mr Lillyvick was intent upon the game in progress, and as all should be fish that comes to a water-collector's net, the dear old gentleman was by no means scrupulous in appropriating to himself the property of his neighbours, which, on the contrary, he abstracted whenever an opportunity presented itself, smiling good-humouredly all the while, and making so many condescending speeches to the owners, that they were delighted with his amiability, and thought in their hearts that he deserved to be Chancellor of the Exchequer at least.

After a great deal of trouble, and the administration of many slaps on the head to the infant Kenwigses, whereof two of the most rebellious were summarily banished, the cloth was laid with much elegance, and a pair of boiled fowls, a large piece of pork, apple-pie, potatoes and greens, were served; at sight of which, the worthy Mr Lillyvick vented a great many witticisms, and plucked up amazingly: to the immense delight and satisfaction of the whole body of admirers.

Very well and very fast the supper went off; no more serious difficulties occurring, than those which arose from the incessant demand for clean knives and forks; which made poor Mrs Kenwigs wish, more than once, that private society adopted the principle of schools, and required that every guest should bring his own knife, fork, and spoon; which doubtless would be a great accommodation in many cases, and to no one more so than to the lady and gentleman of the house, especially if the school principle were carried out to the full extent, and the articles were expected, as a matter of delicacy, not to be taken away again.

Everybody having eaten everything, the table was cleared in a most alarming hurry, and with great noise; and the spirits, whereat the eyes of Newman Noggs glistened, being arranged in order, with water both hot and cold, the party composed themselves for conviviality; Mr

Lillyvick being stationed in a large armchair by the fireside, and the four little Kenwigses disposed on a small form in front of the company with their flaxen tails towards them, and their faces to the fire; an arrangement which was no sooner perfected, than Mrs Kenwigs was overpowered by the feelings of a mother, and fell upon the left shoulder of Mr Kenwigs dissolved in tears.

'They are so beautiful!' said Mrs Kenwigs, sobbing.

'Oh, dear,' said all the ladies, 'so they are! it's very natural you should feel proud of that; but don't give way, don't.'

'I can - not help it, and it don't signify,' sobbed Mrs Kenwigs; 'oh! they're too beautiful to live, much too beautiful!'

On hearing this alarming presentiment of their being doomed to an early death in the flower of their infancy, all four little girls raised a hideous cry, and burying their heads in their mother's lap simultaneously, screamed until the eight flaxen tails vibrated again; Mrs Kenwigs meanwhile clasping them alternately to her bosom, with attitudes expressive of distraction, which Miss Petowker herself might have copied.

At length, the anxious mother permitted herself to be soothed into a more tranquil state, and the little Kenwigses, being also composed, were distributed among the company, to prevent the possibility of Mrs Kenwigs being again overcome by the blaze of their combined beauty. This done, the ladies and gentlemen united in prophesying that they would live for many, many years, and that there was no occasion at all for Mrs Kenwigs to distress herself; which, in good truth, there did not appear to be; the loveliness of the children by no means justifying her apprehensions.

'This day eight year,' said Mr Kenwigs after a pause. 'Dear me - ah!'

This reflection was echoed by all present, who said 'Ah!' first, and 'dear me,' afterwards.

'I was younger then,' tittered Mrs Kenwigs.

'No,' said the collector.

'Certainly not,' added everybody.

'I remember my niece,' said Mr Lillyvick, surveying his audience with a grave air; 'I remember her, on that very afternoon, when she first acknowledged to her mother a partiality for Kenwigs. 'Mother,' she says, 'I love him."

''Adore him,' I said, uncle,' interposed Mrs Kenwigs.

''Love him,' I think, my dear,' said the collector, firmly.

'Perhaps you are right, uncle,' replied Mrs Kenwigs, submissively. 'I thought it was 'adore."

''Love,' my dear,' retorted Mr Lillyvick. ''Mother,' she says, 'I love him!' 'What do I hear?' cries her mother; and instantly falls into strong conwulsions.'

A general exclamation of astonishment burst from the company.

'Into strong conwulsions,' repeated Mr Lillyvick, regarding them with a rigid look. 'Kenwigs will excuse my saying, in the presence of friends, that there was a very great objection to him, on the ground that he was beneath the family, and would disgrace it. You remember, Kenwigs?'

'Certainly,' replied that gentleman, in no way displeased at the reminiscence, inasmuch as it proved, beyond all doubt, what a high family Mrs Kenwigs came of.

'I shared in that feeling,' said Mr Lillyvick: 'perhaps it was natural; perhaps it wasn't.'

A gentle murmur seemed to say, that, in one of Mr Lillyvick's station, the objection was not only natural, but highly praiseworthy.

'I came round to him in time,' said Mr Lillyvick. 'After they were married, and there was no help for it, I was one of the first to say that Kenwigs must be taken notice of. The family DID take notice of him, in consequence, and on my representation; and I am bound to say - and proud to say - that I have always found him a very honest, well-behaved, upright, respectable sort of man. Kenwigs, shake hands.'

'I am proud to do it, sir,' said Mr Kenwigs.

'So am I, Kenwigs,' rejoined Mr Lillyvick.

'A very happy life I have led with your niece, sir,' said Kenwigs.

'It would have been your own fault if you had not, sir,' remarked Mr Lillyvick.

'Morleena Kenwigs,' cried her mother, at this crisis, much affected, 'kiss your dear uncle!' The young lady did as she was requested, and the three other little girls were successively hoisted up to the

collector's countenance, and subjected to the same process, which was afterwards repeated on them by the majority of those present.

'Oh dear, Mrs Kenwigs,' said Miss Petowker, 'while Mr Noggs is making that punch to drink happy returns in, do let Morleena go through that figure dance before Mr Lillyvick.'

'No, no, my dear,' replied Mrs Kenwigs, 'it will only worry my uncle.'

'It can't worry him, I am sure,' said Miss Petowker. 'You will be very much pleased, won't you, sir?'

'That I am sure I shall' replied the collector, glancing at the punch-mixer.

'Well then, I'll tell you what,' said Mrs Kenwigs, 'Morleena shall do the steps, if uncle can persuade Miss Petowker to recite us the Blood-Drinker's Burial, afterwards.'

There was a great clapping of hands and stamping of feet, at this proposition; the subject whereof, gently inclined her head several times, in acknowledgment of the reception.

'You know,' said Miss Petowker, reproachfully, 'that I dislike doing anything professional in private parties.'

'Oh, but not here!' said Mrs Kenwigs. 'We are all so very friendly and pleasant, that you might as well be going through it in your own room; besides, the occasion - '

'I can't resist that,' interrupted Miss Petowker; 'anything in my humble power I shall be delighted to do.'

Mrs Kenwigs and Miss Petowker had arranged a small PROGRAMME of the entertainments between them, of which this was the prescribed order, but they had settled to have a little pressing on both sides, because it looked more natural. The company being all ready, Miss Petowker hummed a tune, and Morleena danced a dance; having previously had the soles of her shoes chalked, with as much care as if she were going on the tight-rope. It was a very beautiful figure, comprising a great deal of work for the arms, and was received with unbounded applause.

'If I was blessed with a - a child - ' said Miss Petowker, blushing, 'of such genius as that, I would have her out at the Opera instantly.'

Mrs Kenwigs sighed, and looked at Mr Kenwigs, who shook his head, and observed that he was doubtful about it.

'Kenwigs is afraid,' said Mrs K.

'What of?' inquired Miss Petowker, 'not of her failing?'

'Oh no,' replied Mrs Kenwigs, 'but if she grew up what she is now, - only think of the young dukes and marquises.'

'Very right,' said the collector.

'Still,' submitted Miss Petowker, 'if she took a proper pride in herself, you know - '

'There's a good deal in that,' observed Mrs Kenwigs, looking at her husband.

'I only know - ' faltered Miss Petowker, - 'it may be no rule to be sure - but I have never found any inconvenience or unpleasantness of that sort.'

Mr Kenwigs, with becoming gallantry, said that settled the question at once, and that he would take the subject into his serious consideration. This being resolved upon, Miss Petowker was entreated to begin the Blood-Drinker's Burial; to which end, that young lady let down her back hair, and taking up her position at the other end of the room, with the bachelor friend posted in a corner, to rush out at the cue 'in death expire,' and catch her in his arms when she died raving mad, went through the performance with extraordinary spirit, and to the great terror of the little Kenwigses, who were all but frightened into fits.

The ecstasies consequent upon the effort had not yet subsided, and Newman (who had not been thoroughly sober at so late an hour for a long long time,) had not yet been able to put in a word of announcement, that the punch was ready, when a hasty knock was heard at the room-door, which elicited a shriek from Mrs Kenwigs, who immediately divined that the baby had fallen out of bed.

'Who is that?' demanded Mr Kenwigs, sharply.

'Don't be alarmed, it's only me,' said Crowl, looking in, in his nightcap. 'The baby is very comfortable, for I peeped into the room as I came down, and it's fast asleep, and so is the girl; and I don't think the candle will set fire to the bed-curtain, unless a draught was to get into the room - it's Mr Noggs that's wanted.'

'Me!' cried Newman, much astonished.

'Why, it IS a queer hour, isn't it?' replied Crowl, who was not best pleased at the prospect of losing his fire; 'and they are queer-looking people, too, all covered with rain and mud. Shall I tell them to go away?'

'No,' said Newman, rising. 'People? How many?'

'Two,' rejoined Crowl.

'Want me? By name?' asked Newman.

'By name,' replied Crowl. 'Mr Newman Noggs, as pat as need be.'

Newman reflected for a few seconds, and then hurried away, muttering that he would be back directly. He was as good as his word; for, in an exceedingly short time, he burst into the room, and seizing, without a word of apology or explanation, a lighted candle and tumbler of hot punch from the table, darted away like a madman.

'What the deuce is the matter with him?' exclaimed Crowl, throwing the door open. 'Hark! Is there any noise above?'

The guests rose in great confusion, and, looking in each other's faces with much perplexity and some fear, stretched their necks forward, and listened attentively.