

met by a prospect of unimagined despair. There are no trees. The country is flat and barren. A dismal creek runs miles inland—an estuary fed by the River Murgle. A few battered cottages, a general shop, a couple of low public-houses, and three perky red-brick villas all in a row form the city, or town, or village, or what you will, of Murglebed-on-Sea. Renniker is a wonderful man.

I have rented a couple of furnished rooms in one of the villas. It has a decayed bit of front garden in which a gnarled, stunted stick is planted, and it is called The Laburnums. My landlord, the owner of the villas, is a builder. What profit he can get from building in Murglebed, Heaven alone knows; but, as he mounts a bicycle in the morning and disappears for the rest of the day, I presume he careers over the waste, building as he goes. In the evenings he gets drunk at the Red Cow; so I know little of him, save that he is a red-faced man, with a moustache like a tooth-brush and two great hands like hams.

His wife is taciturn almost to dumbness. She is a thick-set, black-haired woman, and looks at me disapprovingly out of the corner of her eye as if I were a blackbeetle which she would like to squash under foot. She tolerates me, however, on account of the tongues and other sustenance sent by Rogers from Benoist, of which she consumes prodigious quantities. She wonders, as far as the power of wonder is given to her dull brain, what on earth I am doing here. I see her whispering to her friends as I enter the house, and I know they are wondering what I am doing here. The whole village regards me as a humourous zoological freak, and wonders what I am doing here among normal human beings.

And what am I doing here—I, Simon de Gex, M.P., the spoilt darling of fortune as my opponent in the