

OUR MUTUAL FRIEND.

BY CHARLES DICKENS.

IN FOUR BOOKS.—BOOK THE SECOND. BIRDS OF A FEATHER.

CHAPTER IV.

CUPID PROMPTED.

TO use the cold language of the world, Mrs. Alfred Lammle rapidly improved the acquaintance of Miss Podsnap. To use the warm language of Mrs. Lammle, she and her sweet Georgiana soon became one: in heart, in mind, in sentiment, in soul.

Whenever Georgiana could escape from the thralldom of Podsnappery; could throw off the bed-clothes of the custard-colored phaeton, and get up; could shrink out of the range of her mother's rocking, and (so to speak) rescue her poor little frosty toes from being rocked over; she repaired to her friend, Mrs. Alfred Lammle. Mrs. Podsnap by no means objected. As a conscientiously "splendid woman," accustomed to overhear herself so denominated by elderly osteologists pursuing their studies in dinner society, Mrs. Podsnap could dispense with her daughter. Mr. Podsnap, for his part, on being informed where Georgiana was, swelled with patronage of the Lammles. That they, when unable to lay hold of him, should respectfully grasp at the hem of his mantle; that they, when they could not bask in the glory of him the sun, should take up with the pale reflected light of the watery young moon his daughter; appeared quite natural, becoming, and proper. It gave him a better opinion of the discretion of the Lammles than he had heretofore held, as showing that they appreciated the value of the connection. So, Georgiana repairing to her friend, Mr. Podsnap went out to dinner, and to dinner, and yet to dinner, arm in arm with Mrs. Podsnap: settling his obstinate head in his cravat and shirt-collar, much as if he were performing on the Pandean pipes, in his own honor, the triumphal march. See the conquering Podsnap comes, Sound the trumpets, beat the drums!

It was a trait in Mr. Podsnap's character (and in one form or other it will be generally seen to pervade the depths and shallows of Podsnappery), that he could not endure a hint of disparagement of any friend or acquaintance of his. "How dare you?" he would seem to say, in such a case. "What do you mean? I have licensed this person. This person has taken out my certificate. Through this person you strike at me, Podsnap the Great. And it is not that I particularly care for the person's dignity, but that I do most particularly care for Podsnap's." Hence, if any one in his presence had presumed to doubt the responsibility of the Lammles, he would have been mightily huffed. Not that any one did, for Veneering, M.P., was always the authority for their being very rich, and perhaps believed it. As indeed he might,

if he chose, for any thing he knew of the matter.

Mr. and Mrs. Lammle's house in Sackville Street, Piccadilly, was but a temporary residence. It had done well enough, they informed their friends, for Mr. Lammle when a bachelor, but it would not do now. So they were always looking at palatial residences in the best situations, and always very nearly taking or buying one, but never quite concluding the bargain. Hereby they made for themselves a shining little reputation apart. People said, on seeing a vacant palatial residence, "The very thing for the Lammles!" and wrote to the Lammles about it, and the Lammles always went to look at it, but unfortunately it never exactly answered. In short, they suffered so many disappointments that they began to think it would be necessary to build a palatial residence. And hereby they made another shining reputation; many persons of their acquaintance becoming by anticipation dissatisfied with their own houses, and envious of the non-existent Lammle structure.

The handsome fittings and furnishings of the house in Sackville Street were piled thick and high over the skeleton up stairs, and if it ever whispered from under its load of upholstery, "Here I am in the closet!" it was to very few ears, and certainly never to Miss Podsnap's. What Miss Podsnap was particularly charmed with, next to the graces of her friend, was the happiness of her friend's married life. This was frequently their theme of conversation.

"I am sure," said Miss Podsnap, "Mr. Lammle is like a lover. At least I—I should think he was."

"Georgiana, darling!" said Mrs. Lammle, holding up a forefinger, "Take care!"

"Oh my goodness me!" exclaimed Miss Podsnap, reddening. "What have I said now?"

"Alfred, you know," hinted Mrs. Lammle, playfully shaking her head. "You were never to say Mr. Lammle any more, Georgiana."

"Oh! Alfred, then. I am glad it's no worse. I was afraid I had said something shocking. I am always saying something wrong to ma."

"To me, Georgiana dearest?"

"No, not to you; you are not ma. I wish you were."

Mrs. Lammle bestowed a sweet and loving smile upon her friend, which Miss Podsnap returned as she best could. They sat at lunch in Mrs. Lammle's own boudoir.

"And so, dearest Georgiana, Alfred is like your notion of a lover?"

"I don't say that, Sophronia," Georgiana replied, beginning to conceal her elbows. "I haven't any notion of a lover. The dreadful

wretches that ma brings up at places to torment me are not lovers. I only mean that Mr.—”

“Again, dearest Georgiana?”

“That Alfred—”

“Sounds much better, darling.”

“—Loves you so. He always treats you with such delicate gallantry and attention. Now, don't he?”

“Truly, my dear,” said Mrs. Lammle, with a rather singular expression crossing her face. “I believe that he loves me fully as much as I love him.”

“Oh, what happiness!” exclaimed Miss Podsnap.

“But do you know, my Georgiana,” Mrs. Lammle resumed presently, “that there is something suspicious in your enthusiastic sympathy with Alfred's tenderness?”

“Good gracious no, I hope not!”

“Doesn't it rather suggest,” said Mrs. Lammle, archly, “that my Georgiana's little heart is—”

“Oh don't!” Miss Podsnap blushingly besought her. “Please don't! I assure you, Sophronia, that I only praise Alfred because he is your husband and so fond of you.”

Sophronia's glance was as if a rather new light broke in upon her. It shaded off into a cool smile, as she said, with her eyes upon her lunch, and her eyebrows raised:

“You are quite wrong, my love, in your guess at my meaning. What I insinuated was, that my Georgiana's little heart was growing conscious of a vacancy.”

“No, no, no,” said Georgiana. “I wouldn't have any body say any thing to me in that way for I don't know how many thousand pounds.”

“In what way, my Georgiana?” inquired Mrs. Lammle, still smiling coolly, with her eyes upon her lunch, and her eyebrows raised.

“You know,” returned poor little Miss Podsnap. “I think I should go out of my mind, Sophronia, with vexation and shyness and detestation, if any body did. It's enough for me to see how loving you and your husband are. That's a different thing. I couldn't bear to have any thing of that sort going on with myself. I should beg and pray to—to have the person taken away and trampled upon.”

Ah! here was Alfred. Having stolen in unobserved, he playfully leaned on the back of Sophronia's chair, and, as Miss Podsnap saw him, put one of Sophronia's wandering locks to his lips, and waved a kiss from it toward Miss Podsnap.

“What is this about husbands and detestations?” inquired the captivating Alfred.

“Why, they say,” returned his wife, “that listeners never hear any good of themselves; though you—but pray how long have you been here, Sir?”

“This instant arrived, my own.”

“Then I may go on—though if you had been here but a moment or two sooner, you would have heard your praises sounded by Georgiana.”

“Only, if they were to be called praises at all, which I really don't think they were,” explained Miss Podsnap in a flutter, “for being so devoted to Sophronia.”

“Sophronia!” murmured Alfred. “My life!” and kissed her hand. In return for which she kissed his watch-chain.

“But it was not I who was to be taken away and trampled upon, I hope?” said Alfred, drawing a seat between them.

“Ask Georgiana, my soul,” replied his wife.

Alfred touchingly appealed to Georgiana.

“Oh, it was nobody,” replied Miss Podsnap. “It was nonsense.”

“But if you are determined to know, Mr. Inquisitive Pet, as I suppose you are,” said the happy and fond Sophronia, smiling, “it was any one who should venture to aspire to Georgiana.”

“Sophronia, my love,” remonstrated Mr. Lammle, becoming graver, “you are not serious?”

“Alfred, my love,” returned his wife, “I dare say Georgiana was not, but I am.”

“Now this,” said Mr. Lammle, “shows the accidental combinations that there are in things! Could you believe, my Ownest, that I came in here with the name of an aspirant to our Georgiana on my lips?”

“Of course I could believe, Alfred,” said Mrs. Lammle, “any thing that *you* told me.”

“You dear one! And I any thing that *you* told me.”

How delightful those interchanges, and the looks accompanying them! Now, if the skeleton up stairs had taken that opportunity, for instance, of calling out “Here I am, suffocating in the closet!”

“I give you my honor, my dear Sophronia—”

“And I know what that is, love,” said she.

“You do, my darling—that I came into the room all but uttering young Fledgeby's name. Tell Georgiana, dearest, about young Fledgeby.”

“Oh no, don't! Please don't!” cried Miss Podsnap, putting her fingers in her ears. “I'd rather not.”

Mrs. Lammle laughed in her gayest manner, and, removing her Georgiana's unresisting hands, and playfully holding them in her own at arms-length, sometimes near together and sometimes wide apart, went on:

“You must know, you dearly beloved little goose, that once upon a time there was a certain person called young Fledgeby. And this young Fledgeby, who was of an excellent family and rich, was known to two other certain persons, dearly attached to one another and called Mr. and Mrs. Alfred Lammle. So this young Fledgeby, being one night at the play, there sees, with Mr. and Mrs. Alfred Lammle, a certain heroine called—”

“No, don't say Georgiana Podsnap!” pleaded that young lady almost in tears. “Please don't. Oh do do do say somebody else! Not Georgiana Podsnap. Oh don't, don't, don't!”

"No other," said Mrs. Lammle, laughing airily, and, full of affectionate blandishments, opening and closing Georgiana's arms like a pair of compasses, "than my little Georgiana Podsnap. So this young Fledgeby goes to that Alfred Lammle and says—"

"Oh ple-e-e-case don't!" cried Georgiana, as if the supplication were being squeezed out of her by powerful compression. "I so hate him for saying it!"

"For saying what, my dear?" laughed Mrs. Lammle.

"Oh, I don't know what he said," cried Georgiana, wildly, "but I hated him all the same for saying it."

"My dear," said Mrs. Lammle, always laughing in her most captivating way, "the poor young fellow only says that he is stricken all of a heap."

"Oh, what shall I ever do!" interposed Georgiana. "Oh my goodness what a Fool he must be!"

"—And implores to be asked to dinner, and to make a fourth at the play another time. And so he dines to-morrow and goes to the Opera with us. That's all. Except, my dear Georgiana—and what will you think of this!—that he is infinitely shyer than you, and far more afraid of you than you ever were of any one in all your days!"

In perturbation of mind Miss Podsnap still fumed and plucked at her hands a little, but could not help laughing at the notion of any body's being afraid of her. With that advantage, Sophronia flattered her and rallied her more successfully, and then the insinuating Alfred flattered her and rallied her, and promised that at any moment when she might require that service at his hands, he would take young Fledgeby out and trample on him. Thus it remained amicably understood that young Fledgeby was to come to admire, and that Georgiana was to come to be admired; and Georgiana with the entirely new sensation in her breast of having that prospect before her, and with many kisses from her dear Sophronia in present possession, preceded six feet one of discontented footman (an amount of the article that always came for her when she walked home) to her father's dwelling.

The happy pair being left together, Mrs. Lammle said to her husband:

"If I understand this girl, Sir, your dangerous fascinations have produced some effect upon her. I mention the conquest in good time because I apprehend your scheme to be more important to you than your vanity."

There was a mirror on the wall before them, and her eyes just caught him smirking in it. She gave the reflected image a look of the deepest disdain, and the image received it in the glass. Next moment they quietly eyed each other, as if they, the principals, had had no part in that expressive transaction.

It may have been that Mrs. Lammle tried in some manner to excuse her conduct to herself by depreciating the poor little victim of whom

she spoke with acrimonious contempt. It may have been too that in this she did not quite succeed, for it is very difficult to resist confidence, and she knew she had Georgiana's.

Nothing more was said between the happy pair. Perhaps conspirators who have once established an understanding, may not be overfond of repeating the terms and objects of their conspiracy. Next day came; came Georgiana; and came Fledgeby.

Georgiana had by this time seen a good deal of the house and its frequenters. As there was a certain handsome room with a billiard-table in it—on the ground-floor, eating out a backyard—which might have been Mr. Lammle's office, or library, but was called by neither name, but simply Mr. Lammle's room, so it would have been hard for stronger female heads than Georgiana's to determine whether its frequenters were men of pleasure or men of business. Between the room and the men there were strong points of general resemblance. Both were too gaudy, too slangey, too odorous of cigars, and too much given to horse-flesh; the latter characteristic being exemplified in the room by its decorations, and in the men by their conversation. High-stepping horses seemed necessary to all Mr. Lammle's friends—as necessary as their transaction of business together in a gipsy way at untimely hours of the morning and evening, and in rushes and snatches. There were friends who seemed to be always coming and going across the Channel, on errands about the Bourse, and Greek and Spanish and India and Mexican and par and premium and discount and three quarters and seven eighths. There were other friends who seemed to be always lolling and lounging in and out of the City, on questions of the Bourse, and Greek and Spanish and India and Mexican and par and premium and discount and three quarters and seven eighths. They were all feverish, boastful, and indefinitely loose; and they all ate and drank a great deal; and made bets in eating and drinking. They all spoke of sums of money, and only mentioned the sums and left the money to be understood: as "five and forty thousand Tom," or "Two hundred and twenty-two on every individual share in the lot Joe." They seemed to divide the world into two classes of people; people who were making enormous fortunes, and people who were being enormously ruined. They were always in a hurry, and yet seemed to have nothing tangible to do; except a few of them (these, mostly asthmatic and thick-lipped) who were forever demonstrating to the rest, with gold pencil-cases which they could hardly hold because of the big rings on their forefingers, how money was to be made. Lastly, they all swore at their grooms, and the grooms were not quite as respectful or complete as other men's grooms; seeming somehow to fall short of the groom point as their masters fell short of the gentleman point.

Young Fledgeby was none of these. Young Fledgeby had a peachy check, or a check com-

pounded of the peach and the red red red wall on which it grows, and was an awkward, sandy-haired, small-eyed youth, exceeding slim (his enemies would have said lanky), and prone to self-examination in the articles of whisker and mustache. While feeling for the whisker that he anxiously expected, Fledgeby underwent remarkable fluctuations of spirits, ranging along the whole scale from confidence to despair. There were times when he started, as exclaiming "By Jupiter here it is at last!" There were other times when, being equally depressed, he would be seen to shake his head, and give up hope. To see him at those periods leaning on a chimney-piece, like as on an urn containing the ashes of his ambition, with the cheek that would not sprout, upon the hand on which that cheek had forced conviction, was a distressing sight.

Not so was Fledgeby seen on this occasion. Arrayed in superb raiment, with his opera hat under his arm, he concluded his self-examination hopefully, awaited the arrival of Miss Podsnap, and talked small-talk with Mrs. Lammle. In facetious homage to the smallness of his talk, and the jerky nature of his manners, Fledgeby's familiars had agreed to confer upon him (behind his back) the honorary title of Fascination Fledgeby.

"Warm weather, Mrs. Lammle," said Fascination Fledgeby. Mrs. Lammle thought it scarcely as warm as it had been yesterday. "Perhaps not," said Fascination Fledgeby, with great quickness of repartee; "but I expect it will be devilish warm to-morrow."

He threw off another little scintillation. "Been out to-day, Mrs. Lammle?"

Mrs. Lammle answered, for a short drive.

"Some people," said Fascination Fledgeby, "are accustomed to take long drives; but it generally appears to me that if they make 'em too long, they overdo it."

Being in such feather, he might have surpassed himself in his next sally, had not Miss Podsnap been announced. Mrs. Lammle flew to embrace her darling little Georgy, and when the first transports were over, presented Mr. Fledgeby. Mr. Lammle came on the scene last, for he was always late, and so were the frequenters always late; all hands being bound to be made late, by private information about the Bourse, and Greek and Spanish and India and Mexican and par and premium and discount and three quarters and seven eighths.

A handsome little dinner was served immediately, and Mr. Lammle sat sparkling at his end of the table, with his servant behind his chair, and his ever-lingering doubts upon the subject of his wages behind himself. Mr. Lammle's utmost powers of sparkling were in requisition to-day, for Fascination Fledgeby and Georgiana not only struck each other speechless, but struck each other into astonishing attitudes; Georgiana, as she sat facing Fledgeby, making such efforts to conceal her elbows as were totally incompatible with the use of a knife

and fork; and Fledgeby, as he sat facing Georgiana, avoiding her countenance by every possible device, and betraying the discomposure of his mind in feeling for his whiskers with his spoon, his wine-glass, and his bread.

So Mr. and Mrs. Alfred Lammle had to prompt, and this is how they prompted.

"Georgiana," said Mr. Lammle, low and smiling, and sparkling all over, like a harlequin; "you are not in your usual spirits. Why are you not in your usual spirits, Georgiana?"

Georgiana faltered that she was much the same as she was in general; she was not aware of being different.

"Not aware of being different!" retorted Mr. Alfred Lammle. "You, my dear Georgiana! who were always so natural and unconstrained with us! who are such a relief from the crowd that are all alike! who are the embodiment of gentleness, simplicity, and reality!"

Miss Podsnap looked at the door, as if she entertained confused thoughts of taking refuge from these compliments in flight.

"Now, I will be judged," said Mr. Lammle, raising his voice a little, "by my friend Fledgeby."

"Oh DON'T!" Miss Podsnap faintly ejaculated: when Mrs. Lammle took the prompt-book.

"I beg your pardon, Alfred, my dear, but I can not part with Mr. Fledgeby quite yet; you must wait for him a moment. Mr. Fledgeby and I are engaged in a personal discussion."

Fledgeby must have conducted it on his side with immense art, for no appearance of uttering one syllable had escaped him.

"A personal discussion, Sophronia, my love? What discussion? Fledgeby, I am jealous. What discussion, Fledgeby?"

"Shall I tell him, Mr. Fledgeby?" asked Mrs. Lammle.

Trying to look as if he knew any thing about it, Fascination replied, "Yes, tell him."

"We were discussing then," said Mrs. Lammle, "if you *must* know, Alfred, whether Mr. Fledgeby was in his usual flow of spirits."

"Why, that is the very point, Sophronia, that Georgiana and I were discussing as to herself! What did Fledgeby say?"

"Oh, a likely thing, Sir, that I am going to tell you every thing, and be told nothing! What did Georgiana say?"

"Georgiana said she was doing her usual justice to herself to-day, and I said she was not."

"Precisely," exclaimed Mrs. Lammle, "what I said to Mr. Fledgeby."

Still, it wouldn't do. They would not look at one another. No, not even when the sparkling host proposed that the quartette should take an appropriately sparkling glass of wine. Georgiana looked from her wine-glass at Mr. Lammle and at Mrs. Lammle; but mightn't, couldn't, shouldn't, wouldn't, look at Mr. Fledgeby. Fascination looked from his wine-glass at Mrs. Lammle and at Mr. Lammle; but mightn't, couldn't, shouldn't, wouldn't, look at Georgiana.

More prompting was necessary. Cupid must be brought up to the mark. The manager had put him down in the bill for the part, and he must play it.

"Sophronia, my dear," said Mr. Lammle, "I don't like the color of your dress."

"I appeal," said Mrs. Lammle, "to Mr. Fledgeby."

"And I," said Mr. Lammle, "to Georgiana."

"Georgy, my love," remarked Mrs. Lammle aside to her dear girl, "I rely upon you not to go over to the opposition. Now, Mr. Fledgeby."

Fascination wished to know if the color were not called rose-color? Yes, said Mr. Lammle; actually he knew every thing; it was really rose-color. Fascination took rose-color to mean the color of roses. (In this he was very warmly supported by Mr. and Mrs. Lammle.) Fascination had heard the term Queen of Flowers applied to the Rose. Similarly, it might be said that the dress was the Queen of Dresses. ("Very happy, Fledgeby!" from Mr. Lammle.) Notwithstanding, Fascination's opinion was that we all had our eyes—or at least a large majority of us—and that—and—and his further opinion was several ands, with nothing beyond them.

"Oh, Mr. Fledgeby," said Mrs. Lammle, "to desert me in that way! Oh, Mr. Fledgeby, to abandon my poor dear injured rose and declare for blue!"

"Victory, victory!" cried Mr. Lammle; "your dress is condemned, my dear."

"But what," said Mrs. Lammle, stealing her affectionate hand toward her dear girl's, "what does Georgy say?"

"She says," replied Mr. Lammle, interpreting for her, "that in her eyes you look well in any color, Sophronia, and that if she had expected to be embarrassed by so pretty a compliment as she has received, she would have worn another color herself. Though I tell her, in reply, that it would not have saved her, for whatever color she had worn would have been Fledgeby's color. But what does Fledgeby say?"

"He says," replied Mrs. Lammle, interpreting for him, and patting the back of her dear girl's hand, as if it were Fledgeby who was patting it, "that it was no compliment, but a little natural act of homage that he couldn't resist. And," expressing more feeling as if it were more feeling on the part of Fledgeby, "he is right, he is right!"

Still, no not even now, would they look at one another. Seeming to gnash his sparkling teeth, studs, eyes, and buttons, all at once, Mr. Lammle secretly bent a dark frown on the two, expressive of an intense desire to bring them together by knocking their heads together.

"Have you heard this opera of to-night, Fledgeby?" he asked, stopping very short, to prevent himself from running on into "confound you."

"Why no, not exactly," said Fledgeby. "In fact I don't know a note of it."

"Neither do you know it, Georgy?" said Mrs. Lammle.

"N-no," replied Georgiana, faintly, under the sympathetic coincidence.

"Why, then," said Mrs. Lammle, charmed by the discovery which flowed from the premises, "you neither of you know it! How charming!"

Even the craven Fledgeby felt that the time was now come when he must strike a blow. He struck it by saying, partly to Mrs. Lammle and partly to the circumambient air, "I consider myself very fortunate in being reserved by—"

As he stopped dead, Mr. Lammle, making that gingerous bush of his whiskers to look out of, offered him the word "Destiny."

"No, I wasn't going to say that," said Fledgeby. "I was going to say Fate. I consider it very fortunate that Fate has written in the book of—in the book which is its own property—that I should go to that opera for the first time under the memorable circumstances of going with Miss Podsnap."

To which Georgiana replied, hooking her two little fingers in one another, and addressing the table-cloth, "Thank you, but I generally go with no one but you, Sophronia, and I like that very much."

Content perforce with this success for the time, Mr. Lammle let Miss Podsnap out of the room, as if he were opening her cage door, and Mrs. Lammle followed. Coffee being presently served up stairs, he kept a watch on Fledgeby until Miss Podsnap's cup was empty, and then directed him with his finger (as if that young gentleman were a slow Retriever) to go and fetch it. This feat he performed, not only without failure, but even with the original embellishment of informing Miss Podsnap that green tea was considered bad for the nerves. Though there Miss Podsnap unintentionally threw him out by faltering, "Oh, is it indeed? How does it act?" Which he was not prepared to elucidate.

The carriage announced, Mrs. Lammle said, "Don't mind me, Mr. Fledgeby, my skirts and cloak occupy both my hands, take Miss Podsnap." And he took her, and Mrs. Lammle went next, and Mr. Lammle went last, savagely following his little flock like a drover.

But he was all sparkle and glitter in the box at the Opera, and there he and his dear wife made a conversation between Fledgeby and Georgiana in the following ingenious and skillful manner. They sat in this order: Mrs. Lammle, Fascination Fledgeby, Georgiana, Mr. Lammle. Mrs. Lammle made leading remarks to Fledgeby, only requiring monosyllabic replies. Mr. Lammle did the like with Georgiana. At times Mrs. Lammle would lean forward to address Mr. Lammle to this purpose.

"Alfred, my dear, Mr. Fledgeby very justly says, apropos of the last scene, that true constancy would not require any such stimulant as the stage deems necessary." To which Mr. Lammle would reply, "Ay, Sophronia, my love,

but as Georgiana has observed to me, the lady had no sufficient reason to know the state of the gentleman's affections." To which Mrs. Lammle would rejoin, "Very true, Alfred; but Mr. Fledgeby points out," this. To which Alfred would demur: "Undoubtedly, Sophronia, but Georgiana acutely remarks," that. Through this device the two young people conversed at great length and committed themselves to a variety of delicate sentiments, without having once opened their lips save to say yes or no, and even that not to one another.

Fledgeby took his leave of Miss Podsnap at the carriage door, and the Lammles dropped her at her own home, and on the way Mrs. Lammle archly rallied her, in her fond and protecting manner, by saying at intervals, "Oh little Georgiana, little Georgiana!" Which was not much; but the tone added, "You have enslaved your Fledgeby."

And thus the Lammles got home at last, and the lady sat down moody and weary, looking at her dark lord engaged in a deed of violence with a bottle of soda-water as though he were wringing the neck of some unlucky creature and pouring its blood down his throat. As he wiped his dripping whiskers in an ogreish way, he met her eyes, and pausing, said, with no very gentle voice:

"Well?"

"Was such an absolute Booby necessary to the purpose?"

"I know what I am doing. He is no such dolt as you suppose."

"A genius, perhaps?"

"You sneer, perhaps; and you take a lofty air upon yourself, perhaps! But I tell you this:—when that young fellow's interest is concerned, he holds as tight as a horse-leech. When money is in question with that young fellow, he is a match for the Devil."

"Is he a match for you?"

"He is. Almost as good a one as you thought me for you. He has no quality of youth in him, but such as you have seen to-day. Touch him upon money, and you touch no booby then. He really is a dolt, I suppose, in other things; but it answers his one purpose very well."

"Has she money in her own right in any case?"

"Ay! she has money in her own right in any case. You have done so well to-day, Sophronia, that I answer the question, though you know I object to any such questions. You have done so well to-day, Sophronia, that you must be tired. Get to bed."

CHAPTER V.

MERCURY PROMPTING.

FLEDGEBY deserved Mr. Alfred Lammle's eulogium. He was the meanest cur existing, with a single pair of legs. And instinct (a word we all clearly understand) going largely on four

legs, and reason always on two, meanness on four legs never attains the perfection of meanness on two.

The father of this young gentleman had been a money-lender, who had transacted professional business with the mother of this young gentleman, when he, the latter, was waiting in the vast dark ante-chambers of the present world to be born. The lady, a widow, being unable to pay the money-lender, married him; and in due course, Fledgeby was summoned out of the vast dark ante-chambers to come and be presented to the Registrar-General. Rather a curious speculation how Fledgeby would otherwise have disposed of his leisure until Doomsday.

Fledgeby's mother offended her family by marrying Fledgeby's father. It is one of the easiest achievements in life to offend your family when your family want to get rid of you. Fledgeby's mother's family had been very much offended with her for being poor, and broke with her for becoming comparatively rich. Fledgeby's mother's family was the Snigsworth family. She had even the high honor to be cousin to Lord Snigsworth—so many times removed that the noble Earl would have had no compunction in removing her one time more and dropping her clean outside the cousinly pale; but cousin for all that.

Among her pre-matrimonial transactions with Fledgeby's father, Fledgeby's mother had raised money of him at a great disadvantage on a certain reversionary interest. The reversion falling in soon after they were married, Fledgeby's father laid hold of the cash for his separate use and benefit. This led to subjective differences of opinion, not to say objective interchanges of bootjacks, backgammon boards, and other domestic missiles, between Fledgeby's father and Fledgeby's mother, and those led to Fledgeby's mother spending as much money as she could, and to Fledgeby's father doing all he couldn't to restrain her. Fledgeby's childhood had been, in consequence, a stormy one; but the winds and the waves had gone down in the grave, and Fledgeby flourished alone.

He lived in chambers in the Albany, did Fledgeby, and maintained a spruce appearance. But his youthful fire was all composed of sparks from the grindstone; and as the sparks flew off, went out, and never warmed any thing, be sure that Fledgeby had his tools at the grindstone, and turned it with a wary eye.

Mr. Alfred Lammle came round to the Albany to breakfast with Fledgeby. Present on the table, one scanty pot of tea, one scanty loaf, two scanty pats of butter, two scanty rashers of bacon, two pitiful eggs, and an abundance of handsome china bought a second-hand bargain.

"What did you think of Georgiana?" asked Mr. Lammle.

"Why, I'll tell you," said Fledgeby, very liberately.

"Do, my boy."

"You misunderstand me," said Fledgeby.