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Chapter VI: Fading Away

Upon leaving Bounderby's house, Stephen meets Rachael and the old woman whom he had met some time before standing outside Bounderby's house. The old woman questions Stephen carefully about Bounderby's wife. When she hears that Louisa is young and handsome, she seems delighted. Again, Stephen wonders little about the woman's curiosity concerning Bounderby. He tells Rachael that he has been fired and that he plans to leave Coketown to seek employment elsewhere. He tries to make her understand that it would be better for her if she were not seen with him anymore. Later at his room, where he and Rachael are talking with the old woman, who calls herself Mrs. Pegler, Louisa and her brother Tom come to see Stephen. For the first time, Louisa has come to the home of one of the workers. She knows well the facts of supply and demand, the percentage of pauperism and the percentage of crime, and the results of the changes in wheat prices, but she knows nothing of the workers who make up these statistics. Indeed, to her they have been just so many units producing a given amount of goods in a given amount of time and space. For the first time, she realizes that these people are not mere statistics; they have pride; they struggle to exist. She learns, too, that if a worker is fired from his job, he will not be able to find another one in the same town.

As she talks with Stephen and Rachael, she feels compassion for them and offers Stephen money to help him find employment away from Coketown. When Stephen accepts two pounds from her, Louisa is impressed with his self-command.

Tom remains quiet while Louisa converses with Rachael and Stephen. When he sees his sister ready to depart, he asks Stephen to step out on the stairs with him while Louisa remains inside the room talking with Rachael. Tom persuades Stephen that he may be able to do something for the discharged worker during the few days remaining before his departure from Coketown in search of work. Tom hints strongly about a job as a light porter at the bank. Stephen wonders about, but does not question, the strange request made of him to wait outside the bank for a while each evening. Stephen agrees to grant the request. During his three days of fruitless waiting, Stephen is probably observed by Mrs. Sparsit and Bitzer. At the end of that period, having completed the work on his loom, Stephen takes leave of Rachael and departs from Coketown.

Dickens weaves into this chapter some third-person narration concerning the fate of the workers. He says, "Utilitarian economists, skeletons of schoolmasters, Commissioners of Fact, genteel and used-up infidels, gabblers of many little dog's-eared creeds, the poor you will have always with you." He urges these people to give the poor some consideration, lest they — when nothing is left except a bare existence — rise up and destroy their oppressors.

Chapter VII: Gunpowder

Harthouse, having performed his duties well, has gained the confidence of both Gradgrind and Bounderby. They are unaware of his objective: to make Louisa love him. His pursuit of Louisa is amusing to him, and he becomes a frequent caller at the Bounderby house. The reader learns that Bounderby, having foreclosed a mortgage on Nickits, who speculated too much, has moved his family into a country estate some fifteen miles from Coketown and accessible by railway. In the flower garden, Bounderby has planted cabbages; in the house filled with elegant furnishings and beautiful paintings, Boundery has continued his barrack-like existence.

The day of Harthouse's triumph arrives at Bounderby's country home, when he broaches to Louisa the subject of Tom's gambling by saying he is interested in Tom's well-being. He convinces Louisa of his deep interest in Tom. While they are walking back to the house, they encounter Tom carving a girl's name in a tree. Tom, in a bad mood, is barely civil to his sister, who has refused him a hundred pounds. When Louisa goes into the house, Harthouse remains in the garden with Tom. Persuaded by Harthouse, Tom discusses his troubles with him. When Harthouse asks Tom how much money he needs, Tom replies by saying it is too late for money. Harthouse persuades Tom to apologize to Louisa for his rudeness. When Tom does apologize, Louisa believes that the change in him is due to Harthouse's influence; her smile is for Harthouse now.

Chapter VIII: Explosion

When gunpowder is set off, an explosion always follows. Accordingly, this chapter is well named. It has a twofold purpose: to relate the bank robbery and to show Louisa's growing fondness for Harthouse and her continued awakening to the realization that something is missing from her life.

The chapter opens with Harthouse smoking his pipe and musing over the happenings of the preceding night. Pleased with himself at the turn of events, he did not dwell long on the consequence of what could happen as a result of his relationship with Louisa. Here the reader sees Dickens drawing an analogy between Harthouse and the devil. Harthouse departs early for a public occasion, at some distance from the Bounderby residence. When he returns to the Bounderby house at six, he is met by Bounderby, who informs him of the robbery at the bank. Whoever entered the bank did so with a false key; the key was later found in the street. One hundred and fifty pounds is the missing sum. At the Bounderby house are Bitzer, who is scolded for sleeping so soundly, and Mrs. Sparsit, who has come to stay because her nerves are too bad for her to remain in her apartment at the bank. Bounderby comments that even Louisa fainted when she learned of the robbery. The reader realizes almost immediately the identity of the thief, but Stephen Blackpool is suspected of the crime. Coming under suspicion as an accomplice is the old woman who is yet a mystery to all. When Harthouse inquires concerning Tom's whereabouts, Bounderby says he is helping the police.

As the evening progresses, Mrs. Sparsit obliges her employer by occasionally resorting to copious tears as she caters to Bounderby's whims — playing backgammon with him and preparing his sherry with lemon-peel and nutmeg — and watches Louisa and Harthouse, hoping for the worst.

Louisa lies sleepless waiting for Tom's return; she is concerned, for she suspects

that he – not Blackpool – has forced open the safe and used the false key, if indeed it were used. An hour past midnight she hears Tom enter. After giving him time to prepare for bed, she goes to his upstairs room, hoping that he will confide in her. They discuss their visit with Blackpool and Rachael and agree not to tell anyone about it. Tom lies to Louisa, telling her that he had taken Stephen outside on the stairs that night to tell him what good fortune he had in getting her help. Troubled, Louisa leaves her brother, who weeps, unable to confide in her or anyone else.

Chapter IX: Hearing the Last of It

"Hearing the Last of It" bears a dual meaning: the last of Louisa's determination to remain aloof from Harthouse and the last of Mrs. Sparsit's scheme to be again the respected housekeeper in the Bounderby house. This dual meaning is incomplete until the final chapter of this book.

In spite of her "bad nerves," Mrs. Sparsit reassumes all of her duties as housekeeper and hostess in Bounderby's house. Even though she refers to Louisa as Miss Gradgrind, Bounderby takes no offense. He is pathetic in his acceptance of the old regime – his tea poured, a ready ear, a smooth-running household, and an obvious, agreeable admirer of his talents as a "self-made man."

The reader realizes that Mrs. Sparsit is aware of the dangerous alienation of husband and wife. She kisses Bounderby's hand when she is in his presence but shakes her right-hand mitten at his picture in his absence and says, "Serve you right, you Noodle, and I am glad of it." Mrs. Sparsit's constant reference to Louisa as Miss Gradgrind lets the reader know also that no real marriage exists between the aging tyrant and the young woman just awakening to life.

Louisa is summoned home to see her gravely ill mother. Since her marriage, she has been home very few times. Now as she returns, she has no childhood memories to make her homecoming glad. Rather, she goes with a heavy, hardened kind of sorrow to find her mother rapidly sinking. In those last minutes of Mrs. Gradgrind's life, Louisa lets the reader know how much Sissy has influenced her and the youngest Gradgrind, child Jane.