

Our Mutual Friend

by

Charles Dickens

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Our Mutual Friend

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BOOK I

1. On the Look Out

In these times of ours, though concerning the exact year there is no need to be precise, a boat of dirty and disreputable appearance, with two figures in it, floated on the Thames, between Southwark bridge which is of iron, and London Bridge which is of stone, as an autumn evening was closing in.

The figures in this boat were those of a strong man with ragged grizzled hair and a sun-browned face, and a dark girl of nineteen or twenty, sufficiently like him to be recognizable as his daughter. The girl rowed, pulling a pair of sculls very easily; the man, with the rudder-lines slack in his hands, and his hands loose in his waistband, kept an eager look out. He had no net, hook, or line, and he could not be a fisherman; his boat had no cushion for a sitter, no paint, no inscription, no appliance beyond a rusty boathook and a coil of rope, and he could not be a waterman; his boat was too crazy and too small to take in cargo for delivery, and he could not be a lighterman or river-carrier; there was no clue to what he looked for, but he looked for something, with a most intent and searching gaze. The tide, which had turned an hour before, was running down, and his eyes watched every little race and eddy in its broad sweep, as the boat made slight head-way against it, or drove stern foremost before it, according as he directed his daughter by a movement of his head. She watched his face as earnestly as he watched the river. But, in the intensity of her look there was a touch of dread or horror.

Allied to the bottom of the river rather than the surface, by reason of the slime and ooze with which it was covered, and its sodden state, this boat and the two figures in it obviously were doing something that they often did, and were seeking what they often sought. Half savage as the man showed, with no covering on his matted head, with his brown arms bare to between the elbow and the shoulder, with the loose knot of a looser kerchief lying low on his bare breast in a wilderness of beard and whisker, with such dress as he wore seeming to be made out of the mud that begrimed his boat, still there was a business-like usage in his steady gaze. So with every lithe action of the girl, with every turn of her wrist, perhaps most of all with her look of dread or horror; they were things of usage.

'Keep her out, Lizzie. Tide runs strong here. Keep her well afore the sweep of it.'

Trusting to the girl's skill and making no use of the rudder, he eyed the coming tide with an absorbed attention. So the girl eyed him. But, it happened now, that

a slant of light from the setting sun glanced into the bottom of the boat, and, touching a rotten stain there which bore some resemblance to the outline of a muffled human form, coloured it as though with diluted blood. This caught the girl's eye, and she shivered.

'What ails you?' said the man, immediately aware of it, though so intent on the advancing waters; 'I see nothing afloat.'

The red light was gone, the shudder was gone, and his gaze, which had come back to the boat for a moment, travelled away again. Wheresoever the strong tide met with an impediment, his gaze paused for an instant. At every mooring-chain and rope, at every stationery boat or barge that split the current into a broad- arrowhead, at the offsets from the piers of Southwark Bridge, at the paddles of the river steamboats as they beat the filthy water, at the floating logs of timber lashed together lying off certain wharves, his shining eyes darted a hungry look. After a darkening hour or so, suddenly the rudder-lines tightened in his hold, and he steered hard towards the Surrey shore.

Always watching his face, the girl instantly answered to the action in her sculling; presently the boat swung round, quivered as from a sudden jerk, and the upper half of the man was stretched out over the stern.

The girl pulled the hood of a cloak she wore, over her head and over her face, and, looking backward so that the front folds of this hood were turned down the river, kept the boat in that direction going before the tide. Until now, the boat had barely held her own, and had hovered about one spot; but now, the banks changed swiftly, and the deepening shadows and the kindling lights of London Bridge were passed, and the tiers of shipping lay on either hand.

It was not until now that the upper half of the man came back into the boat. His arms were wet and dirty, and he washed them over the side. In his right hand he held something, and he washed that in the river too. It was money. He chinked it once, and he blew upon it once, and he spat upon it once,--'for luck,' he hoarsely said --before he put it in his pocket.

'Lizzie!'

The girl turned her face towards him with a start, and rowed in silence. Her face was very pale. He was a hook-nosed man, and with that and his bright eyes and his ruffled head, bore a certain likeness to a roused bird of prey.

'Take that thing off your face.'

She put it back.

'Here! and give me hold of the sculls. I'll take the rest of the spell.'

'No, no, father! No! I can't indeed. Father!--I cannot sit so near it!'

He was moving towards her to change places, but her terrified expostulation stopped him and he resumed his seat.

'What hurt can it do you?'

'None, none. But I cannot bear it.'

'It's my belief you hate the sight of the very river.'

'I--I do not like it, father.'

'As if it wasn't your living! As if it wasn't meat and drink to you!'

At these latter words the girl shivered again, and for a moment paused in her rowing, seeming to turn deadly faint. It escaped his attention, for he was glancing over the stern at something the boat had in tow.

'How can you be so thankless to your best friend, Lizzie? The very fire that warmed you when you were a babby, was picked out of the river alongside the coal barges. The very basket that you slept in, the tide washed ashore. The very rockers that I put it upon to make a cradle of it, I cut out of a piece of wood that drifted from some ship or another.'

Lizzie took her right hand from the scull it held, and touched her lips with it, and for a moment held it out lovingly towards him: then, without speaking, she resumed her rowing, as another boat of similar appearance, though in rather better trim, came out from a dark place and dropped softly alongside.

'In luck again, Gaffer?' said a man with a squinting leer, who sculled her and who was alone, 'I know'd you was in luck again, by your wake as you come down.'

'Ah!' replied the other, drily. 'So you're out, are you?'

'Yes, pardner.'

There was now a tender yellow moonlight on the river, and the new comer, keeping half his boat's length astern of the other boat looked hard at its track.

'I says to myself,' he went on, 'directly you hove in view, yonder's Gaffer, and in luck again, by George if he ain't! Scull it is, pardner--don't fret yourself--I didn't touch him.' This was in answer to a quick impatient movement on the part of Gaffer: the speaker at the same time unshipping his scull on that side, and laying his hand on the gunwale of Gaffer's boat and holding to it.

'He's had touches enough not to want no more, as well as I make him out, Gaffer! Been a knocking about with a pretty many tides, ain't he pardner? Such is my out-of-luck ways, you see! He must have passed me when he went up last time, for I was on the lookout below bridge here. I a'most think you're like the vulturs, pardner, and scent 'em out.'

He spoke in a dropped voice, and with more than one glance at Lizzie who had pulled on her hood again. Both men then looked with a weird unholy interest in the wake of Gaffer's boat.

'Easy does it, betwixt us. Shall I take him aboard, pardner?'

'No,' said the other. In so surly a tone that the man, after a blank stare, acknowledged it with the retort:

'--Arn't been eating nothing as has disagreed with you, have you, pardner?'

'Why, yes, I have,' said Gaffer. 'I have been swallowing too much of that word, Pardner. I am no pardner of yours.'

'Since when was you no pardner of mine, Gaffer Hexam Esquire?'

'Since you was accused of robbing a man. Accused of robbing a live man!' said Gaffer, with great indignation.

'And what if I had been accused of robbing a dead man, Gaffer?'

'You COULDN'T do it.'

'Couldn't you, Gaffer?'

'No. Has a dead man any use for money? Is it possible for a dead man to have money? What world does a dead man belong to? 'Tother world. What world does money belong to? This world. How can money be a corpse's? Can a corpse own it, want it, spend it, claim it, miss it? Don't try to go confounding the rights and wrongs of things in that way. But it's worthy of the sneaking spirit that robs a live man.'

'I'll tell you what it is--.'

'No you won't. I'll tell you what it is. You got off with a short time of it for putting you're hand in the pocket of a sailor, a live sailor. Make the most of it and think yourself lucky, but don't think after that to come over ME with your pardners. We have worked together in time past, but we work together no more in time present nor yet future. Let go. Cast off!'

'Gaffer! If you think to get rid of me this way--.'

'If I don't get rid of you this way, I'll try another, and chop you over the fingers with the stretcher, or take a pick at your head with the boat-hook. Cast off! Pull you, Lizzie. Pull home, since you won't let your father pull.'

Lizzie shot ahead, and the other boat fell astern. Lizzie's father, composing himself into the easy attitude of one who had asserted the high moralities and taken an unassailable position, slowly lighted a pipe, and smoked, and took a survey of what he had in tow. What he had in tow, lunged itself at him sometimes in an awful manner when the boat was checked, and sometimes seemed to try to wrench itself away, though for the most part it followed submissively. A neophyte might have fancied that the ripples passing over it were dreadfully like faint changes of expression on a sightless face; but Gaffer was no neophyte and had no fancies.

2. The Man From Somewhere

Mr and Mrs Veneering were bran-new people in a bran-new house in a bran-new quarter of London. Everything about the Veneerings was spick and span new. All their furniture was new, all their friends were new, all their servants were new, their plate was new, their carriage was new, their harness was new, their horses were new, their pictures were new, they themselves were new, they were as newly married as was lawfully compatible with their having a bran-new baby, and if they had set up a great-grandfather, he would have come home in matting from the Pantechnicon, without a scratch upon him, French polished to the crown of his head.

For, in the Veneering establishment, from the hall-chairs with the new coat of arms, to the grand pianoforte with the new action, and upstairs again to the new fire-escape, all things were in a state of high varnish and polish. And what was observable in the furniture, was observable in the Veneerings--the surface smelt a little too much of the workshop and was a trifle sticky.

There was an innocent piece of dinner-furniture that went upon easy castors and was kept over a livery stable-yard in Duke Street, Saint James's, when not in use, to whom the Veneerings were a source of blind confusion. The name of this article was Twemlow. Being first cousin to Lord Snigsworth, he was in frequent requisition, and at many houses might be said to represent the dining-table in its normal state. Mr and Mrs Veneering, for example, arranging a dinner, habitually started with Twemlow, and then put leaves in him, or added guests to him. Sometimes, the table consisted of Twemlow and half a dozen leaves; sometimes, of Twemlow and a dozen leaves; sometimes, Twemlow was pulled out to his utmost extent of twenty leaves. Mr and Mrs Veneering on occasions of ceremony faced each other in the centre of the board, and thus the parallel still held; for, it always happened that the more Twemlow was pulled out, the further he found himself from the center, and nearer to the sideboard at one end of the room, or the window-curtains at the other.

But, it was not this which steeped the feeble soul of Twemlow in confusion. This he was used to, and could take soundings of. The abyss to which he could find no bottom, and from which started forth the engrossing and ever-swelling difficulty of his life, was the insoluble question whether he was Veneering's oldest friend, or newest friend. To the excogitation of this problem, the harmless gentleman had devoted many anxious hours, both in his lodgings over the livery stable-yard, and in the cold gloom, favourable to meditation, of Saint James's Square. Thus, Twemlow had first known Veneering at his club, where Veneering then knew nobody but the man who made them known to one another, who seemed to be the most intimate friend he had in the world, and whom he had known two days--

the bond of union between their souls, the nefarious conduct of the committee respecting the cookery of a fillet of veal, having been accidentally cemented at that date. Immediately upon this, Twemlow received an invitation to dine with Veneering, and dined: the man being of the party. Immediately upon that, Twemlow received an invitation to dine with the man, and dined: Veneering being of the party. At the man's were a Member, an Engineer, a Payer-off of the National Debt, a Poem on Shakespeare, a Grievance, and a Public Office, who all seem to be utter strangers to Veneering. And yet immediately after that, Twemlow received an invitation to dine at Veneerings, expressly to meet the Member, the Engineer, the Payer-off of the National Debt, the Poem on Shakespeare, the Grievance, and the Public Office, and, dining, discovered that all of them were the most intimate friends Veneering had in the world, and that the wives of all of them (who were all there) were the objects of Mrs Veneering's most devoted affection and tender confidence.

Thus it had come about, that Mr Twemlow had said to himself in his lodgings, with his hand to his forehead: 'I must not think of this. This is enough to soften any man's brain,'--and yet was always thinking of it, and could never form a conclusion.

This evening the Veneerings give a banquet. Eleven leaves in the Twemlow; fourteen in company all told. Four pigeon-breasted retainers in plain clothes stand in line in the hall. A fifth retainer, proceeding up the staircase with a mournful air--as who should say, 'Here is another wretched creature come to dinner; such is life!'--announces, 'Mis-ter Twemlow!'

Mrs Veneering welcomes her sweet Mr Twemlow. Mr Veneering welcomes his dear Twemlow. Mrs Veneering does not expect that Mr Twemlow can in nature care much for such insipid things as babies, but so old a friend must please to look at baby. 'Ah! You will know the friend of your family better, Tootleums,' says Mr Veneering, nodding emotionally at that new article, 'when you begin to take notice.' He then begs to make his dear Twemlow known to his two friends, Mr Boots and Mr Brewer--and clearly has no distinct idea which is which.

But now a fearful circumstance occurs.

'Mis-ter and Mis-sus Podsnap!'

'My dear,' says Mr Veneering to Mrs Veneering, with an air of much friendly interest, while the door stands open, 'the Podsnaps.'

A too, too smiling large man, with a fatal freshness on him, appearing with his wife, instantly deserts his wife and darts at Twemlow with:

'How do you do? So glad to know you. Charming house you have here. I hope we are not late. So glad of the opportunity, I am sure!'

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