Constance, Tony, Mrs Hardcastle

MISS NEVILLE. (Aside.) Undone! undone! A letter to him from
Hastings. I know the hand. If my aunt sees it, we are ruined for
ever. I'll keep her employed a little if I can. (To MRS.
HARDCASTLE.) But I have not told you, madam, of my cousin's smart
answer just now to Mr. Marlow. We so laughed.--You must know,
madam.--This way a little, for he must not hear us. [They confer.]

TONY. (Still gazing.) A damned cramp piece of penmanship, as ever I
saw in my life. I can read your print hand very well. But here are
such handles, and shanks, and dashes, that one can scarce tell the head
from the tail.--"To Anthony Lumpkin, Esquire." It's very odd, I can
read the outside of my letters, where my own name is, well enough; but
when I come to open it, it's all----buzz. That's hard, very hard; for
the inside of the letter is always the cream of the correspondence.

MRS. HARDCASTLE. Ha! ha! ha! Very well, very well. And so my son was
too hard for the philosopher.

MISS NEVILLE. Yes, madam; but you must hear the rest, madam. A
little more this way, or he may hear us. You'll hear how he puzzled
him again.

MRS. HARDCASTLE. He seems strangely puzzled now himself, methinks.

TONY. (Still gazing.) A damned up and down hand, as if it was
disguised in liquor.--(Reading.) Dear Sir,--ay, that's that. Then
there's an M, and a T, and an S, but whether the next be an izzard, or
an R, confound me, I cannot tell.

MRS. HARDCASTLE. What's that, my dear? Can I give you any
assistance?

MISS NEVILLE. Pray, aunt, let me read it. Nobody reads a cramp hand
better than I. (Twitching the letter from him.) Do you know who it is
from?

TONY. Can't tell, except from Dick Ginger, the feeder.

MISS NEVILLE. Ay, so it is. (Pretending to read.) Dear 'Squire,
hoping that you're in health, as I am at this present. The gentlemen
of the Shake-bag club has cut the gentlemen of Goose-green quite out of
feather. The odds--um--odd battle--um--long fighting--um--here, here,
it's all about cocks and fighting; it's of no consequence; here, put it
up, put it up. (Thrusting the crumpled letter upon him.)

TONY. But I tell you, miss, it's of all the consequence in the world.
I would not lose the rest of it for a guinea. Here, mother, do you
make it out. Of no consequence! (Giving MRS. HARDCASTLE the letter.)

MRS. HARDCASTLE. How's this?--(Reads.) "Dear 'Squire, I'm now
waiting for Miss Neville, with a post-chaise and pair, at the bottom of
the garden, but I find my horses yet unable to perform the journey. I
expect you'll assist us with a pair of fresh horses, as you promised.
Dispatch is necessary, as the HAG (ay, the hag), your mother, will
otherwise suspect us! Yours, Hastings." Grant me patience. I shall
run distracted! My rage chokes me.

MISS NEVILLE. I hope, madam, you'll suspend your resentment for a few
moments, and not impute to me any impertinence, or sinister design,
that belongs to another.

MRS. HARDCASTLE. (Curtseying very low.) Fine spoken, madam, you are
most miraculously polite and engaging, and quite the very pink of
courtesy and circumspection, madam. (Changing her tone.) And you, you
great ill-fashioned oaf, with scarce sense enough to keep your mouth
shut: were you, too, joined against me? But I'll defeat all your plots
in a moment. As for you, madam, since you have got a pair of fresh
horses ready, it would be cruel to disappoint them. So, if you please,
instead of running away with your spark, prepare, this very moment, to
run off with ME. Your old aunt Pedigree will keep you secure, I'll
warrant me. You too, sir, may mount your horse, and guard us upon the
way. Here, Thomas, Roger, Diggory! I'll show you, that I wish you
better than you do yourselves. [Exit.]

MISS NEVILLE. So now I'm completely ruined.

TONY. Ay, that's a sure thing.

MISS NEVILLE. What better could be expected from being connected with
such a stupid fool,--and after all the nods and signs I made him?

TONY. By the laws, miss, it was your own cleverness, and not my
stupidity, that did your business. You were so nice and so busy with
your Shake-bags and Goose-greens, that I thought you could never be
making believe.