

DICKENS CHARLES

THE OLD
CURIOSITY
SHOP

Чарльз Диккенс
The Old Curiosity Shop

«Public Domain»

Диккенс Ч.

The Old Curiosity Shop / Ч. Диккенс — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

CHAPTER 1	5
CHAPTER 2	12
CHAPTER 3	16
CHAPTER 4	20
CHAPTER 5	25
CHAPTER 6	29
CHAPTER 7	34
CHAPTER 8	38
CHAPTER 9	43
CHAPTER 10	49
CHAPTER 11	52
CHAPTER 12	57
CHAPTER 13	61
CHAPTER 14	66
CHAPTER 15	70
CHAPTER 16	75
CHAPTER 17	78
CHAPTER 18	82
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	83

Charles Dickens

The Old Curiosity Shop

CHAPTER 1

Although I am an old man, night is generally my time for walking. In the summer I often leave home early in the morning, and roam about fields and lanes all day, or even escape for days or weeks together; but, saving in the country, I seldom go out until after dark, though, Heaven be thanked, I love its light and feel the cheerfulness it sheds upon the earth, as much as any creature living.

I have fallen insensibly into this habit, both because it favours my infirmity and because it affords me greater opportunity of speculating on the characters and occupations of those who fill the streets. The glare and hurry of broad noon are not adapted to idle pursuits like mine; a glimpse of passing faces caught by the light of a street-lamp or a shop window is often better for my purpose than their full revelation in the daylight; and, if I must add the truth, night is kinder in this respect than day, which too often destroys an air-built castle at the moment of its completion, without the least ceremony or remorse.

That constant pacing to and fro, that never-ending restlessness, that incessant tread of feet wearing the rough stones smooth and glossy – is it not a wonder how the dwellers in narrow ways can bear to hear it! Think of a sick man in such a place as Saint Martin's Court, listening to the footsteps, and in the midst of pain and weariness obliged, despite himself (as though it were a task he must perform) to detect the child's step from the man's, the slipshod beggar from the booted exquisite, the lounging from the busy, the dull heel of the sauntering outcast from the quick tread of an expectant pleasure-seeker – think of the hum and noise always being present to his sense, and of the stream of life that will not stop, pouring on, on, on, through all his restless dreams, as if he were condemned to lie, dead but conscious, in a noisy churchyard, and had no hope of rest for centuries to come.

Then, the crowds for ever passing and repassing on the bridges (on those which are free of toll at last), where many stop on fine evenings looking listlessly down upon the water with some vague idea that by and by it runs between green banks which grow wider and wider until at last it joins the broad vast sea – where some halt to rest from heavy loads and think as they look over the parapet that to smoke and lounge away one's life, and lie sleeping in the sun upon a hot tarpaulin, in a dull, slow, sluggish barge, must be happiness unalloyed – and where some, and a very different class, pause with heavier loads than they, remembering to have heard or read in old time that drowning was not a hard death, but of all means of suicide the easiest and best.

Covent Garden Market at sunrise too, in the spring or summer, when the fragrance of sweet flowers is in the air, over-powering even the unwholesome streams of last night's debauchery, and driving the dusky thrush, whose cage has hung outside a garret window all night long, half mad with joy! Poor bird! the only neighbouring thing at all akin to the other little captives, some of whom, shrinking from the hot hands of drunken purchasers, lie drooping on the path already, while others, soddened by close contact, await the time when they shall be watered and freshened up to please more sober company, and make old clerks who pass them on their road to business, wonder what has filled their breasts with visions of the country.

But my present purpose is not to expatiate upon my walks. The story I am about to relate, and to which I shall recur at intervals, arose out of one of these rambles; and thus I have been led to speak of them by way of preface.

One night I had roamed into the City, and was walking slowly on in my usual way, musing upon a great many things, when I was arrested by an inquiry, the purport of which did not reach me, but which seemed to be addressed to myself, and was preferred in a soft sweet voice that struck me very

pleasantly. I turned hastily round and found at my elbow a pretty little girl, who begged to be directed to a certain street at a considerable distance, and indeed in quite another quarter of the town.

‘It is a very long way from here,’ said I, ‘my child.’

‘I know that, sir,’ she replied timidly. ‘I am afraid it is a very long way, for I came from there to-night.’

‘Alone?’ said I, in some surprise.

‘Oh, yes, I don’t mind that, but I am a little frightened now, for I had lost my road.’

‘And what made you ask it of me? Suppose I should tell you wrong?’

‘I am sure you will not do that,’ said the little creature, ‘you are such a very old gentleman, and walk so slow yourself.’

I cannot describe how much I was impressed by this appeal and the energy with which it was made, which brought a tear into the child’s clear eye, and made her slight figure tremble as she looked up into my face.

‘Come,’ said I, ‘I’ll take you there.’

She put her hand in mine as confidently as if she had known me from her cradle, and we trudged away together; the little creature accommodating her pace to mine, and rather seeming to lead and take care of me than I to be protecting her. I observed that every now and then she stole a curious look at my face, as if to make quite sure that I was not deceiving her, and that these glances (very sharp and keen they were too) seemed to increase her confidence at every repetition.

For my part, my curiosity and interest were at least equal to the child’s, for child she certainly was, although I thought it probable from what I could make out, that her very small and delicate frame imparted a peculiar youthfulness to her appearance. Though more scantily attired than she might have been she was dressed with perfect neatness, and betrayed no marks of poverty or neglect.

‘Who has sent you so far by yourself?’ said I.

‘Someone who is very kind to me, sir.’

‘And what have you been doing?’

‘That, I must not tell,’ said the child firmly.

There was something in the manner of this reply which caused me to look at the little creature with an involuntary expression of surprise; for I wondered what kind of errand it might be that occasioned her to be prepared for questioning. Her quick eye seemed to read my thoughts, for as it met mine she added that there was no harm in what she had been doing, but it was a great secret – a secret which she did not even know herself.

This was said with no appearance of cunning or deceit, but with an unsuspecting frankness that bore the impress of truth. She walked on as before, growing more familiar with me as we proceeded and talking cheerfully by the way, but she said no more about her home, beyond remarking that we were going quite a new road and asking if it were a short one.

While we were thus engaged, I revolved in my mind a hundred different explanations of the riddle and rejected them every one. I really felt ashamed to take advantage of the ingenuousness or grateful feeling of the child for the purpose of gratifying my curiosity. I love these little people; and it is not a slight thing when they, who are so fresh from God, love us. As I had felt pleased at first by her confidence I determined to deserve it, and to do credit to the nature which had prompted her to repose it in me.

There was no reason, however, why I should refrain from seeing the person who had inconsiderately sent her to so great a distance by night and alone, and as it was not improbable that if she found herself near home she might take farewell of me and deprive me of the opportunity, I avoided the most frequented ways and took the most intricate, and thus it was not until we arrived in the street itself that she knew where we were. Clapping her hands with pleasure and running on before me for a short distance, my little acquaintance stopped at a door and remaining on the step till I came up knocked at it when I joined her.

A part of this door was of glass unprotected by any shutter, which I did not observe at first, for all was very dark and silent within, and I was anxious (as indeed the child was also) for an answer to our summons. When she had knocked twice or thrice there was a noise as if some person were moving inside, and at length a faint light appeared through the glass which, as it approached very slowly, the bearer having to make his way through a great many scattered articles, enabled me to see both what kind of person it was who advanced and what kind of place it was through which he came.

It was an old man with long grey hair, whose face and figure as he held the light above his head and looked before him as he approached, I could plainly see. Though much altered by age, I fancied I could recognize in his spare and slender form something of that delicate mould which I had noticed in the child. Their bright blue eyes were certainly alike, but his face was so deeply furrowed and so very full of care, that here all resemblance ceased.

The place through which he made his way at leisure was one of those receptacles for old and curious things which seem to crouch in odd corners of this town and to hide their musty treasures from the public eye in jealousy and distrust. There were suits of mail standing like ghosts in armour here and there, fantastic carvings brought from monkish cloisters, rusty weapons of various kinds, distorted figures in china and wood and iron and ivory: tapestry and strange furniture that might have been designed in dreams. The haggard aspect of the little old man was wonderfully suited to the place; he might have groped among old churches and tombs and deserted houses and gathered all the spoils with his own hands. There was nothing in the whole collection but was in keeping with himself nothing that looked older or more worn than he.

As he turned the key in the lock, he surveyed me with some astonishment which was not diminished when he looked from me to my companion. The door being opened, the child addressed him as grandfather, and told him the little story of our companionship.

‘Why, bless thee, child,’ said the old man, patting her on the head, ‘how couldst thou miss thy way? What if I had lost thee, Nell!’

‘I would have found my way back to *you*, grandfather,’ said the child boldly; ‘never fear.’

The old man kissed her, then turning to me and begging me to walk in, I did so. The door was closed and locked. Preceding me with the light, he led me through the place I had already seen from without, into a small sitting-room behind, in which was another door opening into a kind of closet, where I saw a little bed that a fairy might have slept in, it looked so very small and was so prettily arranged. The child took a candle and tripped into this little room, leaving the old man and me together.

‘You must be tired, sir,’ said he as he placed a chair near the fire, ‘how can I thank you?’

‘By taking more care of your grandchild another time, my good friend,’ I replied.

‘More care!’ said the old man in a shrill voice, ‘more care of Nelly! Why, who ever loved a child as I love Nell?’

He said this with such evident surprise that I was perplexed what answer to make, and the more so because coupled with something feeble and wandering in his manner, there were in his face marks of deep and anxious thought which convinced me that he could not be, as I had been at first inclined to suppose, in a state of dotage or imbecility.

‘I don’t think you consider – ’ I began.

‘I don’t consider!’ cried the old man interrupting me, ‘I don’t consider her! Ah, how little you know of the truth! Little Nelly, little Nelly!’

It would be impossible for any man, I care not what his form of speech might be, to express more affection than the dealer in curiosities did, in these four words. I waited for him to speak again, but he rested his chin upon his hand and shaking his head twice or thrice fixed his eyes upon the fire.

While we were sitting thus in silence, the door of the closet opened, and the child returned, her light brown hair hanging loose about her neck, and her face flushed with the haste she had made to rejoin us. She busied herself immediately in preparing supper, and while she was thus engaged I

remarked that the old man took an opportunity of observing me more closely than he had done yet. I was surprised to see that all this time everything was done by the child, and that there appeared to be no other persons but ourselves in the house. I took advantage of a moment when she was absent to venture a hint on this point, to which the old man replied that there were few grown persons as trustworthy or as careful as she.

‘It always grieves me,’ I observed, roused by what I took to be his selfishness, ‘it always grieves me to contemplate the initiation of children into the ways of life, when they are scarcely more than infants. It checks their confidence and simplicity – two of the best qualities that Heaven gives them – and demands that they share our sorrows before they are capable of entering into our enjoyments.’

‘It will never check hers,’ said the old man looking steadily at me, ‘the springs are too deep. Besides, the children of the poor know but few pleasures. Even the cheap delights of childhood must be bought and paid for.’

‘But – forgive me for saying this – you are surely not so very poor’ – said I.

‘She is not my child, sir,’ returned the old man. ‘Her mother was, and she was poor. I save nothing – not a penny – though I live as you see, but’ – he laid his hand upon my arm and leant forward to whisper – ‘she shall be rich one of these days, and a fine lady. Don’t you think ill of me because I use her help. She gives it cheerfully as you see, and it would break her heart if she knew that I suffered anybody else to do for me what her little hands could undertake. I don’t consider!’ – he cried with sudden querulousness, ‘why, God knows that this one child is the thought and object of my life, and yet he never prospers me – no, never!’

At this juncture, the subject of our conversation again returned, and the old man motioning to me to approach the table, broke off, and said no more.

We had scarcely begun our repast when there was a knock at the door by which I had entered, and Nell bursting into a hearty laugh, which I was rejoiced to hear, for it was childlike and full of hilarity, said it was no doubt dear old Kit coming back at last.

‘Foolish Nell!’ said the old man fondling with her hair. ‘She always laughs at poor Kit.’

The child laughed again more heartily than before, and I could not help smiling from pure sympathy. The little old man took up a candle and went to open the door. When he came back, Kit was at his heels.

Kit was a shock-headed, shambling, awkward lad with an uncommonly wide mouth, very red cheeks, a turned-up nose, and certainly the most comical expression of face I ever saw. He stopped short at the door on seeing a stranger, twirled in his hand a perfectly round old hat without any vestige of a brim, and resting himself now on one leg and now on the other and changing them constantly, stood in the doorway, looking into the parlour with the most extraordinary leer I ever beheld. I entertained a grateful feeling towards the boy from that minute, for I felt that he was the comedy of the child’s life.

‘A long way, wasn’t it, Kit?’ said the little old man.

‘Why, then, it was a goodish stretch, master,’ returned Kit.

‘Of course you have come back hungry?’

‘Why, then, I do consider myself rather so, master,’ was the answer.

The lad had a remarkable manner of standing sideways as he spoke, and thrusting his head forward over his shoulder, as if he could not get at his voice without that accompanying action. I think he would have amused one anywhere, but the child’s exquisite enjoyment of his oddity, and the relief it was to find that there was something she associated with merriment in a place that appeared so unsuited to her, were quite irresistible. It was a great point too that Kit himself was flattered by the sensation he created, and after several efforts to preserve his gravity, burst into a loud roar, and so stood with his mouth wide open and his eyes nearly shut, laughing violently.

The old man had again relapsed into his former abstraction and took no notice of what passed, but I remarked that when her laugh was over, the child’s bright eyes were dimmed with tears, called

forth by the fullness of heart with which she welcomed her uncouth favourite after the little anxiety of the night. As for Kit himself (whose laugh had been all the time one of that sort which very little would change into a cry) he carried a large slice of bread and meat and a mug of beer into a corner, and applied himself to disposing of them with great voracity.

‘Ah!’ said the old man turning to me with a sigh, as if I had spoken to him but that moment, ‘you don’t know what you say when you tell me that I don’t consider her.’

‘You must not attach too great weight to a remark founded on first appearances, my friend,’ said I.

‘No,’ returned the old man thoughtfully, ‘no. Come hither, Nell.’

The little girl hastened from her seat, and put her arm about his neck.

‘Do I love thee, Nell?’ said he. ‘Say – do I love thee, Nell, or no?’

The child only answered by her caresses, and laid her head upon his breast.

‘Why dost thou sob?’ said the grandfather, pressing her closer to him and glancing towards me. ‘Is it because thou know’st I love thee, and dost not like that I should seem to doubt it by my question? Well, well – then let us say I love thee dearly.’

‘Indeed, indeed you do,’ replied the child with great earnestness, ‘Kit knows you do.’

Kit, who in despatching his bread and meat had been swallowing two-thirds of his knife at every mouthful with the coolness of a juggler, stopped short in his operations on being thus appealed to, and bawled ‘Nobody isn’t such a fool as to say he doosn’t,’ after which he incapacitated himself for further conversation by taking a most prodigious sandwich at one bite.

‘She is poor now’ – said the old man, patting the child’s cheek, ‘but I say again that the time is coming when she shall be rich. It has been a long time coming, but it must come at last; a very long time, but it surely must come. It has come to other men who do nothing but waste and riot. When *will* it come to me!’

‘I am very happy as I am, grandfather,’ said the child.

‘Tush, tush!’ returned the old man, ‘thou dost not know – how should’st thou!’ then he muttered again between his teeth, ‘The time must come, I am very sure it must. It will be all the better for coming late’; and then he sighed and fell into his former musing state, and still holding the child between his knees appeared to be insensible to everything around him. By this time it wanted but a few minutes of midnight and I rose to go, which recalled him to himself.

‘One moment, sir,’ he said, ‘Now, Kit – near midnight, boy, and you still here! Get home, get home, and be true to your time in the morning, for there’s work to do. Good night! There, bid him good night, Nell, and let him be gone!’

‘Good night, Kit,’ said the child, her eyes lighting up with merriment and kindness.

‘Good night, Miss Nell,’ returned the boy.

‘And thank this gentleman,’ interposed the old man, ‘but for whose care I might have lost my little girl to-night.’

‘No, no, master,’ said Kit, ‘that won’t do, that won’t.’

‘What do you mean?’ cried the old man.

‘I’d have found her, master,’ said Kit, ‘I’d have found her. I’ll bet that I’d find her if she was above ground, I would, as quick as anybody, master. Ha, ha, ha!’

Once more opening his mouth and shutting his eyes, and laughing like a stentor, Kit gradually backed to the door, and roared himself out.

Free of the room, the boy was not slow in taking his departure; when he had gone, and the child was occupied in clearing the table, the old man said:

‘I haven’t seemed to thank you, sir, for what you have done to-night, but I do thank you humbly and heartily, and so does she, and her thanks are better worth than mine. I should be sorry that you went away, and thought I was unmindful of your goodness, or careless of her – I am not indeed.’

I was sure of that, I said, from what I had seen. ‘But,’ I added, ‘may I ask you a question?’

‘Ay, sir,’ replied the old man, ‘What is it?’

‘This delicate child,’ said I, ‘with so much beauty and intelligence – has she nobody to care for her but you? Has she no other companion or advisor?’

‘No,’ he returned, looking anxiously in my face, ‘no, and she wants no other.’

‘But are you not fearful,’ said I, ‘that you may misunderstand a charge so tender? I am sure you mean well, but are you quite certain that you know how to execute such a trust as this? I am an old man, like you, and I am actuated by an old man’s concern in all that is young and promising. Do you not think that what I have seen of you and this little creature to-night must have an interest not wholly free from pain?’

‘Sir,’ rejoined the old man after a moment’s silence. ‘I have no right to feel hurt at what you say. It is true that in many respects I am the child, and she the grown person – that you have seen already. But waking or sleeping, by night or day, in sickness or health, she is the one object of my care, and if you knew of how much care, you would look on me with different eyes, you would indeed. Ah! It’s a weary life for an old man – a weary, weary life – but there is a great end to gain and that I keep before me.’

Seeing that he was in a state of excitement and impatience, I turned to put on an outer coat which I had thrown off on entering the room, purposing to say no more. I was surprised to see the child standing patiently by with a cloak upon her arm, and in her hand a hat, and stick.

‘Those are not mine, my dear,’ said I.

‘No,’ returned the child, ‘they are grandfather’s.’

‘But he is not going out to-night.’

‘Oh, yes, he is,’ said the child, with a smile.

‘And what becomes of you, my pretty one?’

‘Me! I stay here of course. I always do.’

I looked in astonishment towards the old man, but he was, or feigned to be, busied in the arrangement of his dress. From him I looked back to the slight gentle figure of the child. Alone! In that gloomy place all the long, dreary night.

She evinced no consciousness of my surprise, but cheerfully helped the old man with his cloak, and when he was ready took a candle to light us out. Finding that we did not follow as she expected, she looked back with a smile and waited for us. The old man showed by his face that he plainly understood the cause of my hesitation, but he merely signed to me with an inclination of the head to pass out of the room before him, and remained silent. I had no resource but to comply.

When we reached the door, the child setting down the candle, turned to say good night and raised her face to kiss me. Then she ran to the old man, who folded her in his arms and bade God bless her.

‘Sleep soundly, Nell,’ he said in a low voice, ‘and angels guard thy bed! Do not forget thy prayers, my sweet.’

‘No, indeed,’ answered the child fervently, ‘they make me feel so happy!’

‘That’s well; I know they do; they should,’ said the old man. ‘Bless thee a hundred times! Early in the morning I shall be home.’

‘You’ll not ring twice,’ returned the child. ‘The bell wakes me, even in the middle of a dream.’

With this, they separated. The child opened the door (now guarded by a shutter which I had heard the boy put up before he left the house) and with another farewell whose clear and tender note I have recalled a thousand times, held it until we had passed out. The old man paused a moment while it was gently closed and fastened on the inside, and satisfied that this was done, walked on at a slow pace. At the street-corner he stopped, and regarding me with a troubled countenance said that our ways were widely different and that he must take his leave. I would have spoken, but summoning up more alacrity than might have been expected in one of his appearance, he hurried away. I could see that twice or thrice he looked back as if to ascertain if I were still watching him, or perhaps to assure

himself that I was not following at a distance. The obscurity of the night favoured his disappearance, and his figure was soon beyond my sight.

I remained standing on the spot where he had left me, unwilling to depart, and yet unknowing why I should loiter there. I looked wistfully into the street we had lately quitted, and after a time directed my steps that way. I passed and repassed the house, and stopped and listened at the door; all was dark, and silent as the grave.

Yet I lingered about, and could not tear myself away, thinking of all possible harm that might happen to the child – of fires and robberies and even murder – and feeling as if some evil must ensue if I turned my back upon the place. The closing of a door or window in the street brought me before the curiosity-dealer's once more; I crossed the road and looked up at the house to assure myself that the noise had not come from there. No, it was black, cold, and lifeless as before.

There were few passengers astir; the street was sad and dismal, and pretty well my own. A few stragglers from the theatres hurried by, and now and then I turned aside to avoid some noisy drunkard as he reeled homewards, but these interruptions were not frequent and soon ceased. The clocks struck one. Still I paced up and down, promising myself that every time should be the last, and breaking faith with myself on some new plea as often as I did so.

The more I thought of what the old man had said, and of his looks and bearing, the less I could account for what I had seen and heard. I had a strong misgiving that his nightly absence was for no good purpose. I had only come to know the fact through the innocence of the child, and though the old man was by at the time, and saw my undisguised surprise, he had preserved a strange mystery upon the subject and offered no word of explanation. These reflections naturally recalled again more strongly than before his haggard face, his wandering manner, his restless anxious looks. His affection for the child might not be inconsistent with villany of the worst kind; even that very affection was in itself an extraordinary contradiction, or how could he leave her thus? Disposed as I was to think badly of him, I never doubted that his love for her was real. I could not admit the thought, remembering what had passed between us, and the tone of voice in which he had called her by her name.

'Stay here of course,' the child had said in answer to my question, 'I always do!' What could take him from home by night, and every night! I called up all the strange tales I had ever heard of dark and secret deeds committed in great towns and escaping detection for a long series of years; wild as many of these stories were, I could not find one adapted to this mystery, which only became the more impenetrable, in proportion as I sought to solve it.

Occupied with such thoughts as these, and a crowd of others all tending to the same point, I continued to pace the street for two long hours; at length the rain began to descend heavily, and then over-powered by fatigue though no less interested than I had been at first, I engaged the nearest coach and so got home. A cheerful fire was blazing on the hearth, the lamp burnt brightly, my clock received me with its old familiar welcome; everything was quiet, warm and cheering, and in happy contrast to the gloom and darkness I had quitted.

But all that night, waking or in my sleep, the same thoughts recurred and the same images retained possession of my brain. I had ever before me the old dark murky rooms – the gaunt suits of mail with their ghostly silent air – the faces all awry, grinning from wood and stone – the dust and rust and worm that lives in wood – and alone in the midst of all this lumber and decay and ugly age, the beautiful child in her gentle slumber, smiling through her light and sunny dreams.

CHAPTER 2

After combating, for nearly a week, the feeling which impelled me to revisit the place I had quitted under the circumstances already detailed, I yielded to it at length; and determining that this time I would present myself by the light of day, bent my steps thither early in the morning.

I walked past the house, and took several turns in the street, with that kind of hesitation which is natural to a man who is conscious that the visit he is about to pay is unexpected, and may not be very acceptable. However, as the door of the shop was shut, and it did not appear likely that I should be recognized by those within, if I continued merely to pass up and down before it, I soon conquered this irresolution, and found myself in the Curiosity Dealer's warehouse.

The old man and another person were together in the back part, and there seemed to have been high words between them, for their voices which were raised to a very high pitch suddenly stopped on my entering, and the old man advancing hastily towards me, said in a tremulous tone that he was very glad I had come.

'You interrupted us at a critical moment,' said he, pointing to the man whom I had found in company with him; 'this fellow will murder me one of these days. He would have done so, long ago, if he had dared.'

'Bah! You would swear away my life if you could,' returned the other, after bestowing a stare and a frown on me; 'we all know that!'

'I almost think I could,' cried the old man, turning feebly upon him. 'If oaths, or prayers, or words, could rid me of you, they should. I would be quit of you, and would be relieved if you were dead.'

'I know it,' returned the other. 'I said so, didn't I? But neither oaths, or prayers, nor words, *will* kill me, and therefore I live, and mean to live.'

'And his mother died!' cried the old man, passionately clasping his hands and looking upward; 'and this is Heaven's justice!'

The other stood lounging with his foot upon a chair, and regarded him with a contemptuous sneer. He was a young man of one-and-twenty or thereabouts; well made, and certainly handsome, though the expression of his face was far from prepossessing, having in common with his manner and even his dress, a dissipated, insolent air which repelled one.

'Justice or no justice,' said the young fellow, 'here I am and here I shall stop till such time as I think fit to go, unless you send for assistance to put me out – which you won't do, I know. I tell you again that I want to see my sister.'

'*Your* sister!' said the old man bitterly.

'Ah! You can't change the relationship,' returned the other. 'If you could, you'd have done it long ago. I want to see my sister, that you keep cooped up here, poisoning her mind with your sly secrets and pretending an affection for her that you may work her to death, and add a few scraped shillings every week to the money you can hardly count. I want to see her; and I will.'

'Here's a moralist to talk of poisoned minds! Here's a generous spirit to scorn scraped-up shillings!' cried the old man, turning from him to me. 'A profligate, sir, who has forfeited every claim not only upon those who have the misfortune to be of his blood, but upon society which knows nothing of him but his misdeeds. A liar too,' he added, in a lower voice as he drew closer to me, 'who knows how dear she is to me, and seeks to wound me even there, because there is a stranger nearby.'

'Strangers are nothing to me, grandfather,' said the young fellow catching at the word, 'nor I to them, I hope. The best they can do, is to keep an eye to their business and leave me to mine. There's a friend of mine waiting outside, and as it seems that I may have to wait some time, I'll call him in, with your leave.'

Saying this, he stepped to the door, and looking down the street beckoned several times to some unseen person, who, to judge from the air of impatience with which these signals were accompanied, required a great quantity of persuasion to induce him to advance. At length there sauntered up, on the opposite side of the way – with a bad pretense of passing by accident – a figure conspicuous for its dirty smartness, which after a great many frowns and jerks of the head, in resistance of the invitation, ultimately crossed the road and was brought into the shop.

‘There. It’s Dick Swiveller,’ said the young fellow, pushing him in. ‘Sit down, Swiveller.’

‘But is the old min agreeable?’ said Mr Swiveller in an undertone.

Mr Swiveller complied, and looking about him with a propitiatory smile, observed that last week was a fine week for the ducks, and this week was a fine week for the dust; he also observed that whilst standing by the post at the street-corner, he had observed a pig with a straw in his mouth issuing out of the tobacco-shop, from which appearance he augured that another fine week for the ducks was approaching, and that rain would certainly ensue. He furthermore took occasion to apologize for any negligence that might be perceptible in his dress, on the ground that last night he had had ‘the sun very strong in his eyes’; by which expression he was understood to convey to his hearers in the most delicate manner possible, the information that he had been extremely drunk.

‘But what,’ said Mr Swiveller with a sigh, ‘what is the odds so long as the fire of soul is kindled at the taper of conviviality, and the wing of friendship never moults a feather! What is the odds so long as the spirit is expanded by means of rosy wine, and the present moment is the least happiest of our existence!’

‘You needn’t act the chairman here,’ said his friend, half aside.

‘Fred!’ cried Mr Swiveller, tapping his nose, ‘a word to the wise is sufficient for them – we may be good and happy without riches, Fred. Say not another syllable. I know my cue; smart is the word. Only one little whisper, Fred – is the old min friendly?’

‘Never you mind,’ replied his friend.

‘Right again, quite right,’ said Mr Swiveller, ‘caution is the word, and caution is the act.’ with that, he winked as if in preservation of some deep secret, and folding his arms and leaning back in his chair, looked up at the ceiling with profound gravity.

It was perhaps not very unreasonable to suspect from what had already passed, that Mr Swiveller was not quite recovered from the effects of the powerful sunlight to which he had made allusion; but if no such suspicion had been awakened by his speech, his wiry hair, dull eyes, and sallow face would still have been strong witnesses against him. His attire was not, as he had himself hinted, remarkable for the nicest arrangement, but was in a state of disorder which strongly induced the idea that he had gone to bed in it. It consisted of a brown body-coat with a great many brass buttons up the front and only one behind, a bright check neckerchief, a plaid waistcoat, soiled white trousers, and a very limp hat, worn with the wrong side foremost, to hide a hole in the brim. The breast of his coat was ornamented with an outside pocket from which there peeped forth the cleanest end of a very large and very ill-favoured handkerchief; his dirty wristbands were pulled on as far as possible and ostentatiously folded back over his cuffs; he displayed no gloves, and carried a yellow cane having at the top a bone hand with the semblance of a ring on its little finger and a black ball in its grasp. With all these personal advantages (to which may be added a strong savour of tobacco-smoke, and a prevailing greasiness of appearance) Mr Swiveller leant back in his chair with his eyes fixed on the ceiling, and occasionally pitching his voice to the needful key, obliged the company with a few bars of an intensely dismal air, and then, in the middle of a note, relapsed into his former silence.

The old man sat himself down in a chair, and with folded hands, looked sometimes at his grandson and sometimes at his strange companion, as if he were utterly powerless and had no resource but to leave them to do as they pleased. The young man reclined against a table at no great distance from his friend, in apparent indifference to everything that had passed; and I – who felt the difficulty of any interference, notwithstanding that the old man had appealed to me, both by words and looks

– made the best feint I could of being occupied in examining some of the goods that were disposed for sale, and paying very little attention to a person before me.

The silence was not of long duration, for Mr Swiveller, after favouring us with several melodious assurances that his heart was in the Highlands, and that he wanted but his Arab steed as a preliminary to the achievement of great feats of valour and loyalty, removed his eyes from the ceiling and subsided into prose again.

‘Fred,’ said Mr Swiveller stopping short, as if the idea had suddenly occurred to him, and speaking in the same audible whisper as before, ‘is the old min friendly?’

‘What does it matter?’ returned his friend peevishly.

‘No, but *is* he?’ said Dick.

‘Yes, of course. What do I care whether he is or not?’

Emboldened as it seemed by this reply to enter into a more general conversation, Mr Swiveller plainly laid himself out to captivate our attention.

He began by remarking that soda-water, though a good thing in the abstract, was apt to lie cold upon the stomach unless qualified with ginger, or a small infusion of brandy, which latter article he held to be preferable in all cases, saving for the one consideration of expense. Nobody venturing to dispute these positions, he proceeded to observe that the human hair was a great retainer of tobacco-smoke, and that the young gentlemen of Westminster and Eton, after eating vast quantities of apples to conceal any scent of cigars from their anxious friends, were usually detected in consequence of their heads possessing this remarkable property; when he concluded that if the Royal Society would turn their attention to the circumstance, and endeavour to find in the resources of science a means of preventing such untoward revelations, they might indeed be looked upon as benefactors to mankind. These opinions being equally incontrovertible with those he had already pronounced, he went on to inform us that Jamaica rum, though unquestionably an agreeable spirit of great richness and flavour, had the drawback of remaining constantly present to the taste next day; and nobody being venturesome enough to argue this point either, he increased in confidence and became yet more companionable and communicative.

‘It’s a devil of a thing, gentlemen,’ said Mr Swiveller, ‘when relations fall out and disagree. If the wing of friendship should never moult a feather, the wing of relationship should never be clipped, but be always expanded and serene. Why should a grandson and grandfather peg away at each other with mutual violence when all might be bliss and concord. Why not jine hands and forgit it?’

‘Hold your tongue,’ said his friend.

‘Sir,’ replied Mr Swiveller, ‘don’t you interrupt the chair. Gentlemen, how does the case stand, upon the present occasion? Here is a jolly old grandfather – I say it with the utmost respect – and here is a wild, young grandson. The jolly old grandfather says to the wild young grandson, “I have brought you up and educated you, Fred; I have put you in the way of getting on in life; you have bolted a little out of course, as young fellows often do; and you shall never have another chance, nor the ghost of half a one.” The wild young grandson makes answer to this and says, “You’re as rich as rich can be; you have been at no uncommon expense on my account, you’re saving up piles of money for my little sister that lives with you in a secret, stealthy, higger-muggering kind of way and with no manner of enjoyment – why can’t you stand a trifle for your grown-up relation?” The jolly old grandfather unto this, retorts, not only that he declines to fork out with that cheerful readiness which is always so agreeable and pleasant in a gentleman of his time of life, but that he will bow up, and call names, and make reflections whenever they meet. Then the plain question is, an’t it a pity that this state of things should continue, and how much better would it be for the gentleman to hand over a reasonable amount of tin, and make it all right and comfortable?’

Having delivered this oration with a great many waves and flourishes of the hand, Mr Swiveller abruptly thrust the head of his cane into his mouth as if to prevent himself from impairing the effect of his speech by adding one other word.

‘Why do you hunt and persecute me, God help me!’ said the old man turning to his grandson. ‘Why do you bring your profligate companions here? How often am I to tell you that my life is one of care and self-denial, and that I am poor?’

‘How often am I to tell you,’ returned the other, looking coldly at him, ‘that I know better?’

‘You have chosen your own path,’ said the old man. ‘Follow it. Leave Nell and me to toil and work.’

‘Nell will be a woman soon,’ returned the other, ‘and, bred in your faith, she’ll forget her brother unless he shows himself sometimes.’

‘Take care,’ said the old man with sparkling eyes, ‘that she does not forget you when you would have her memory keenest. Take care that the day don’t come when you walk barefoot in the streets, and she rides by in a gay carriage of her own.’

‘You mean when she has your money?’ retorted the other. ‘How like a poor man he talks!’

‘And yet,’ said the old man dropping his voice and speaking like one who thinks aloud, ‘how poor we are, and what a life it is! The cause is a young child’s guiltless of all harm or wrong, but nothing goes well with it! Hope and patience, hope and patience!’

These words were uttered in too low a tone to reach the ears of the young men. Mr Swiveller appeared to think that they implied some mental struggle consequent upon the powerful effect of his address, for he poked his friend with his cane and whispered his conviction that he had administered ‘a clincher,’ and that he expected a commission on the profits. Discovering his mistake after a while, he appeared to grow rather sleepy and discontented, and had more than once suggested the propriety of an immediate departure, when the door opened, and the child herself appeared.

CHAPTER 3

The child was closely followed by an elderly man of remarkably hard features and forbidding aspect, and so low in stature as to be quite a dwarf, though his head and face were large enough for the body of a giant. His black eyes were restless, sly, and cunning; his mouth and chin, bristly with the stubble of a coarse hard beard; and his complexion was one of that kind which never looks clean or wholesome. But what added most to the grotesque expression of his face was a ghastly smile, which, appearing to be the mere result of habit and to have no connection with any mirthful or complacent feeling, constantly revealed the few discoloured fangs that were yet scattered in his mouth, and gave him the aspect of a panting dog. His dress consisted of a large high-crowned hat, a worn dark suit, a pair of capacious shoes, and a dirty white neckerchief sufficiently limp and crumpled to disclose the greater portion of his wiry throat. Such hair as he had was of a grizzled black, cut short and straight upon his temples, and hanging in a frowzy fringe about his ears. His hands, which were of a rough, coarse grain, were very dirty; his fingernails were crooked, long, and yellow.

There was ample time to note these particulars, for besides that they were sufficiently obvious without very close observation, some moments elapsed before any one broke silence. The child advanced timidly towards her brother and put her hand in his, the dwarf (if we may call him so) glanced keenly at all present, and the curiosity-dealer, who plainly had not expected his uncouth visitor, seemed disconcerted and embarrassed.

‘Ah!’ said the dwarf, who with his hand stretched out above his eyes had been surveying the young man attentively, ‘that should be your grandson, neighbour!’

‘Say rather that he should not be,’ replied the old man. ‘But he is.’

‘And that?’ said the dwarf, pointing to Dick Swiveller.

‘Some friend of his, as welcome here as he,’ said the old man.

‘And that?’ inquired the dwarf, wheeling round and pointing straight at me.

‘A gentleman who was so good as to bring Nell home the other night when she lost her way, coming from your house.’

The little man turned to the child as if to chide her or express his wonder, but as she was talking to the young man, held his peace, and bent his head to listen.

‘Well, Nelly,’ said the young fellow aloud. ‘Do they teach you to hate me, eh?’

‘No, no. For shame. Oh, no!’ cried the child.

‘To love me, perhaps?’ pursued her brother with a sneer.

‘To do neither,’ she returned. ‘They never speak to me about you. Indeed they never do.’

‘I dare be bound for that,’ he said, darting a bitter look at the grandfather. ‘I dare be bound for that Nell. Oh! I believe you there!’

‘But I love you dearly, Fred,’ said the child.

‘No doubt!’

‘I do indeed, and always will,’ the child repeated with great emotion, ‘but oh! If you would leave off vexing him and making him unhappy, then I could love you more.’

‘I see!’ said the young man, as he stooped carelessly over the child, and having kissed her, pushed her from him: ‘There – get you away now you have said your lesson. You needn’t whimper. We part good friends enough, if that’s the matter.’

He remained silent, following her with his eyes, until she had gained her little room and closed the door; and then turning to the dwarf, said abruptly,

‘Harkee, Mr –’

‘Meaning me?’ returned the dwarf. ‘Quilp is my name. You might remember. It’s not a long one – Daniel Quilp.’

'Harkee, Mr Quilp, then,' pursued the other, 'You have some influence with my grandfather there.'

'Some,' said Mr Quilp emphatically.

'And are in a few of his mysteries and secrets.'

'A few,' replied Quilp, with equal dryness.

'Then let me tell him once for all, through you, that I will come into and go out of this place as often as I like, so long as he keeps Nell here; and that if he wants to be quit of me, he must first be quit of her. What have I done to be made a bugbear of, and to be shunned and dreaded as if I brought the plague? He'll tell you that I have no natural affection; and that I care no more for Nell, for her own sake, than I do for him. Let him say so. I care for the whim, then, of coming to and fro and reminding her of my existence. I *will* see her when I please. That's my point. I came here to-day to maintain it, and I'll come here again fifty times with the same object and always with the same success. I said I would stop till I had gained it. I have done so, and now my visit's ended. Come Dick.'

'Stop!' cried Mr Swiveller, as his companion turned toward the door. 'Sir!'

'Sir, I am your humble servant,' said Mr Quilp, to whom the monosyllable was addressed.

'Before I leave the gay and festive scene, and halls of dazzling light, sir,' said Mr Swiveller, 'I will with your permission, attempt a slight remark. I came here, sir, this day, under the impression that the old min was friendly.'

'Proceed, sir,' said Daniel Quilp; for the orator had made a sudden stop.

'Inspired by this idea and the sentiments it awakened, sir, and feeling as a mutual friend that badgering, baiting, and bullying, was not the sort of thing calculated to expand the souls and promote the social harmony of the contending parties, I took upon myself to suggest a course which is *the* course to be adopted to the present occasion. Will you allow me to whisper half a syllable, sir?'

Without waiting for the permission he sought, Mr Swiveller stepped up to the dwarf, and leaning on his shoulder and stooping down to get at his ear, said in a voice which was perfectly audible to all present,

'The watch-word to the old min is – fork.'

'Is what?' demanded Quilp.

'Is fork, sir, fork,' replied Mr Swiveller slapping his pocket. 'You are awake, sir?'

The dwarf nodded. Mr Swiveller drew back and nodded likewise, then drew a little further back and nodded again, and so on. By these means he in time reached the door, where he gave a great cough to attract the dwarf's attention and gain an opportunity of expressing in dumb show, the closest confidence and most inviolable secrecy. Having performed the serious pantomime that was necessary for the due conveyance of this idea, he cast himself upon his friend's track, and vanished.

'Humph!' said the dwarf with a sour look and a shrug of his shoulders, 'so much for dear relations. Thank God I acknowledge none! Nor need you either,' he added, turning to the old man, 'if you were not as weak as a reed, and nearly as senseless.'

'What would you have me do?' he retorted in a kind of helpless desperation. 'It is easy to talk and sneer. What would you have me do?'

'What would I do if I was in your case?' said the dwarf.

'Something violent, no doubt.'

'You're right there,' returned the little man, highly gratified by the compliment, for such he evidently considered it; and grinning like a devil as he rubbed his dirty hands together. 'Ask Mrs Quilp, pretty Mrs Quilp, obedient, timid, loving Mrs Quilp. But that reminds me – I have left her all alone, and she will be anxious and know not a moment's peace till I return. I know she's always in that condition when I'm away, thought she doesn't dare to say so, unless I lead her on and tell her she may speak freely and I won't be angry with her. Oh! well-trained Mrs Quilp.'

The creature appeared quite horrible with his monstrous head and little body, as he rubbed his hands slowly round, and round, and round again – with something fantastic even in his manner of

performing this slight action – and, dropping his shaggy brows and cocking his chin in the air, glanced upward with a stealthy look of exultation that an imp might have copied and appropriated to himself.

‘Here,’ he said, putting his hand into his breast and sidling up to the old man as he spoke; ‘I brought it myself for fear of accidents, as, being in gold, it was something large and heavy for Nell to carry in her bag. She need be accustomed to such loads betimes though, neighbor, for she will carry weight when you are dead.’

‘Heaven send she may! I hope so,’ said the old man with something like a groan.

‘Hope so!’ echoed the dwarf, approaching close to his ear; ‘neighbour, I would I knew in what good investment all these supplies are sunk. But you are a deep man, and keep your secret close.’

‘My secret!’ said the other with a haggard look. ‘Yes, you’re right – I – I – keep it close – very close.’

He said no more, but taking the money turned away with a slow, uncertain step, and pressed his hand upon his head like a weary and dejected man. The dwarf watched him sharply, while he passed into the little sitting-room and locked it in an iron safe above the chimney-piece; and after musing for a short space, prepared to take his leave, observing that unless he made good haste, Mrs Quilp would certainly be in fits on his return.

‘And so, neighbour,’ he added, ‘I’ll turn my face homewards, leaving my love for Nelly and hoping she may never lose her way again, though her doing so *has* procured me an honour I didn’t expect.’ With that he bowed and leered at me, and with a keen glance around which seemed to comprehend every object within his range of vision, however, small or trivial, went his way.

I had several times essayed to go myself, but the old man had always opposed it and entreated me to remain. As he renewed his entreaties on our being left alone, and adverted with many thanks to the former occasion of our being together, I willingly yielded to his persuasions, and sat down, pretending to examine some curious miniatures and a few old medals which he placed before me. It needed no great pressing to induce me to stay, for if my curiosity has been excited on the occasion of my first visit, it certainly was not diminished now.

Nell joined us before long, and bringing some needle-work to the table, sat by the old man’s side. It was pleasant to observe the fresh flowers in the room, the pet bird with a green bough shading his little cage, the breath of freshness and youth which seemed to rustle through the old dull house and hover round the child. It was curious, but not so pleasant, to turn from the beauty and grace of the girl, to the stooping figure, care-worn face, and jaded aspect of the old man. As he grew weaker and more feeble, what would become of this lonely little creature; poor protector as he was, say that he died – what would be her fate, then?

The old man almost answered my thoughts, as he laid his hand on hers, and spoke aloud.

‘I’ll be of better cheer, Nell,’ he said; ‘there must be good fortune in store for thee – I do not ask it for myself, but thee. Such miseries must fall on thy innocent head without it, that I cannot believe but that, being tempted, it will come at last!’

She looked cheerfully into his face, but made no answer.

‘When I think,’ said he, ‘of the many years – many in thy short life – that thou has lived with me; of my monotonous existence, knowing no companions of thy own age nor any childish pleasures; of the solitude in which thou has grown to be what thou art, and in which thou hast lived apart from nearly all thy kind but one old man; I sometimes fear I have dealt hardly by thee, Nell.’

‘Grandfather!’ cried the child in unfeigned surprise.

‘Not in intention – no no,’ said he. ‘I have ever looked forward to the time that should enable thee to mix among the gayest and prettiest, and take thy station with the best. But I still look forward, Nell, I still look forward, and if I should be forced to leave thee, meanwhile, how have I fitted thee for struggles with the world? The poor bird yonder is as well qualified to encounter it, and be turned adrift upon its mercies – Hark! I hear Kit outside. Go to him, Nell, go to him.’

She rose, and hurrying away, stopped, turned back, and put her arms about the old man's neck, then left him and hurried away again – but faster this time, to hide her falling tears.

'A word in your ear, sir,' said the old man in a hurried whisper. 'I have been rendered uneasy by what you said the other night, and can only plead that I have done all for the best – that it is too late to retract, if I could (though I cannot) – and that I hope to triumph yet. All is for her sake. I have borne great poverty myself, and would spare her the sufferings that poverty carries with it. I would spare her the miseries that brought her mother, my own dear child, to an early grave. I would leave her – not with resources which could be easily spent or squandered away, but with what would place her beyond the reach of want for ever. You mark me sir? She shall have no pittance, but a fortune – Hush! I can say no more than that, now or at any other time, and she is here again!'

The eagerness with which all this was poured into my ear, the trembling of the hand with which he clasped my arm, the strained and starting eyes he fixed upon me, the wild vehemence and agitation of his manner, filled me with amazement. All that I had heard and seen, and a great part of what he had said himself, led me to suppose that he was a wealthy man. I could form no comprehension of his character, unless he were one of those miserable wretches who, having made gain the sole end and object of their lives and having succeeded in amassing great riches, are constantly tortured by the dread of poverty, and beset by fears of loss and ruin. Many things he had said which I had been at a loss to understand, were quite reconcilable with the idea thus presented to me, and at length I concluded that beyond all doubt he was one of this unhappy race.

The opinion was not the result of hasty consideration, for which indeed there was no opportunity at that time, as the child came directly, and soon occupied herself in preparations for giving Kit a writing lesson, of which it seemed he had a couple every week, and one regularly on that evening, to the great mirth and enjoyment both of himself and his instructress. To relate how it was a long time before his modesty could be so far prevailed upon as to admit of his sitting down in the parlour, in the presence of an unknown gentleman – how, when he did set down, he tucked up his sleeves and squared his elbows and put his face close to the copy-book and squinted horribly at the lines – how, from the very first moment of having the pen in his hand, he began to wallow in blots, and to daub himself with ink up to the very roots of his hair – how, if he did by accident form a letter properly, he immediately smeared it out again with his arm in his preparations to make another – how, at every fresh mistake, there was a fresh burst of merriment from the child and louder and not less hearty laugh from poor Kit himself – and how there was all the way through, notwithstanding, a gentle wish on her part to teach, and an anxious desire on his to learn – to relate all these particulars would no doubt occupy more space and time than they deserve. It will be sufficient to say that the lesson was given – that evening passed and night came on – that the old man again grew restless and impatient – that he quitted the house secretly at the same hour as before – and that the child was once more left alone within its gloomy walls.

And now that I have carried this history so far in my own character and introduced these personages to the reader, I shall for the convenience of the narrative detach myself from its further course, and leave those who have prominent and necessary parts in it to speak and act for themselves.

CHAPTER 4

Mr and Mrs Quilp resided on Tower Hill; and in her bower on Tower Hill Mrs Quilp was left to pine the absence of her lord, when he quitted her on the business which he had already seen to transact.

Mr Quilp could scarcely be said to be of any particular trade or calling, though his pursuits were diversified and his occupations numerous. He collected the rents of whole colonies of filthy streets and alleys by the waterside, advanced money to the seamen and petty officers of merchant vessels, had a share in the ventures of divers mates of East Indiamen, smoked his smuggled cigars under the very nose of the Custom House, and made appointments on 'Change with men in glazed hats and round jackets pretty well every day. On the Surrey side of the river was a small rat-infested dreary yard called 'Quilp's Wharf,' in which were a little wooden counting-house burrowing all awry in the dust as if it had fallen from the clouds and ploughed into the ground; a few fragments of rusty anchors; several large iron rings; some piles of rotten wood; and two or three heaps of old sheet copper, crumpled, cracked, and battered. On Quilp's Wharf, Daniel Quilp was a ship-breaker, yet to judge from these appearances he must either have been a ship-breaker on a very small scale, or have broken his ships up very small indeed. Neither did the place present any extraordinary aspect of life or activity, as its only human occupant was an amphibious boy in a canvas suit, whose sole change of occupation was from sitting on the head of a pile and throwing stones into the mud when the tide was out, to standing with his hands in his pockets gazing listlessly on the motion and on the bustle of the river at high-water.

The dwarf's lodging on Tower hill comprised, besides the needful accommodation for himself and Mrs Quilp, a small sleeping-closet for that lady's mother, who resided with the couple and waged perpetual war with Daniel; of whom, notwithstanding, she stood in no slight dread. Indeed, the ugly creature contrived by some means or other – whether by his ugliness or his ferocity or his natural cunning is no great matter – to impress with a wholesome fear of his anger, most of those with whom he was brought into daily contact and communication. Over nobody had he such complete ascendancy as Mrs Quilp herself – a pretty little, mild-spoken, blue-eyed woman, who having allied herself in wedlock to the dwarf in one of those strange infatuations of which examples are by no means scarce, performed a sound practical penance for her folly, every day of her life.

It has been said that Mrs Quilp was pining in her bower. In her bower she was, but not alone, for besides the old lady her mother of whom mention has recently been made, there were present some half-dozen ladies of the neighborhood who had happened by a strange accident (and also by a little understanding among themselves) to drop in one after another, just about tea-time. This being a season favourable to conversation, and the room being a cool, shady, lazy kind of place, with some plants at the open window shutting out the dust, and interposing pleasantly enough between the tea table within and the old Tower without, it is no wonder that the ladies felt an inclination to talk and linger, especially when there are taken into account the additional inducements of fresh butter, new bread, shrimps, and watercresses.

Now, the ladies being together under these circumstances, it was extremely natural that the discourse should turn upon the propensity of mankind to tyrannize over the weaker sex, and the duty that developed upon the weaker sex to resist that tyranny and assert their rights and dignity. It was natural for four reasons: firstly, because Mrs Quilp being a young woman and notoriously under the dominion of her husband ought to be excited to rebel; secondly, because Mrs Quilp's parent was known to be laudably shrewish in her disposition and inclined to resist male authority; thirdly, because each visitor wished to show for herself how superior she was in this respect to the generality of her sex; and fourthly, because the company being accustomed to scandalise each other in pairs, were

deprived of their usual subject of conversation now that they were all assembled in close friendship, and had consequently no better employment than to attack the common enemy.

Moved by these considerations, a stout lady opened the proceedings by inquiring, with an air of great concern and sympathy, how Mr Quilp was; whereunto Mr Quilp's wife's mother replied sharply, 'Oh! He was well enough – nothing much was every the matter with him – and ill weeds were sure to thrive.' All the ladies then sighed in concert, shook their heads gravely, and looked at Mrs Quilp as a martyr.

'Ah!' said the spokeswoman, 'I wish you'd give her a little of your advice, Mrs Jiniwin' – Mrs Quilp had been a Miss Jiniwin it should be observed – 'nobody knows better than you, ma'am, what us women owe to ourselves.'

'Owe indeed, ma'am!' replied Mrs Jiniwin. 'When my poor husband, her dear father, was alive, if he had ever ventured a cross word to me, I'd have – ' The good old lady did not finish the sentence, but she twisted off the head of a shrimp with a vindictiveness which seemed to imply that the action was in some degree a substitute for words. In this light it was clearly understood by the other party, who immediately replied with great approbation, 'You quite enter into my feelings, ma'am, and it's jist what I'd do myself.'

'But you have no call to do it,' said Mrs Jiniwin. 'Luckily for you, you have no more occasion to do it than I had.'

'No woman need have, if she was true to herself,' rejoined the stout lady.

'Do you hear that, Betsy?' said Mrs Jiniwin, in a warning voice. 'How often have I said the same words to you, and almost gone down my knees when I spoke 'em!'

Poor Mrs Quilp, who had looked in a state of helplessness from one face of condolence to another, coloured, smiled, and shook her head doubtfully. This was the signal for a general clamour, which beginning in a low murmur gradually swelled into a great noise in which everybody spoke at once, and all said that she being a young woman had no right to set up her opinions against the experiences of those who knew so much better; that it was very wrong of her not to take the advice of people who had nothing at heart but her good; that it was next door to being downright ungrateful to conduct herself in that manner; that if she had no respect for herself she ought to have some for other women, all of whom she compromised by her meekness; and that if she had no respect for other women, the time would come when other women would have no respect for her; and she would be very sorry for that, they could tell her. Having dealt out these admonitions, the ladies fell to a more powerful assault than they had yet made upon the mixed tea, new bread, fresh butter, shrimps, and watercresses, and said that their vexation was so great to see her going on like that, that they could hardly bring themselves to eat a single morsel.

It's all very fine to talk,' said Mrs Quilp with much simplicity, 'but I know that if I was to die to-morrow, Quilp could marry anybody he pleased – now that he could, I know!'

There was quite a scream of indignation at this idea. Marry whom he pleased! They would like to see him dare to think of marrying any of them; they would like to see the faintest approach to such a thing. One lady (a widow) was quite certain she should stab him if he hinted at it.

'Very well,' said Mrs Quilp, nodding her head, 'as I said just now, it's very easy to talk, but I say again that I know – that I'm sure – Quilp has such a way with him when he likes, that the best looking woman here couldn't refuse him if I was dead, and she was free, and he chose to make love to her. Come!'

Everybody bridled up at this remark, as much as to say, 'I know you mean me. Let him try – that's all.' and yet for some hidden reason they were all angry with the widow, and each lady whispered in her neighbour's ear that it was very plain that said widow thought herself the person referred to, and what a puss she was!

'Mother knows,' said Mrs Quilp, 'that what I say is quite correct, for she often said so before we were married. Didn't you say so, mother?'

This inquiry involved the respected lady in rather a delicate position, for she certainly had been an active party in making her daughter Mrs Quilp, and, besides, it was not supporting the family credit to encourage the idea that she had married a man whom nobody else would have. On the other hand, to exaggerate the captivating qualities of her son-in-law would be to weaken the cause of revolt, in which all her energies were deeply engaged. Beset by these opposing considerations, Mrs Jiniwin admitted the powers of insinuation, but denied the right to govern, and with a timely compliment to the stout lady brought back the discussion to the point from which it had strayed.

‘Oh! It’s a sensible and proper thing indeed, what Mrs George has said!’ exclaimed the old lady. ‘If women are only true to themselves! – But Betsy isn’t, and more’s the shame and pity.’

‘Before I’d let a man order me about as Quilp orders her,’ said Mrs George, ‘before I’d consent to stand in awe of a man as she does of him, I’d – I’d kill myself, and write a letter first to say he did it!’

This remark being loudly commended and approved of, another lady (from the Minorities) put in her word:

‘Mr Quilp may be a very nice man,’ said this lady, ‘and I supposed there’s no doubt he is, because Mrs Quilp says he is, and Mrs Jiniwin says he is, and they ought to know, or nobody does. But still he is not quite a – what one calls a handsome man, nor quite a young man neither, which might be a little excuse for him if anything could be; whereas his wife is young, and is good-looking, and is a woman – which is the greatest thing after all.’

This last clause being delivered with extraordinary pathos, elicited a corresponding murmur from the hearers, stimulated by which the lady went on to remark that if such a husband was cross and unreasonable with such a wife, then —

‘If he is!’ interposed the mother, putting down her tea-cup and brushing the crumbs out of her lap, preparatory to making a solemn declaration. ‘If he is! He is the greatest tyrant that every lived, she daren’t call her soul her own, he makes her tremble with a word and even with a look, he frightens her to death, and she hasn’t the spirit to give him a word back, no, not a single word.’

Notwithstanding that the fact had been notorious beforehand to all the tea-drinkers, and had been discussed and expatiated on at every tea-drinking in the neighbourhood for the last twelve months, this official communication was no sooner made than they all began to talk at once and to vie with each other in vehemence and volubility. Mrs George remarked that people would talk, that people had often said this to her before, that Mrs Simmons then and there present had told her so twenty times, that she had always said, ‘No, Henrietta Simmons, unless I see it with my own eyes and hear it with my own ears, I never will believe it.’ Mrs Simmons corroborated this testimony and added strong evidence of her own. The lady from the Minorities recounted a successful course of treatment under which she had placed her own husband, who, from manifesting one month after marriage unequivocal symptoms of the tiger, had by this means become subdued into a perfect lamb. Another lady recounted her own personal struggle and final triumph, in the course whereof she had found it necessary to call in her mother and two aunts, and to weep incessantly night and day for six weeks. A third, who in the general confusion could secure no other listener, fastened herself upon a young woman still unmarried who happened to be amongst them, and conjured her, as she valued her own peace of mind and happiness to profit by this solemn occasion, to take example from the weakness of Mrs Quilp, and from that time forth to direct her whole thoughts to taming and subduing the rebellious spirit of man. The noise was at its height, and half the company had elevated their voices into a perfect shriek in order to drown the voices of the other half, when Mrs Jiniwin was seen to change colour and shake her forefinger stealthily, as if exhorting them to silence. Then, and not until then, Daniel Quilp himself, the cause and occasion of all this clamour, was observed to be in the room, looking on and listening with profound attention.

‘Go on, ladies, go on,’ said Daniel. ‘Mrs Quilp, pray ask the ladies to stop to supper, and have a couple of lobsters and something light and palatable.’

‘I – I – didn’t ask them to tea, Quilp,’ stammered his wife. ‘It’s quite an accident.’

‘So much the better, Mrs Quilp; these accidental parties are always the pleasantest,’ said the dwarf, rubbing his hands so hard that he seemed to be engaged in manufacturing, of the dirt with which they were encrusted, little charges for popguns. ‘What! Not going, ladies, you are not going, surely!’

His fair enemies tossed their heads slightly as they sought their respective bonnets and shawls, but left all verbal contention to Mrs Jiniwin, who finding herself in the position of champion, made a faint struggle to sustain the character.

‘And why not stop to supper, Quilp,’ said the old lady, ‘if my daughter had a mind?’

‘To be sure,’ rejoined Daniel. ‘Why not?’

‘There’s nothing dishonest or wrong in a supper, I hope?’ said Mrs Jiniwin.

‘Surely not,’ returned the dwarf. ‘Why should there be? Nor anything unwholesome, either, unless there’s lobster-salad or prawns, which I’m told are not good for digestion.’

‘And you wouldn’t like your wife to be attacked with that, or anything else that would make her uneasy would you?’ said Mrs Jiniwin.

‘Not for a score of worlds,’ replied the dwarf with a grin. ‘Not even to have a score of mothers-in-law at the same time – and what a blessing that would be!’

‘My daughter’s your wife, Mr Quilp, certainly,’ said the old lady with a giggle, meant for satirical and to imply that he needed to be reminded of the fact; ‘your wedded wife.’

‘So she is, certainly. So she is,’ observed the dwarf.

‘And she has a right to do as she likes, I hope, Quilp,’ said the old lady trembling, partly with anger and partly with a secret fear of her impish son-in-law.

‘Hope she has!’ he replied. ‘Oh! Don’t you know she has? Don’t you know she has, Mrs Jiniwin?’

‘I know she ought to have, Quilp, and would have, if she was of my way of thinking.’

‘Why an’t you of your mother’s way of thinking, my dear?’ said the dwarf, turing round and addressing his wife, ‘why don’t you always imitate your mother, my dear? She’s the ornament of her sex – your father said so every day of his life. I am sure he did.’

‘Her father was a blessed creetur, Quilp, and worthy twenty thousand of some people,’ said Mrs Jiniwin; ‘twenty hundred million thousand.’

‘I should like to have known him,’ remarked the dwarf. ‘I dare say he was a blessed creature then; but I’m sure he is now. It was a happy release. I believe he had suffered a long time?’

The old lady gave a gasp, but nothing came of it; Quilp resumed, with the same malice in his eye and the same sarcastic politeness on his tongue.

‘You look ill, Mrs Jiniwin; I know you have been exciting yourself too much – talking perhaps, for it is your weakness. Go to bed. Do go to bed.’

‘I shall go when I please, Quilp, and not before.’

‘But please to do now. Do please to go now,’ said the dwarf.

The old woman looked angrily at him, but retreated as he advanced, and falling back before him, suffered him to shut the door upon her and bolt her out among the guests, who were by this time crowding downstairs. Being left alone with his wife, who sat trembling in a corner with her eyes fixed upon the ground, the little man planted himself before her, and folding his arms looked steadily at her for a long time without speaking.

‘Mrs Quilp,’ he said at last.

‘Yes, Quilp,’ she replead meekly.

Instead of pursuing the theme he had in his mind, Quilp folded his arms again, and looked at her more sternly than before, while she averted her eyes and kept them on the ground.

‘Mrs Quilp.’

‘Yes, Quilp.’

‘If ever you listen to these beldames again, I’ll bite you.’

With this laconic threat, which he accompanied with a snarl that gave him the appearance of being particularly in earnest, Mr Quilp bade her clear the teaboard away, and bring the rum. The spirit being set before him in a huge case-bottle, which had originally come out of some ship's locker, he settled himself in an arm-chair with his large head and face squeezed up against the back, and his little legs planted on the table.

'Now, Mrs Quilp,' he said; 'I feel in a smoking humour, and shall probably blaze away all night. But sit where you are, if you please, in case I want you.'

His wife returned no other reply than the necessary 'Yes, Quilp,' and the small lord of the creation took his first cigar and mixed his first glass of grog. The sun went down and the stars peeped out, the Tower turned from its own proper colours to grey and from grey to black, the room became perfectly dark and the end of the cigar a deep fiery red, but still Mr Quilp went on smoking and drinking in the same position, and staring listlessly out of window with the doglike smile always on his face, save when Mrs Quilp made some involuntary movement of restlessness or fatigue; and then it expanded into a grin of delight.

CHAPTER 5

Whether Mr Quilp took any sleep by snatches of a few winks at a time, or whether he sat with his eyes wide open all night long, certain it is that he kept his cigar alight, and kindled every fresh one from the ashes of that which was nearly consumed, without requiring the assistance of a candle. Nor did the striking of the clocks, hour after hour, appear to inspire him with any sense of drowsiness or any natural desire to go to rest, but rather to increase his wakefulness, which he showed, at every such indication of the progress of the night, by a suppressed cackling in his throat, and a motion of his shoulders, like one who laughs heartily but the same time slyly and by stealth.

At length the day broke, and poor Mrs Quilp, shivering with cold of early morning and harassed by fatigue and want of sleep, was discovered sitting patiently on her chair, raising her eyes at intervals in mute appeal to the compassion and clemency of her lord, and gently reminding him by an occasional cough that she was still unpardoned and that her penance had been of long duration. But her dwarfish spouse still smoked his cigar and drank his rum without heeding her; and it was not until the sun had some time risen, and the activity and noise of city day were rife in the street, that he deigned to recognize her presence by any word or sign. He might not have done so even then, but for certain impatient tapping at the door he seemed to denote that some pretty hard knuckles were actively engaged upon the other side.

‘Why dear me!’ he said looking round with a malicious grin, ‘it’s day. Open the door, sweet Mrs Quilp!’

His obedient wife withdrew the bolt, and her lady mother entered.

Now, Mrs Jiniwin bounced into the room with great impetuosity; for, supposing her son-in-law to be still a-bed, she had come to relieve her feelings by pronouncing a strong opinion upon his general conduct and character. Seeing that he was up and dressed, and that the room appeared to have been occupied ever since she quitted it on the previous evening, she stopped short, in some embarrassment.

Nothing escaped the hawk’s eye of the ugly little man, who, perfectly understanding what passed in the old lady’s mind, turned uglier still in the fulness of his satisfaction, and bade her good morning, with a leer or triumph.

‘Why, Betsy,’ said the old woman, ‘you haven’t been – you don’t mean to say you’ve been a –’

‘Sitting up all night?’ said Quilp, supplying the conclusion of the sentence. ‘Yes she has!’

‘All night?’ cried Mrs Jiniwin.

‘Ay, all night. Is the dear old lady deaf?’ said Quilp, with a smile of which a frown was part. ‘Who says man and wife are bad company? Ha ha! The time has flown.’

‘You’re a brute!’ exclaimed Mrs Jiniwin.

‘Come come,’ said Quilp, wilfully misunderstanding her, of course, ‘you mustn’t call her names. She’s married now, you know. And though she did beguile the time and keep me from my bed, you must not be so tenderly careful of me as to be out of humour with her. Bless you for a dear old lady. Here’s to your health!’

‘I am much obliged to you,’ returned the old woman, testifying by a certain restlessness in her hands a vehement desire to shake her matronly fist at her son-in-law. ‘Oh! I’m very much obliged to you!’

‘Grateful soul!’ cried the dwarf. ‘Mrs Quilp.’

‘Yes, Quilp,’ said the timid sufferer.

‘Help your mother to get breakfast, Mrs Quilp. I am going to the wharf this morning – the earlier the better, so be quick.’

Mrs Jiniwin made a faint demonstration of rebellion by sitting down in a chair near the door and folding her arms as if in a resolute determination to do nothing. But a few whispered words from her daughter, and a kind inquiry from her son-in-law whether she felt faint, with a hint that there was

abundance of cold water in the next apartment, routed these symptoms effectually, and she applied herself to the prescribed preparations with sullen diligence.

While they were in progress, Mr Quilp withdrew to the adjoining room, and, turning back his coat-collar, proceeded to smear his countenance with a damp towel of very unwholesome appearance, which made his complexion rather more cloudy than it was before. But, while he was thus engaged, his caution and inquisitiveness did not forsake him, for with a face as sharp and cunning as ever, he often stopped, even in this short process, and stood listening for any conversation in the next room, of which he might be the theme.

‘Ah!’ he said after a short effort of attention, ‘it was not the towel over my ears, I thought it wasn’t. I’m a little hunchy villain and a monster, am I, Mrs Jiniwin? Oh!’

The pleasure of this discovery called up the old doglike smile in full force. When he had quite done with it, he shook himself in a very doglike manner, and rejoined the ladies.

Mr Quilp now walked up to front of a looking-glass, and was standing there putting on his neckerchief, when Mrs Jiniwin happening to be behind him, could not resist the inclination she felt to shake her fist at her tyrant son-in-law. It was the gesture of an instant, but as she did so and accompanied the action with a menacing look, she met his eye in the glass, catching her in the very act. The same glance at the mirror conveyed to her the reflection of a horribly grotesque and distorted face with the tongue lolling out; and the next instant the dwarf, turning about with a perfectly bland and placid look, inquired in a tone of great affection.

‘How are you now, my dear old darling?’

Slight and ridiculous as the incident was, it made him appear such a little fiend, and withal such a keen and knowing one, that the old woman felt too much afraid of him to utter a single word, and suffered herself to be led with extraordinary politeness to the breakfast-table. Here he by no means diminished the impression he had just produced, for he ate hard eggs, shell and all, devoured gigantic prawns with the heads and tails on, chewed tobacco and water-cresses at the same time and with extraordinary greediness, drank boiling tea without winking, bit his fork and spoon till they bent again, and in short performed so many horrifying and uncommon acts that the women were nearly frightened out of their wits, and began to doubt if he were really a human creature. At last, having gone through these proceedings and many others which were equally a part of his system, Mr Quilp left them, reduced to a very obedient and humbled state, and betook himself to the river-side, where he took boat for the wharf on which he had bestowed his name.

It was flood tide when Daniel Quilp sat himself down in the ferry to cross to the opposite shore. A fleet of barges were coming lazily on, some sideways, some head first, some stern first; all in a wrong-headed, dogged, obstinate way, bumping up against the larger craft, running under the bows of steamboats, getting into every kind of nook and corner where they had no business, and being crunched on all sides like so many walnut-shells; while each with its pair of long sweeps struggling and splashing in the water looked like some lumbering fish in pain. In some of the vessels at anchor all hands were busily engaged in coiling ropes, spreading out sails to dry, taking in or discharging their cargoes; in others no life was visible but two or three tarry boys, and perhaps a barking dog running to and fro upon the deck or scrambling up to look over the side and bark the louder for the view. Coming slowly on through the forests of masts was a great steamship, beating the water in short impatient strokes with her heavy paddles as though she wanted room to breathe, and advancing in her huge bulk like a sea monster among the minnows of the Thames. On either hand were long black tiers of colliers; between them vessels slowly working out of harbour with sails glistening in the sun, and creaking noise on board, re-echoed from a hundred quarters. The water and all upon it was in active motion, dancing and buoyant and bubbling up; while the old grey Tower and piles of building on the shore, with many a church-spire shooting up between, looked coldly on, and seemed to disdain their chafing, restless neighbour.

Daniel Quilp, who was not much affected by a bright morning save in so far as it spared him the trouble of carrying an umbrella, caused himself to be put ashore hard by the wharf, and proceeded thither through a narrow lane which, partaking of the amphibious character of its frequenters, had as much water as mud in its composition, and a very liberal supply of both. Arrived at his destination, the first object that presented itself to his view was a pair of very imperfectly shod feet elevated in the air with the soles upwards, which remarkable appearance was referable to the boy, who being of an eccentric spirit and having a natural taste for tumbling, was now standing on his head and contemplating the aspect of the river under these uncommon circumstances. He was speedily brought on his heels by the sound of his master's voice, and as soon as his head was in its right position, Mr Quilp, to speak expressively in the absence of a better verb, 'punched it' for him.

'Come, you let me alone,' said the boy, parrying Quilp's hand with both his elbows alternatively. 'You'll get something you won't like if you don't and so I tell you.'

'You dog,' snarled Quilp, 'I'll beat you with an iron rod, I'll scratch you with a rusty nail, I'll pinch your eyes, if you talk to me – I will.'

With these threats he clenched his hand again, and dexterously diving in between the elbows and catching the boy's head as it dodged from side to side, gave it three or four good hard knocks. Having now carried his point and insisted on it, he left off.

'You won't do it agin,' said the boy, nodding his head and drawing back, with the elbows ready in case of the worst; 'now –'

'Stand still, you dog,' said Quilp. 'I won't do it again, because I've done it as often as I want. Here. Take the key.'

'Why don't you hit one of your size?' said the boy approaching very slowly.

'Where is there one of my size, you dog?' returned Quilp. 'Take the key, or I'll brain you with it' – indeed he gave him a smart tap with the handle as he spoke. 'Now, open the counting-house.'

The boy sulkily complied, muttering at first, but desisting when he looked round and saw that Quilp was following him with a steady look. And here it may be remarked, that between this boy and the dwarf there existed a strange kind of mutual liking. How born or bred, and or nourished upon blows and threats on one side, and retorts and defiances on the other, is not to the purpose. Quilp would certainly suffer nobody to contract him but the boy, and the boy would assuredly not have submitted to be so knocked about by anybody but Quilp, when he had the power to run away at any time he chose.

'Now,' said Quilp, passing into the wooden counting-house, 'you mind the wharf. Stand upon your head agin, and I'll cut one of your feet off.'

The boy made no answer, but directly Quilp had shut himself in, stood on his head before the door, then walked on his hands to the back and stood on his head there, and then to the opposite side and repeated the performance. There were indeed four sides to the counting-house, but he avoided that one where the window was, deeming it probable that Quilp would be looking out of it. This was prudent, for in point of fact, the dwarf, knowing his disposition, was lying in wait at a little distance from the sash armed with a large piece of wood, which, being rough and jagged and studded in many parts with broken nails, might possibly have hurt him.

It was a dirty little box, this counting-house, with nothing in it but an old ricketty desk and two stools, a hat-peg, an ancient almanack, an inkstand with no ink, and the stump of one pen, and an eight-day clock which hadn't gone for eighteen years at least, and of which the minute-hand had been twisted off for a tooth-pick. Daniel Quilp pulled his hat over his brows, climbed on to the desk (which had a flat top) and stretching his short length upon it went to sleep with ease of an old practitioner; intending, no doubt, to compensate himself for the deprivation of last night's rest, by a long and sound nap.

Sound it might have been, but long it was not, for he had not been asleep a quarter of an hour when the boy opened the door and thrust in his head, which was like a bundle of badly-picked oakum. Quilp was a light sleeper and started up directly.

‘Here’s somebody for you,’ said the boy.

‘Who?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Ask!’ said Quilp, seizing the trifle of wood before mentioned and throwing it at him with such dexterity that it was well the boy disappeared before it reached the spot on which he had stood. ‘Ask, you dog.’

Not caring to venture within range of such missiles again, the boy discreetly sent in his stead the first cause of the interruption, who now presented herself at the door.

‘What, Nelly!’ cried Quilp.

‘Yes,’ said the child, hesitating whether to enter or retreat, for the dwarf just roused, with his dishevelled hair hanging all about him and a yellow handkerchief over his head, was something fearful to behold; it’s only me, sir.’

‘Come in,’ said Quilp, without getting off the desk. ‘Come in. Stay. Just look out into the yard, and see whether there’s a boy standing on his head.’

‘No, sir,’ replied Nell. ‘He’s on his feet.’

‘You’re sure he is?’ said Quilp. ‘Well. Now, come in and shut the door. What’s your message, Nelly?’

The child handed him a letter. Mr Quilp, without changing his position further than to turn over a little more on his side and rest his chin on his hand, proceeded to make himself acquainted with its contents.

CHAPTER 6

Little Nell stood timidly by, with her eyes raised to the countenance of Mr Quilp as he read the letter, plainly showing by her looks that while she entertained some fear and distrust of the little man, she was much inclined to laugh at his uncouth appearance and grotesque attitude. And yet there was visible on the part of the child a painful anxiety for his reply, and consciousness of his power to render it disagreeable or distressing, which was strongly at variance with this impulse and restrained it more effectually than she could possibly have done by any efforts of her own.

That Mr Quilp was himself perplexed, and that in no small degree, by the contents of the letter, was sufficiently obvious. Before he had got through the first two or three lines he began to open his eyes very wide and to frown most horribly, the next two or three caused him to scratch his head in an uncommonly vicious manner, and when he came to the conclusion he gave a long dismal whistle indicative of surprise and dismay. After folding and laying it down beside him, he bit the nails of all of his ten fingers with extreme voracity; and taking it up sharply, read it again. The second perusal was to all appearance as unsatisfactory as the first, and plunged him into a profound reverie from which he awakened to another assault upon his nails and a long stare at the child, who with her eyes turned towards the ground awaited his further pleasure.

‘Halloa here!’ he said at length, in a voice, and with a suddenness, which made the child start as though a gun had been fired off at her ear. ‘Nelly!’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Do you know what’s inside this letter, Nell?’

‘No, sir!’

‘Are you sure, quite sure, quite certain, upon your soul?’

‘Quite sure, sir.’

‘Do you wish you may die if you do know, hey?’ said the dwarf.

‘Indeed I don’t know,’ returned the child.

‘Well!’ muttered Quilp as he marked her earnest look. ‘I believe you. Humph! Gone already? Gone in four-and-twenty hours! What the devil has he done with it, that’s the mystery!’

This reflection set him scratching his head and biting his nails once more. While he was thus employed his features gradually relaxed into what was with him a cheerful smile, but which in any other man would have been a ghastly grin of pain, and when the child looked up again she found that he was regarding her with extraordinary favour and complacency.

‘You look very pretty to-day, Nelly, charmingly pretty. Are you tired, Nelly?’

‘No, sir. I’m in a hurry to get back, for he will be anxious while I am away.’

‘There’s no hurry, little Nell, no hurry at all,’ said Quilp. ‘How should you like to be my number two, Nelly?’

‘To be what, sir?’

‘My number two, Nelly, my second, my Mrs Quilp,’ said the dwarf.

The child looked frightened, but seemed not to understand him, which Mr Quilp observing, hastened to make his meaning more distinctly.

‘To be Mrs Quilp the second, when Mrs Quilp the first is dead, sweet Nell,’ said Quilp, wrinkling up his eyes and luring her towards him with his bent forefinger, ‘to be my wife, my little cherry-cheeked, red-lipped wife. Say that Mrs Quilp lives five year, or only four, you’ll be just the proper age for me. Ha ha! Be a good girl, Nelly, a very good girl, and see if one of these days you don’t come to be Mrs Quilp of Tower Hill.’

So far from being sustained and stimulated by this delightful prospect, the child shrank from him in great agitation, and trembled violently. Mr Quilp, either because frightening anybody afforded him a constitutional delight, or because it was pleasant to contemplate the death of Mrs Quilp number

one, and the elevation of Mrs Quilp number two to her post and title, or because he was determined from purposes of his own to be agreeable and good-humoured at that particular time, only laughed and feigned to take no heed of her alarm.

‘You shall come with me to Tower Hill and see Mrs Quilp that is, directly,’ said the dwarf. ‘She’s very fond of you, Nell, though not so fond as I am. You shall come home with me.’

‘I must go back indeed,’ said the child. ‘He told me to return directly I had the answer.’

‘But you haven’t it, Nelly,’ retorted the dwarf, ‘and won’t have it, and can’t have it, until I have been home, so you see that to do your errand, you must go with me. Reach me yonder hat, my dear, and we’ll go directly.’ With that, Mr Quilp suffered himself to roll gradually off the desk until his short legs touched the ground, when he got upon them and led the way from the counting-house to the wharf outside, when the first objects that presented themselves were the boy who had stood on his head and another young gentleman of about his own stature, rolling in the mud together, locked in a tight embrace, and cuffing each other with mutual heartiness.

‘It’s Kit!’ cried Nelly, clasping her hand, ‘poor Kit who came with me! Oh, pray stop them, Mr Quilp!’

‘I’ll stop ‘em,’ cried Quilp, diving into the little counting-house and returning with a thick stick, ‘I’ll stop ‘em. Now, my boys, fight away. I’ll fight you both. I’ll take both of you, both together, both together!’

With which defiances the dwarf flourished his cudgel, and dancing round the combatants and treading upon them and skipping over them, in a kind of frenzy, laid about him, now on one and now on the other, in a most desperate manner, always aiming at their heads and dealing such blows as none but the veriest little savage would have inflicted. This being warmer work than they had calculated upon, speedily cooled the courage of the belligerents, who scrambled to their feet and called for quarter.

‘I’ll beat you to a pulp, you dogs,’ said Quilp, vainly endeavoring to get near either of them for a parting blow. ‘I’ll bruise you until you’re copper-coloured, I’ll break your faces till you haven’t a profile between you, I will.’

‘Come, you drop that stick or it’ll be worse for you,’ said his boy, dodging round him and watching an opportunity to rush in; ‘you drop that stick.’

‘Come a little nearer, and I’ll drop it on your skull, you dog,’ said Quilp, with gleaming eyes; ‘a little nearer – nearer yet.’

But the boy declined the invitation until his master was apparently a little off his guard, when he darted in and seizing the weapon tried to wrest it from his grasp. Quilp, who was as strong as a lion, easily kept his hold until the boy was tugging at it with his utmost power, when he suddenly let it go and sent him reeling backwards, so that he fell violently upon his head. The success of this manoeuvre tickled Mr Quilp beyond description, and he laughed and stamped upon the ground as at a most irresistible jest.

‘Never mind,’ said the boy, nodding his head and rubbing it at the same time; ‘you see if ever I offer to strike anybody again because they say you’re an uglier dwarf than can be seen anywheres for a penny, that’s all.’

‘Do you mean to say, I’m not, you dog?’ returned Quilp.

‘No!’ retorted the boy.

‘Then what do you fight on my wharf for, you villain?’ said Quilp.

‘Because he said so,’ replied the boy, pointing to Kit, ‘not because you an’t.’

‘Then why did he say,’ bawled Kit, ‘that Miss Nelly was ugly, and that she and my master was obliged to do whatever his master liked? Why did he say that?’

‘He said what he did because he’s a fool, and you said what you did because you’re very wise and clever – almost too clever to live, unless you’re very careful of yourself, Kit.’ said Quilp, with great suavity in his manner, but still more of quiet malice about his eyes and mouth. ‘Here’s sixpence

for you, Kit. Always speak the truth. At all times, Kit, speak the truth. Lock the counting-house, you dog, and bring me the key.'

The other boy, to whom this order was addressed, did as he was told, and was rewarded for his partizanship in behalf of his master, by a dexterous rap on the nose with the key, which brought the water into his eyes. Then Mr Quilp departed with the child and Kit in a boat, and the boy revenged himself by dancing on his head at intervals on the extreme verge of the wharf, during the whole time they crossed the river.

There was only Mrs Quilp at home, and she, little expecting the return of her lord, was just composing herself for a refreshing slumber when the sound of his footsteps roused her. She had barely time to seem to be occupied in some needle-work, when he entered, accompanied by the child; having left Kit downstairs.

'Here's Nelly Trent, dear Mrs Quilp,' said her husband. 'A glass of wine, my dear, and a biscuit, for she has had a long walk. She'll sit with you, my soul, while I write a letter.'

Mrs Quilp looked tremblingly in her spouse's face to know what this unusual courtesy might portend, and obedient to the summons she saw in his gesture, followed him into the next room.

'Mind what I say to you,' whispered Quilp. 'See if you can get out of her anything about her grandfather, or what they do, or how they live, or what he tells her. I've my reasons for knowing, if I can. You women talk more freely to one another than you do to us, and you have a soft, mild way with you that'll win upon her. Do you hear?'

'Yes, Quilp.'

'Go then. What's the matter now?'

'Dear Quilp,' faltered his wife. 'I love the child – if you could do without making me deceive her –'

The dwarf muttering a terrible oath looked round as if for some weapon with which to inflict condign punishment upon his disobedient wife. The submissive little woman hurriedly entreated him not to be angry, and promised to do as he bade her.

'Do you hear me,' whispered Quilp, nipping and pinching her arm; 'worm yourself into her secrets; I know you can. I'm listening, recollect. If you're not sharp enough, I'll creak the door, and woe betide you if I have to creak it much. Go!'

Mrs Quilp departed according to order, and her amiable husband, ensconcing himself behind the partly opened door, and applying his ear close to it, began to listen with a face of great craftiness and attention.

Poor Mrs Quilp was thinking, however, in what manner to begin or what kind of inquiries she could make; and it was not until the door, creaking in a very urgent manner, warned her to proceed without further consideration, that the sound of her voice was heard.

'How very often you have come backwards and forwards lately to Mr Quilp, my dear.'

'I have said so to grandfather, a hundred times,' returned Nell innocently.

'And what has he said to that?'

'Only sighed, and dropped his head, and seemed so sad and wretched that if you could have seen him I am sure you must have cried; you could not have helped it more than I, I know. How that door creaks!'

'It often does,' returned Mrs Quilp, with an uneasy glance towards it. 'But your grandfather – he used not to be so wretched?'

'Oh, no!' said the child eagerly, 'so different! We were once so happy and he so cheerful and contented! You cannot think what a sad change has fallen on us since.'

'I am very, very sorry, to hear you speak like this, my dear!' said Mrs Quilp. And she spoke the truth.

‘Thank you,’ returned the child, kissing her cheek, ‘you are always kind to me, and it is a pleasure to talk to you. I can speak to no one else about him, but poor Kit. I am very happy still, I ought to feel happier perhaps than I do, but you cannot think how it grieves me sometimes to see him alter so.’

‘He’ll alter again, Nelly,’ said Mrs Quilp, ‘and be what he was before.’

‘Oh, if God would only let that come about!’ said the child with streaming eyes; ‘but it is a long time now, since he first began to – I thought I saw that door moving!’

‘It’s the wind,’ said Mrs Quilp, faintly. ‘Began to –’

‘To be so thoughtful and dejected, and to forget our old way of spending the time in the long evenings,’ said the child. ‘I used to read to him by the fireside, and he sat listening, and when I stopped and we began to talk, he told me about my mother, and how she once looked and spoke just like me when she was a little child. Then he used to take me on his knee, and try to make me understand that she was not lying in her grave, but had flown to a beautiful country beyond the sky where nothing died or ever grew old – we were very happy once!’

‘Nelly, Nelly!’ said the poor woman, ‘I can’t bear to see one as young as you so sorrowful. Pray don’t cry.’

‘I do so very seldom,’ said Nell, ‘but I have kept this to myself a long time, and I am not quite well, I think, for the tears come into my eyes and I cannot keep them back. I don’t mind telling you my grief, for I know you will not tell it to any one again.’

Mrs Quilp turned away her head and made no answer.

‘Then,’ said the child, ‘we often walked in the fields and among the green trees, and when we came home at night, we liked it better for being tired, and said what a happy place it was. And if it was dark and rather dull, we used to say, what did it matter to us, for it only made us remember our last walk with greater pleasure, and look forward to our next one. But now we never have these walks, and though it is the same house it is darker and much more gloomy than it used to be, indeed!’

She paused here, but though the door creaked more than once, Mrs Quilp said nothing.

‘Mind you don’t suppose,’ said the child earnestly, ‘that grandfather is less kind to me than he was. I think he loves me better every day, and is kinder and more affectionate than he was the day before. You do not know how fond he is of me!’

‘I am sure he loves you dearly,’ said Mrs Quilp.

‘Indeed, indeed he does!’ cried Nell, ‘as dearly as I love him. But I have not told you the greatest change of all, and this you must never breathe again to any one. He has no sleep or rest, but that which he takes by day in his easy chair; for every night and nearly all night long he is away from home.’

‘Nelly!’

‘Hush!’ said the child, laying her finger on her lip and looking round. ‘When he comes home in the morning, which is generally just before day, I let him in. Last night he was very late, and it was quite light. I saw that his face was deadly pale, that his eyes were bloodshot, and that his legs trembled as he walked. When I had gone to bed again, I heard him groan. I got up and ran back to him, and heard him say, before he knew that I was there, that he could not bear his life much longer, and if it was not for the child, would wish to die. What shall I do! Oh! What shall I do!’

The fountains of her heart were opened; the child, overpowered by the weight of her sorrows and anxieties, by the first confidence she had ever shown, and the sympathy with which her little tale had been received, hid her face in the arms of her helpless friend, and burst into a passion of tears.

In a few minutes Mr Quilp returned, and expressed the utmost surprise to find her in this condition, which he did very naturally and with admirable effect, for that kind of acting had been rendered familiar to him by long practice, and he was quite at home in it.

‘She’s tired you see, Mrs Quilp,’ said the dwarf, squinting in a hideous manner to imply that his wife was to follow his lead. ‘It’s a long way from her home to the wharf, and then she was alarmed to see a couple of young scoundrels fighting, and was timorous on the water besides. All this together has been too much for her. Poor Nell!’

Mr Quilp unintentionally adopted the very best means he could have devised for the recovery of his young visitor, by patting her on the head. Such an application from any other hand might not have produced a remarkable effect, but the child shrank so quickly from his touch and felt such an instinctive desire to get out of his reach, that she rose directly and declared herself ready to return.

‘But you’d better wait, and dine with Mrs Quilp and me.’ said the dwarf.

‘I have been away too long, sir, already,’ returned Nell, drying her eyes.

‘Well,’ said Mr Quilp, ‘if you will go, you will, Nelly. Here’s the note. It’s only to say that I shall see him to-morrow or maybe next day, and that I couldn’t do that little business for him this morning. Good-bye, Nelly. Here, you sir; take care of her, d’ye hear?’

Kit, who appeared at the summons, deigned to make no reply to so needless an injunction, and after staring at Quilp in a threatening manner, as if he doubted whether he might not have been the cause of Nelly shedding tears, and felt more than half disposed to revenge the fact upon him on the mere suspicion, turned about and followed his young mistress, who had by this time taken her leave of Mrs Quilp and departed.

‘You’re a keen questioner, an’t you, Mrs Quilp?’ said the dwarf, turning upon her as soon as they were left alone.

‘What more could I do?’ returned his wife mildly.

‘What more could you do!’ sneered Quilp, ‘couldn’t you have done something less? Couldn’t you have done what you had to do, without appearing in your favourite part of the crocodile, you minx?’

‘I am very sorry for the child, Quilp,’ said his wife. ‘Surely I’ve done enough. I’ve led her on to tell her secret she supposed we were alone; and you were by, God forgive me.’

‘You led her on! You did a great deal truly!’ said Quilp. ‘What did I tell you about making me creak the door? It’s lucky for you that from what she let fall, I’ve got the clue I want, for if I hadn’t, I’d have visited the failure upon you, I can tell you.’

Mrs Quilp being fully persuaded of this, made no reply. Her husband added with some exultation,

‘But you may thank your fortunate stars – the same stars that made you Mrs Quilp – you may thank them that I’m upon the old gentleman’s track, and have got a new light. So let me hear no more about this matter now or at any other time, and don’t get anything too nice for dinner, for I shan’t be home to it.’

So saying, Mr Quilp put his hat on and took himself off, and Mrs Quilp, who was afflicted beyond measure by the recollection of the part she had just acted, shut herself up in her chamber, and smothering her head in the bed-clothes bemoaned her fault more bitterly than many less tender-hearted persons would have mourned a much greater offence; for, in the majority of cases, conscience is an elastic and very flexible article, which will bear a deal of stretching and adapt itself to a great variety of circumstances. Some people by prudent management and leaving it off piece by piece like a flannel waistcoat in warm weather, even contrive, in time, to dispense with it altogether; but there be others who can assume the garment and throw it off at pleasure; and this, being the greatest and most convenient improvement, is the one most in vogue.

CHAPTER 7

Fred,' said Mr Swiveller, 'remember the once popular melody of Begone dull care; fan the sinking flame of hilarity with the wing of friendship; and pass the rosy wine.'

Mr Richard Swiveller's apartments were in the neighbourhood of Drury Lane, and in addition to this convenience of situation had the advantage of being over a tobacconist's shop, so that he was enabled to procure a refreshing sneeze at any time by merely stepping out upon the staircase, and was saved the trouble and expense of maintaining a snuff-box. It was in these apartments that Mr Swiveller made use of the expressions above recorded for the consolation and encouragement of his desponding friend; and it may not be uninteresting or improper to remark that even these brief observations partook in a double sense of the figurative and poetical character of Mr Swiveller's mind, as the rosy wine was in fact represented by one glass of cold gin-and-water, which was replenished as occasion required from a bottle and jug upon the table, and was passed from one to another, in a scarcity of tumblers which, as Mr Swiveller's was a bachelor's establishment, may be acknowledged without a blush. By a like pleasant fiction his single chamber was always mentioned in a plural number. In its disengaged times, the tobacconist had announced it in his window as 'apartments' for a single gentleman, and Mr Swiveller, following up the hint, never failed to speak of it as his rooms, his lodgings, or his chambers, conveying to his hearers a notion of indefinite space, and leaving their imaginations to wander through long suites of lofty halls, at pleasure.

In this flight of fancy, Mr Swiveller was assisted by a deceptive piece of furniture, in reality a bedstead, but in semblance a bookcase, which occupied a prominent situation in his chamber and seemed to defy suspicion and challenge inquiry. There is no doubt that by day Mr Swiveller firmly believed this secret convenience to be a bookcase and nothing more; that he closed his eyes to the bed, resolutely denied the existence of the blankets, and spurned the bolster from his thoughts. No word of its real use, no hint of its nightly service, no allusion to its peculiar properties, had ever passed between him and his most intimate friends. Implicit faith in the deception was the first article of his creed. To be the friend of Swiveller you must reject all circumstantial evidence, all reason, observation, and experience, and repose a blind belief in the bookcase. It was his pet weakness, and he cherished it.

'Fred!' said Mr Swiveller, finding that his former adjuration had been productive of no effect. 'Pass the rosy.'

Young Trent with an impatient gesture pushed the glass towards him, and fell again in the moody attitude from which he had been unwillingly roused.

'I'll give you, Fred,' said his friend, stirring the mixture, 'a little sentiment appropriate to the occasion. Here's May the –'

'Pshaw!' interposed the other. 'You worry me to death with your chattering. You can be merry under any circumstances.'

'Why, Mr Trent,' returned Dick, 'there is a proverb which talks about being merry and wise. There are some people who can be merry and can't be wise, and some who can be wise (or think they can) and can't be merry. I'm one of the first sort. If the proverb's a good 'un, I suppose it's better to keep to half of it than none; at all events, I'd rather be merry and not wise, than like you, neither one nor t'other.'

'Bah!' muttered his friend, peevishly.

'With all my heart,' said Mr Swiveller. 'In the polite circles I believe this sort of thing isn't usually said to a gentleman in his own apartments, but never mind that. Make yourself at home,' adding to this retort an observation to the effect that his friend appeared to be rather 'cranky' in point of temper, Richard Swiveller finished the rosy and applied himself to the composition of another glassful, in which, after tasting it with great relish, he proposed a toast to an imaginary company.

‘Gentlemen, I’ll give you, if you please, Success to the ancient family of the Swivellers, and good luck to Mr Richard in particular – Mr Richard, gentlemen,’ said Dick with great emphasis, ‘who spends all his money on his friends and is Bah!’d for his pains. Hear, hear!’

‘Dick!’ said the other, returning to his seat after having paced the room twice or thrice, ‘will you talk seriously for two minutes, if I show you a way to make your fortune with very little trouble?’

‘You’ve shown me so many,’ returned Dick; ‘and nothing has come of any one of ‘em but empty pockets –’

‘You’ll tell a different story of this one, before a very long time is over,’ said his companion, drawing his chair to the table. ‘You saw my sister Nell?’

‘What about her?’ returned Dick.

‘She has a pretty face, has she not?’

‘Why, certainly,’ replied Dick. ‘I must say for her that there’s not any very strong family likeness between her and you.’

‘Has she a pretty face,’ repeated his friend impatiently.

‘Yes,’ said Dick, ‘she has a pretty face, a very pretty face. What of that?’

‘I’ll tell you,’ returned his friend. ‘It’s very plain that the old man and I will remain at daggers drawn to the end of our lives, and that I have nothing to expect from him. You see that, I suppose?’

‘A bat might see that, with the sun shining,’ said Dick.

‘It’s equally plain that the money which the old flint – rot him – first taught me to expect that I should share with her at his death, will all be hers, is it not?’

‘I should said it was,’ replied Dick; ‘unless the way in which I put the case to him, made an impression. It may have done so. It was powerful, Fred. ‘Here is a jolly old grandfather’ – that was strong, I thought – very friendly and natural. Did it strike you in that way?’

‘It didn’t strike him,’ returned the other, ‘so we needn’t discuss it. Now look here. Nell is nearly fourteen.’

‘Fine girl of her age, but small,’ observed Richard Swiveller parenthetically.

‘If I am to go on, be quiet for one minute,’ returned Trent, fretting at the slight interest the other appeared to take in the conversation. ‘Now I’m coming to the point.’

‘That’s right,’ said Dick.

‘The girl has strong affections, and brought up as she has been, may, at her age, be easily influenced and persuaded. If I take her in hand, I will be bound by a very little coaxing and threatening to bend her to my will. Not to beat about the bush (for the advantages of the scheme would take a week to tell) what’s to prevent your marrying her?’

Richard Swiveller, who had been looking over the rim of the tumbler while his companion addressed the foregoing remarks to him with great energy and earnestness of manner, no sooner heard these words than he evinced the utmost consternation, and with difficulty ejaculated the monosyllable:

‘What!’

‘I say, what’s to prevent,’ repeated the other with a steadiness of manner, of the effect of which upon his companion he was well assured by long experience, ‘what’s to prevent your marrying her?’

‘And she “nearly fourteen”!’ cried Dick.

‘I don’t mean marrying her now’ – returned the brother angrily; ‘say in two year’s time, in three, in four. Does the old man look like a long-liver?’

‘He don’t look like it,’ said Dick shaking his head, ‘but these old people – there’s no trusting them, Fred. There’s an aunt of mine down in Dorsetshire that was going to die when I was eight years old, and hasn’t kept her word yet. They’re so aggravating, so unprincipled, so spiteful – unless there’s apoplexy in the family, Fred, you can’t calculate upon ‘em, and even then they deceive you just as often as not.’

‘Look at the worst side of the question then,’ said Trent as steadily as before, and keeping his eyes upon his friend. ‘Suppose he lives.’

‘To be sure,’ said Dick. ‘There’s the rub.’

‘I say,’ resumed his friend, ‘suppose he lives, and I persuaded, or if the word sounds more feasible, forced Nell to a secret marriage with you. What do you think would come of that?’

‘A family and an annual income of nothing, to keep ‘em on,’ said Richard Swiveller after some reflection.

‘I tell you,’ returned the other with an increased earnestness, which, whether it were real or assumed, had the same effect on his companion, ‘that he lives for her, that his whole energies and thoughts are bound up in her, that he would no more disinherit her for an act of disobedience than he would take me into his favour again for any act of obedience or virtue that I could possibly be guilty of. He could not do it. You or any other man with eyes in his head may see that, if he chooses.’

‘It seems improbable certainly,’ said Dick, musing.

‘It seems improbable because it is improbable,’ his friend returned. ‘If you would furnish him with an additional inducement to forgive you, let there be an irreconcilable breach, a most deadly quarrel, between you and me – let there be a pretense of such a thing, I mean, of course – and he’ll do fast enough. As to Nell, constant dropping will wear away a stone; you know you may trust to me as far as she is concerned. So, whether he lives or dies, what does it come to? That you become the sole inheritor of the wealth of this rich old hunk, that you and I spend it together, and that you get into the bargain a beautiful young wife.’

‘I suppose there’s no doubt about his being rich’ – said Dick.

‘Doubt! Did you hear what he let fall the other day when we were there? Doubt! What will you doubt next, Dick?’

It would be tedious to pursue the conversation through all its artful windings, or to develop the gradual approaches by which the heart of Richard Swiveller was gained. It is sufficient to know that vanity, interest, poverty, and every spendthrift consideration urged him to look upon the proposal with favour, and that where all other inducements were wanting, the habitual carelessness of his disposition stepped in and still weighed down the scale on the same side. To these impulses must be added the complete ascendancy which his friend had long been accustomed to exercise over him – an ascendancy exerted in the beginning sorely at the expense of his friend’s vices, and was in nine cases out of ten looked upon as his designing tempter when he was indeed nothing but his thoughtless, light-headed tool.

The motives on the other side were something deeper than any which Richard Swiveller entertained or understood, but these being left to their own development, require no present elucidation. The negotiation was concluded very pleasantly, and Mr Swiveller was in the act of stating in flowery terms that he had no insurmountable objection to marrying anybody plentifully endowed with money or moveables, who could be induced to take him, when he was interrupted in his observations by a knock at the door, and the consequent necessity of crying ‘Come in.’

The door was opened, but nothing came in except a soapy arm and a strong gush of tobacco. The gush of tobacco came from the shop downstairs, and the soapy arm proceeded from the body of a servant-girl, who being then and there engaged in cleaning the stairs had just drawn it out of a warm pail to take in a letter, which letter she now held in her hand, proclaiming aloud with that quick perception of surnames peculiar to her class that it was for Mister Snivelling.

Dick looked rather pale and foolish when he glanced at the direction, and still more so when he came to look at the inside, observing that it was one of the inconveniences of being a lady’s man, and that it was very easy to talk as they had been talking, but he had quite forgotten her.

‘Her. Who?’ demanded Trent.

‘Sophy Wackles,’ said Dick.

‘Who’s she?’

‘She’s all my fancy painted her, sir, that’s what she is,’ said Mr Swiveller, taking a long pull at ‘the rosy’ and looking gravely at his friend. ‘She’s lovely, she’s divine. You know her.’

‘I remember,’ said his companion carelessly. ‘What of her?’

‘Why, sir,’ returned Dick, ‘between Miss Sophia Wackles and the humble individual who has now the honor to address you, warm and tender sentiments have been engendered, sentiments of the most honourable and inspiring kind. The Goddess Diana, sir, that calls aloud for the chase, is not more particular in her behavior than Sophia Wackles; I can tell you that.’

‘Am I to believe there’s anything real in what you say?’ demanded his friend; ‘you don’t mean to say that any love-making has been going on?’

‘Love-making, yes. Promising, no,’ said Dick. ‘There can be no action for breach, that’s one comfort. I’ve never committed myself in writing, Fred.’

‘And what’s in the letter, pray?’

‘A reminder, Fred, for to-night – a small party of twenty, making two hundred light fantastic toes in all, supposing every lady and gentleman to have the proper complement. I must go, if it’s only to begin breaking off the affair – I’ll do it, don’t you be afraid. I should like to know whether she left this herself. If she did, unconscious of any bar to her happiness, it’s affecting, Fred.’

To solve this question, Mr Swiveller summoned the handmaid and ascertained that Miss Sophy Wackles had indeed left the letter with her own hands; and that she had come accompanied, for decorum’s sake no doubt, by a younger Miss Wackles; and that on learning that Mr Swiveller was at home and being requested to walk upstairs, she was extremely shocked and professed that she would rather die. Mr Swiveller heard this account with a degree of admiration not altogether consistent with the project in which he had just concurred, but his friend attached very little importance to his behavior in this respect, probably because he knew that he had influence sufficient to control Richard Swiveller’s proceedings in this or any other matter, whenever he deemed it necessary, for the advancement of his own purposes, to exert it.

CHAPTER 8

Business disposed of, Mr Swiveller was inwardly reminded of its being nigh dinner-time, and to the intent that his health might not be endangered by longer abstinence, dispatched a message to the nearest eating-house requiring an immediate supply of boiled beef and greens for two. With this demand, however, the eating-house (having experience of its customer) declined to comply, churlishly sending back for answer that if Mr Swiveller stood in need of beef perhaps he would be so obliging as to come there and eat it, bringing with him, as grace before meat, the amount of a certain small account which had long been outstanding. Not at all intimidated by this rebuff, but rather sharpened in wits and appetite, Mr Swiveller forwarded the same message to another and more distant eating-house, adding to it by way of rider that the gentleman was induced to send so far, not only by the great fame and popularity its beef had acquired, but in consequence of the extreme toughness of the beef retailed at the obdurate cook's shop, which rendered it quite unfit not merely for gentlemanly food, but for any human consumption. The good effect of this politic course was demonstrated by the speedy arrival of a small pewter pyramid, curiously constructed of platters and covers, whereof the boiled-beef-plates formed the base, and a foaming quart-pot the apex; the structure being resolved into its component parts afforded all things requisite and necessary for a hearty meal, to which Mr Swiveller and his friend applied themselves with great keenness and enjoyment.

'May the present moment,' said Dick, sticking his fork into a large carbuncular potato, 'be the worst of our lives! I like the plan of sending 'em with the peel on; there's a charm in drawing a potato from its native element (if I may so express it) to which the rich and powerful are strangers. Ah! "Man wants but little here below, nor wants that little long!" How true that is! – after dinner.'

'I hope the eating-house keeper will want but little and that he may not want that little long,' returned his companion; but I suspect you've no means of paying for this!'

'I shall be passing present, and I'll call,' said Dick, winking his eye significantly. 'The waiter's quite helpless. The goods are gone, Fred, and there's an end of it.'

In point of fact, it would seem that the waiter felt this wholesome truth, for when he returned for the empty plates and dishes and was informed by Mr Swiveller with dignified carelessness that he would call and settle when he should be passing presently, he displayed some perturbation of spirit and muttered a few remarks about 'payment on delivery' and 'no trust,' and other unpleasant subjects, but was fain to content himself with inquiring at what hour it was likely that the gentleman would call, in order that being presently responsible for the beef, greens, and sundries, he might take to be in the way at the time. Mr Swiveller, after mentally calculating his engagements to a nicety, replied that he should look in at from two minutes before six and seven minutes past; and the man disappearing with this feeble consolation, Richard Swiveller took a greasy memorandum-book from his pocket and made an entry therein.

'Is that a reminder, in case you should forget to call?' said Trent with a sneer.

'Not exactly, Fred,' replied the imperturbable Richard, continuing to write with a businesslike air. 'I enter in this little book the names of the streets that I can't go down while the shops are open. This dinner today closes Long Acre. I bought a pair of boots in Great Queen Street last week, and made that no throughfare too. There's only one avenue to the Strand left often now, and I shall have to stop up that to-night with a pair of gloves. The roads are closing so fast in every direction, that in a month's time, unless my aunt sends me a remittance, I shall have to go three or four miles out of town to get over the way.'

'There's no fear of failing, in the end?' said Trent.

'Why, I hope not,' returned Mr Swiveller, 'but the average number of letters it take to soften her is six, and this time we have got as far as eight without any effect at all. I'll write another to-morrow morning. I mean to blot it a good deal and shake some water over it out of the pepper-castor to make

it look penitent. "I'm in such a state of mind that I hardly know what I write" – blot – "if you could see me at this minute shedding tears for my past misconduct" – pepper-castor – "my hand trembles when I think" – blot again – if that don't produce the effect, it's all over.'

By this time, Mr Swiveller had finished his entry, and he now replaced his pencil in its little sheath and closed the book, in a perfectly grave and serious frame of mind. His friend discovered that it was time for him to fulfil some other engagement, and Richard Swiveller was accordingly left alone, in company with the rosy wine and his own meditations touching Miss Sophy Wackles.

'It's rather sudden,' said Dick shaking his head with a look of infinite wisdom, and running on (as he was accustomed to do) with scraps of verse as if they were only prose in a hurry; 'when the heart of a man is depressed with fears, the mist is dispelled when Miss Wackles appears; she's a very nice girl. She's like the red red rose that's newly sprung in June – there's no denying that – she's also like a melody that's sweetly played in tune. It's really very sudden. Not that there's any need, on account of Fred's little sister, to turn cool directly, but it's better not to go too far. If I begin to cool at all I must begin at once, I see that. There's the chance of an action for breach, that's another. There's the chance of – no, there's no chance of that, but it's as well to be on the safe side.'

This undeveloped was the possibility, which Richard Swiveller sought to conceal even from himself, of his not being proof against the charms of Miss Wackles, and in some unguarded moment, by linking his fortunes to hers forever, of putting it out of his own power to further their notable scheme to which he had so readily become a party. For all these reasons, he decided to pick a quarrel with Miss Wackles without delay, and casting about for a pretext determined in favour of groundless jealousy. Having made up his mind on this important point, he circulated the glass (from his right hand to left, and back again) pretty freely, to enable him to act his part with the greater discretion, and then, after making some slight improvements in his toilet, bent his steps towards the spot hallowed by the fair object of his meditations.

The spot was at Chelsea, for there Miss Sophia Wackles resided with her widowed mother and two sisters, in conjunction with whom she maintained a very small day-school for young ladies of proportionate dimensions; a circumstance which was made known to the neighbourhood by an oval board over the front first-floor windows, whereupon appeared in circumambient flourishes the words 'Ladies' Seminary'; and which was further published and proclaimed at intervals between the hours of half-past nine and ten in the morning, by a straggling and solitary young lady of tender years standing on the scraper on the tips of her toes and making futile attempts to reach the knocker with a spelling-book. The several duties of instruction in this establishment were thus discharged. English grammar, composition, geography, and the use of the dumb-bells, by Miss Melissa Wackles; writing, arithmetic, dancing, music, and general fascination, by Miss Sophia Wackles; the art of needle-work, marking, and samplery, by Miss Jane Wackles; corporal punishment, fasting, and other tortures and terrors, by Mrs Wackles. Miss Melissa Wackles was the eldest daughter, Miss Sophy the next, and Miss Jane the youngest. Miss Melissa might have seen five-and-thirty summers or thereabouts, and verged on the autumnal; Miss Sophy was a fresh, good humoured, buxom girl of twenty; and Miss Jane numbered scarcely sixteen years. Mrs Wackles was an excellent but rather venomous old lady of three-score.

To this Ladies' Seminary, then, Richard Swiveller hied, with designs obnoxious to the peace of the fair Sophia, who, arrayed in virgin white, embellished by no ornament but one blushing rose, received him on his arrival, in the midst of very elegant not to say brilliant preparations; such as the embellishment of the room with the little flower-pots which always stood on the window-sill outside, save in windy weather when they blew into the area; the choice attire of the day-scholars who were allowed to grace the festival; the unwonted curls of Miss Jane Wackles who had kept her head during the whole of the preceding day screwed up tight in a yellow play-bill; and the solemn gentility and stately bearing of the old lady and her eldest daughter, which struck Mr Swiveller as being uncommon but made no further impression upon him.

The truth is – and, as there is no accounting for tastes, even a taste so strange as this may be recorded without being looked upon as a wilful and malicious invention – the truth is that neither Mrs Wackles nor her eldest daughter had at any time greatly favoured the pretensions of Mr Swiveller, being accustomed to make slight mention of him as ‘a gay young man’ and to sigh and shake their heads ominously whenever his name was mentioned. Mr Swiveller’s conduct in respect to Miss Sophy having been of that vague and dilatory kind which is usually looked upon as betokening no fixed matrimonial intentions, the young lady herself began in course of time to deem it highly desirable, that it should be brought to an issue one way or other. Hence she had at last consented to play off against Richard Swiveller a stricken market-gardener known to be ready with his offer on the smallest encouragement, and hence – as this occasion had been specially assigned for the purpose – that great anxiety on her part for Richard Swiveller’s presence which had occasioned her to leave the note he has been seen to receive. ‘If he has any expectations at all or any means of keeping a wife well,’ said Mrs Wackles to her eldest daughter, ‘he’ll state ‘em to us now or never.’ – ‘If he really cares about me,’ thought Miss Sophy, ‘he must tell me so, to-night.’

But all these sayings and doings and thinkings being unknown to Mr Swiveller, affected him not in the least; he was debating in his mind how he could best turn jealous, and wishing that Sophy were for that occasion only far less pretty than she was, or that she were her own sister, which would have served his turn as well, when the company came, and among them the market-gardener, whose name was Cheggs. But Mr Cheggs came not alone or unsupported, for he prudently brought along with him his sister, Miss Cheggs, who making straight to Miss Sophy and taking her by both hands, and kissing her on both cheeks, hoped in an audible whisper that they had not come too early.

‘Too early, no!’ replied Miss Sophy.

‘Oh, my dear,’ rejoined Miss Cheggs in the same whisper as before, ‘I’ve been so tormented, so worried, that it’s a mercy we were not here at four o’clock in the afternoon. Alick has been in such a state of impatience to come! You’d hardly believe that he was dressed before dinner-time and has been looking at the clock and teasing me ever since. It’s all your fault, you naughty thing.’

Hereupon Miss Sophy blushed, and Mr Cheggs (who was bashful before ladies) blushed too, and Miss Sophy’s mother and sisters, to prevent Mr Cheggs from blushing more, lavished civilities and attentions upon him, and left Richard Swiveller to take care of himself. Here was the very thing he wanted, here was good cause reason and foundation for pretending to be angry; but having this cause reason and foundation which he had come expressly to seek, not expecting to find, Richard Swiveller was angry in sound earnest, and wondered what the devil Cheggs meant by his impudence.

However, Mr Swiveller had Miss Sophy’s hand for the first quadrille (country-dances being low, were utterly proscribed) and so gained an advantage over his rival, who sat despondingly in a corner and contemplated the glorious figure of the young lady as she moved through the mazy dance. Nor was this the only start Mr Swiveller had of the market-gardener, for determining to show the family what quality of man they trifled with, and influenced perhaps by his late libations, he performed such feats of agility and such spins and twirls as filled the company with astonishment, and in particular caused a very long gentleman who was dancing with a very short scholar, to stand quite transfixed by wonder and admiration. Even Mrs Wackles forgot for the moment to snub three small young ladies who were inclined to be happy, and could not repress a rising thought that to have such a dancer as that in the family would be a pride indeed.

At this momentous crisis, Miss Cheggs proved herself a vigorous and useful ally, for not confining herself to expressing by scornful smiles a contempt for Mr Swiveller’s accomplishments, she took every opportunity of whispering into Miss Sophy’s ear expressions of condolence and sympathy on her being worried by such a ridiculous creature, declaring that she was frightened to death lest Alick should fall upon, and beat him, in the fulness of his wrath, and entreating Miss Sophy to observe how the eyes of the said Alick gleamed with love and fury; passions, it may be observed, which being too much for his eyes rushed into his nose also, and suffused it with a crimson glow.

‘You must dance with Miss Cheggs,’ said Miss Sophy to Dick Swiviller, after she had herself danced twice with Mr Cheggs and made great show of encouraging his advances. ‘She’s a nice girl – and her brother’s quite delightful.’

‘Quite delightful, is he?’ muttered Dick. ‘Quite delighted too, I should say, from the manner in which he’s looking this way.’

Here Miss Jane (previously instructed for the purpose) interposed her many curls and whispered her sister to observe how jealous Mr Cheggs was.

‘Jealous! Like his impudence!’ said Richard Swiviller.

‘His impudence, Mr Swiviller!’ said Miss Jane, tossing her head. ‘Take care he don’t hear you, sir, or you may be sorry for it.’

‘Oh, pray, Jane – ’ said Miss Sophy.

‘Nonsense!’ replied her sister. ‘Why shouldn’t Mr Cheggs be jealous if he likes? I like that, certainly. Mr Cheggs has a good a right to be jealous as anyone else has, and perhaps he may have a better right soon if he hasn’t already. You know best about that, Sophy!’

Though this was a concerted plot between Miss Sophy and her sister, originating in humane intentions and having for its object the inducing Mr Swiviller to declare himself in time, it failed in its effect; for Miss Jane being one of those young ladies who are prematurely shrill and shrewish, gave such undue importance to her part that Mr Swiviller retired in dudgeon, resigning his mistress to Mr Cheggs and conveying a defiance into his looks which that gentleman indignantly returned.

‘Did you speak to me, sir?’ said Mr Cheggs, following him into a corner. ‘Have the kindness to smile, sir, in order that we may not be suspected. Did you speak to me, sir?’

Mr Swiviller looked with a supercilious smile at Mr Chegg’s toes, then raised his eyes from them to his ankles, from that to his shin, from that to his knee, and so on very gradually, keeping up his right leg, until he reached his waistcoat, when he raised his eyes from button to button until he reached his chin, and travelling straight up the middle of his nose came at last to his eyes, when he said abruptly,

‘No, sir, I didn’t.’

‘Hem!’ said Mr Cheggs, glancing over his shoulder, ‘have the goodness to smile again, sir. Perhaps you wished to speak to me, sir.’

‘No, sir, I didn’t do that, either.’

‘Perhaps you may have nothing to say to me now, sir,’ said Mr Cheggs fiercely.

At these words Richard Swiviller withdrew his eyes from Mr Chegg’s face, and travelling down the middle of his nose and down his waistcoat and down his right leg, reached his toes again, and carefully surveyed him; this done, he crossed over, and coming up the other leg, and thence approaching by the waistcoat as before, said when had got to his eyes, ‘No sir, I haven’t.’

‘Oh, indeed, sir!’ said Mr Cheggs. ‘I’m glad to hear it. You know where I’m to be found, I suppose, sir, in case you should have anything to say to me?’

‘I can easily inquire, sir, when I want to know.’

‘There’s nothing more we need say, I believe, sir?’

‘Nothing more, sir’ – With that they closed the tremendous dialog by frowning mutually. Mr Cheggs hastened to tender his hand to Miss Sophy, and Mr Swiviller sat himself down in a corner in a very moody state.

Hard by this corner, Mrs Wackles and Miss Wackles were seated, looking on at the dance; and unto Mrs and Miss Wackles, Miss Cheggs occasionally darted when her partner was occupied with his share of the figure, and made some remark or other which was gall and wormwood to Richard Swiviller’s soul. Looking into the eyes of Mrs and Miss Wackles for encouragement, and sitting very upright and uncomfortable on a couple of hard stools, were two of the day-scholars; and when Miss Wackles smiled, and Mrs Wackles smiled, the two little girls on the stools sought to curry favour by smiling likewise, in gracious acknowledgement of which attention the old lady frowned them

down instantly, and said that if they dared to be guilty of such an impertinence again, they should be sent under convoy to their respective homes. This threat caused one of the young ladies, she being of a weak and trembling temperament, to shed tears, and for this offense they were both filed off immediately, with a dreadful promptitude that struck terror into the souls of all the pupils.

'I've got such news for you,' said Miss Cheggs approaching once more, 'Alick has been saying such things to Sophy. Upon my word, you know, it's quite serious and in earnest, that's clear.'

'What's he been saying, my dear?' demanded Mrs Wackles.

'All manner of things,' replied Miss Cheggs, 'you can't think how out he has been speaking!'

Richard Swiviller considered it advisable to hear no more, but taking advantage of a pause in the dancing, and the approach of Mr Cheggs to pay his court to the old lady, swaggered with an extremely careful assumption of extreme carelessness toward the door, passing on the way Miss Jane Wackles, who in all the glory of her curls was holding a flirtation, (as good practice when no better was to be had) with a feeble old gentleman who lodged in the parlour. Near the door sat Miss Sophy, still fluttered and confused by the attentions of Mr Cheggs, and by her side Richard Swiveller lingered for a moment to exchange a few parting words.

'My boat is on the shore and my bark is on the sea, but before I pass this door I will say farewell to thee,' murmured Dick, looking gloomily upon her.

'Are you going?' said Miss Sophy, whose heart sank within her at the result of her stratagem, but who affected a light indifference notwithstanding.

'Am I going!' echoed Dick bitterly. 'Yes, I am. What then?'

'Nothing, except that it's very early,' said Miss Sophy; 'but you are your own master, of course.'

'I would that I had been my own mistress too,' said Dick, 'before I had ever entertained a thought of you. Miss Wackles, I believed you true, and I was blest in so believing, but now I mourn that e'er I knew, a girl so fair yet so deceiving.'

Miss Sophy bit her lip and affected to look with great interest after Mr Cheggs, who was quaffing lemonade in the distance.

'I came here,' said Dick, rather oblivious of the purpose with which he had really come, 'with my bosom expanded, my heart dilated, and my sentiments of a corresponding description. I go away with feelings that may be conceived but cannot be described, feeling within myself that desolating truth that my best affections have experienced this night a stifler!'

'I am sure I don't know what you mean, Mr Swiviller,' said Miss Sophy with downcast eyes. 'I'm very sorry if –'

'Sorry, Ma'am!' said Dick, 'sorry in the possession of a Cheggs! But I wish you a very good night, concluding with this slight remark, that there is a young lady growing up at this present moment for me, who has not only great personal attractions but great wealth, and who has requested her next of kin to propose for my hand, which, having a regard for some members of her family, I have consented to promise. It's a gratifying circumstance which you'll be glad to hear, that a young and lovely girl is growing into a woman expressly on my account, and is now saving up for me. I thought I'd mention it. I have now merely to apologize for trespassing so long upon your attention. Good night.'

'There's one good thing springs out of all this,' said Richard Swiviller to himself when he had reached home and was hanging over the candle with the extinguisher in his hand, 'which is, that I now go heart and soul, neck and heels, with Fred in all his scheme about little Nelly, and right glad he'll be to find me so strong upon it. He shall know all about that to-morrow, and in the meantime, as it's rather late, I'll try and get a wink of the balmy.'

'The balmy' came almost as soon as it was courted. In a very few minutes Mr Swiviller was fast asleep, dreaming that he had married Nelly Trent and come into the property, and that his first act of power was to lay waste the market-garden of Mr Cheggs and turn it into a brick-field.

CHAPTER 9

The child, in her confidence with Mrs Quilp, had but feebly described the sadness and sorrow of her thoughts, or the heaviness of the cloud which overhung her home, and cast dark shadows on its hearth. Besides that it was very difficult to impart to any person not intimately acquainted with the life she led, an adequate sense of its gloom and loneliness, a constant fear of in some way committing or injuring the old man to whom she was so tenderly attached, had restrained her, even in the midst of her heart's overflowing, and made her timid of allusion to the main cause of her anxiety and distress.

For, it was not the monotonous days unchequered by variety and uncheered by pleasant companionship, it was not the dark dreary evenings or the long solitary nights, it was not the absence of every slight and easy pleasure for which young hearts beat high, or the knowing nothing of childhood but its weakness and its easily wounded spirit, that had wrung such tears from Nell. To see the old man struck down beneath the pressure of some hidden grief, to mark his wavering and unsettled state, to be agitated at times with a dreadful fear that his mind was wandering, and to trace in his words and looks the dawning of despondent madness; to watch and wait and listen for confirmation of these things day after day, and to feel and know that, come what might, they were alone in the world with no one to help or advise or care about them – these were causes of depression and anxiety that might have sat heavily on an older breast with many influences at work to cheer and gladden it, but how heavily on the mind of a young child to whom they were ever present, and who was constantly surrounded by all that could keep such thoughts in restless action!

And yet, to the old man's vision, Nell was still the same. When he could, for a moment, disengage his mind from the phantom that haunted and brooded on it always, there was his young companion with the same smile for him, the same earnest words, the same merry laugh, the same love and care that, sinking deep into his soul, seemed to have been present to him through his whole life. And so he went on, content to read the book of her heart from the page first presented to him, little dreaming of the story that lay hidden in its other leaves, and murmuring within himself that at least the child was happy.

She had been once. She had gone singing through the dim rooms, and moving with gay and lightsome step among their dusty treasures, making them older by her young life, and sterner and more grim by her gay and cheerful presence. But, now, the chambers were cold and gloomy, and when she left her own little room to while away the tedious hours, and sat in one of them, she was still and motionless as their inanimate occupants, and had no heart to startle the echoes – hoarse from their long silence – with her voice.

In one of these rooms, was a window looking into the street, where the child sat, many and many a long evening, and often far into the night, alone and thoughtful. None are so anxious as those who watch and wait; at these times, mournful fancies came flocking on her mind, in crowds.

She would take her station here, at dusk, and watch the people as they passed up and down the street, or appeared at the windows of the opposite houses; wondering whether those rooms were as lonesome as that in which she sat, and whether those people felt it company to see her sitting there, as she did only to see them look out and draw in their heads again. There was a crooked stack of chimneys on one of the roofs, in which, by often looking at them, she had fancied ugly faces that were frowning over at her and trying to peer into the room; and she felt glad when it grew too dark to make them out, though she was sorry too, when the man came to light the lamps in the street – for it made it late, and very dull inside. Then, she would draw in her head to look round the room and see that everything was in its place and hadn't moved; and looking out into the street again, would perhaps see a man passing with a coffin on his back, and two or three others silently following him to a house where somebody lay dead; which made her shudder and think of such things until they suggested afresh the old man's altered face and manner, and a new train of fears and speculations. If he were to

die – if sudden illness had happened to him, and he were never to come home again, alive – if, one night, he should come home, and kiss and bless her as usual, and after she had gone to bed and had fallen asleep and was perhaps dreaming pleasantly, and smiling in her sleep, he should kill himself and his blood come creeping, creeping, on the ground to her own bed-room door! These thoughts were too terrible to dwell upon, and again she would have recourse to the street, now trodden by fewer feet, and darker and more silent than before. The shops were closing fast, and lights began to shine from the upper windows, as the neighbours went to bed. By degrees, these dwindled away and disappeared or were replaced, here and there, by a feeble rush-candle which was to burn all night. Still, there was one late shop at no great distance which sent forth a ruddy glare upon the pavement even yet, and looked bright and companionable. But, in a little time, this closed, the light was extinguished, and all was gloomy and quiet, except when some stray footsteps sounded on the pavement, or a neighbour, out later than his wont, knocked lustily at his house-door to rouse the sleeping inmates.

When the night had worn away thus far (and seldom now until it had) the child would close the window, and steal softly down stairs, thinking as she went that if one of those hideous faces below, which often mingled with her dreams, were to meet her by the way, rendering itself visible by some strange light of its own, how terrified she would be. But these fears vanished before a well-trimmed lamp and the familiar aspect of her own room. After praying fervently, and with many bursting tears, for the old man, and the restoration of his peace of mind and the happiness they had once enjoyed, she would lay her head upon the pillow and sob herself to sleep: often starting up again, before the day-light came, to listen for the bell and respond to the imaginary summons which had roused her from her slumber.

One night, the third after Nelly's interview with Mrs Quilp, the old man, who had been weak and ill all day, said he should not leave home. The child's eyes sparkled at the intelligence, but her joy subsided when they reverted to his worn and sickly face.

'Two days,' he said, 'two whole, clear, days have passed, and there is no reply. What did he tell thee, Nell?'

'Exactly what I told you, dear grandfather, indeed.'

'True,' said the old man, faintly. 'Yes. But tell me again, Nell. My head fails me. What was it that he told thee? Nothing more than that he would see me to-morrow or next day? That was in the note.'

'Nothing more,' said the child. 'Shall I go to him again to-morrow, dear grandfather? Very early? I will be there and back, before breakfast.'

The old man shook his head, and sighing mournfully, drew her towards him.

'T'would be of no use, my dear, no earthly use. But if he deserts me, Nell, at this moment – if he deserts me now, when I should, with his assistance, be recompensed for all the time and money I have lost, and all the agony of mind I have undergone, which makes me what you see, I am ruined, and – worse, far worse than that – have ruined thee, for whom I ventured all. If we are beggars – !'

'What if we are?' said the child boldly. 'Let us be beggars, and be happy.'

'Beggars – and happy!' said the old man. 'Poor child!'

'Dear grandfather,' cried the girl with an energy which shone in her flushed face, trembling voice, and impassioned gesture, 'I am not a child in that I think, but even if I am, oh hear me pray that we may beg, or work in open roads or fields, to earn a scanty living, rather than live as we do now.'

'Nelly!' said the old man.

'Yes, yes, rather than live as we do now,' the child repeated, more earnestly than before. 'If you are sorrowful, let me know why and be sorrowful too; if you waste away and are paler and weaker every day, let me be your nurse and try to comfort you. If you are poor, let us be poor together; but let me be with you, do let me be with you; do not let me see such change and not know why, or I shall break my heart and die. Dear grandfather, let us leave this sad place to-morrow, and beg our way from door to door.'

The old man covered his face with his hands, and hid it in the pillow of the couch on which he lay.

‘Let us be beggars,’ said the child passing an arm round his neck, ‘I have no fear but we shall have enough, I am sure we shall. Let us walk through country places, and sleep in fields and under trees, and never think of money again, or anything that can make you sad, but rest at nights, and have the sun and wind upon our faces in the day, and thank God together! Let us never set foot in dark rooms or melancholy houses, any more, but wander up and down wherever we like to go; and when you are tired, you shall stop to rest in the pleasantest place that we can find, and I will go and beg for both.’

The child’s voice was lost in sobs as she dropped upon the old man’s neck; nor did she weep alone.

These were not words for other ears, nor was it a scene for other eyes. And yet other ears and eyes were there and greedily taking in all that passed, and moreover they were the ears and eyes of no less a person than Mr Daniel Quilp, who, having entered unseen when the child first placed herself at the old man’s side, refrained – actuated, no doubt, by motives of the purest delicacy – from interrupting the conversation, and stood looking on with his accustomed grin. Standing, however, being a tiresome attitude to a gentleman already fatigued with walking, and the dwarf being one of that kind of persons who usually make themselves at home, he soon cast his eyes upon a chair, into which he skipped with uncommon agility, and perching himself on the back with his feet upon the seat, was thus enabled to look on and listen with greater comfort to himself, besides gratifying at the same time that taste for doing something fantastic and monkey-like, which on all occasions had strong possession of him. Here, then, he sat, one leg cocked carelessly over the other, his chin resting on the palm of his hand, his head turned a little on one side, and his ugly features twisted into a complacent grimace. And in this position the old man, happening in course of time to look that way, at length chanced to see him: to his unbounded astonishment.

The child uttered a suppressed shriek on beholding this agreeable figure; in their first surprise both she and the old man, not knowing what to say, and half doubting its reality, looked shrinkingly at it. Not at all disconcerted by this reception, Daniel Quilp preserved the same attitude, merely nodding twice or thrice with great condescension. At length, the old man pronounced his name, and inquired how he came there.

‘Through the door,’ said Quilp pointing over his shoulder with his thumb. ‘I’m not quite small enough to get through key-holes. I wish I was. I want to have some talk with you, particularly, and in private. With nobody present, neighbour. Good-bye, little Nelly.’

Nell looked at the old man, who nodded to her to retire, and kissed her cheek.

‘Ah!’ said the dwarf, smacking his lips, ‘what a nice kiss that was – just upon the rosy part. What a capital kiss!’

Nell was none the slower in going away, for this remark. Quilp looked after her with an admiring leer, and when she had closed the door, fell to complimenting the old man upon her charms.

‘Such a fresh, blooming, modest little bud, neighbour,’ said Quilp, nursing his short leg, and making his eyes twinkle very much; ‘such a chubby, rosy, cosy, little Nell!’

The old man answered by a forced smile, and was plainly struggling with a feeling of the keenest and most exquisite impatience. It was not lost upon Quilp, who delighted in torturing him, or indeed anybody else, when he could.

‘She’s so,’ said Quilp, speaking very slowly, and feigning to be quite absorbed in the subject, ‘so small, so compact, so beautifully modelled, so fair, with such blue veins and such a transparent skin, and such little feet, and such winning ways – but bless me, you’re nervous! Why neighbour, what’s the matter? I swear to you,’ continued the dwarf dismounting from the chair and sitting down in it, with a careful slowness of gesture very different from the rapidity with which he had sprung up unheard,

‘I swear to you that I had no idea old blood ran so fast or kept so warm. I thought it was sluggish in its course, and cool, quite cool. I am pretty sure it ought to be. Yours must be out of order, neighbour.’

‘I believe it is,’ groaned the old man, clasping his head with both hands. ‘There’s burning fever here, and something now and then to which I fear to give a name.’

The dwarf said never a word, but watched his companion as he paced restlessly up and down the room, and presently returned to his seat. Here he remained, with his head bowed upon his breast for some time, and then suddenly raising it, said,

‘Once, and once for all, have you brought me any money?’

‘No!’ returned Quilp.

‘Then,’ said the old man, clenching his hands desperately, and looking upwards, ‘the child and I are lost!’

‘Neighbour,’ said Quilp glancing sternly at him, and beating his hand twice or thrice upon the table to attract his wandering attention, ‘let me be plain with you, and play a fairer game than when you held all the cards, and I saw but the backs and nothing more. You have no secret from me now.’

The old man looked up, trembling.

‘You are surprised,’ said Quilp. ‘Well, perhaps that’s natural. You have no secret from me now, I say; no, not one. For now, I know, that all those sums of money, that all those loans, advances, and supplies that you have had from me, have found their way to – shall I say the word?’

‘Aye!’ replied the old man, ‘say it, if you will.’

‘To the gaming-table,’ rejoined Quilp, ‘your nightly haunt. This was the precious scheme to make your fortune, was it; this was the secret certain source of wealth in which I was to have sunk my money (if I had been the fool you took me for); this was your inexhaustible mine of gold, your El Dorado, eh?’

‘Yes,’ cried the old man, turning upon him with gleaming eyes, ‘it was. It is. It will be, till I die.’

‘That I should have been blinded,’ said Quilp looking contemptuously at him, ‘by a mere shallow gambler!’

‘I am no gambler,’ cried the old man fiercely. ‘I call Heaven to witness that I never played for gain of mine, or love of play; that at every piece I staked, I whispered to myself that orphan’s name and called on Heaven to bless the venture; – which it never did. Whom did it prosper? Who were those with whom I played? Men who lived by plunder, profligacy, and riot; squandering their gold in doing ill, and propagating vice and evil. My winnings would have been from them, my winnings would have been bestowed to the last farthing on a young sinless child whose life they would have sweetened and made happy. What would they have contracted? The means of corruption, wretchedness, and misery. Who would not have hoped in such a cause? Tell me that! Who would not have hoped as I did?’

‘When did you first begin this mad career?’ asked Quilp, his taunting inclination subdued, for a moment, by the old man’s grief and wildness.

‘When did I first begin?’ he rejoined, passing his hand across his brow. ‘When was it, that I first began? When should it be, but when I began to think how little I had saved, how long a time it took to save at all, how short a time I might have at my age to live, and how she would be left to the rough mercies of the world, with barely enough to keep her from the sorrows that wait on poverty; then it was that I began to think about it.’

‘After you first came to me to get your precious grandson packed off to sea?’ said Quilp.

‘Shortly after that,’ replied the old man. ‘I thought of it a long time, and had it in my sleep for months. Then I began. I found no pleasure in it, I expected none. What has it ever brought me but anxious days and sleepless nights; but loss of health and peace of mind, and gain of feebleness and sorrow!’

‘You lost what money you had laid by, first, and then came to me. While I thought you were making your fortune (as you said you were) you were making yourself a beggar, eh? Dear me! And so it comes to pass that I hold every security you could scrape together, and a bill of sale upon the –

upon the stock and property,' said Quilp standing up and looking about him, as if to assure himself that none of it had been taken away. 'But did you never win?'

'Never!' groaned the old man. 'Never won back my loss!'

'I thought,' sneered the dwarf, 'that if a man played long enough he was sure to win at last, or, at the worst, not to come off a loser.'

'And so he is,' cried the old man, suddenly rousing himself from his state of despondency, and lashed into the most violent excitement, 'so he is; I have felt that from the first, I have always known it, I've seen it, I never felt it half so strongly as I feel it now. Quilp, I have dreamed, three nights, of winning the same large sum, I never could dream that dream before, though I have often tried. Do not desert me, now I have this chance. I have no resource but you, give me some help, let me try this one last hope.'

The dwarf shrugged his shoulders and shook his head.

'See, Quilp, good tender-hearted Quilp,' said the old man, drawing some scraps of paper from his pocket with a trembling hand, and clasping the dwarf's arm, 'only see here. Look at these figures, the result of long calculation, and painful and hard experience. I *must* win. I only want a little help once more, a few pounds, but two score pounds, dear Quilp.'

'The last advance was seventy,' said the dwarf; 'and it went in one night.'

'I know it did,' answered the old man, 'but that was the very worst fortune of all, and the time had not come then. Quilp, consider, consider,' the old man cried, trembling so much the while, that the papers in his hand fluttered as if they were shaken by the wind, 'that orphan child! If I were alone, I could die with gladness – perhaps even anticipate that doom which is dealt out so unequally: coming, as it does, on the proud and happy in their strength, and shunning the needy and afflicted, and all who court it in their despair – but what I have done, has been for her. Help me for her sake I implore you; not for mine; for hers!'

'I'm sorry I've got an appointment in the city,' said Quilp, looking at his watch with perfect self-possession, 'or I should have been very glad to have spent half an hour with you while you composed yourself, very glad.'

'Nay, Quilp, good Quilp,' gasped the old man, catching at his skirts, 'you and I have talked together, more than once, of her poor mother's story. The fear of her coming to poverty has perhaps been bred in me by that. Do not be hard upon me, but take that into account. You are a great gainer by me. Oh spare me the money for this one last hope!'

'I couldn't do it really,' said Quilp with unusual politeness, 'though I tell you what – and this is a circumstance worth bearing in mind as showing how the sharpest among us may be taken in sometimes – I was so deceived by the penurious way in which you lived, alone with Nelly –'

'All done to save money for tempting fortune, and to make her triumph greater,' cried the old man.

'Yes, yes, I understand that now,' said Quilp; 'but I was going to say, I was so deceived by that, your miserly way, the reputation you had among those who knew you of being rich, and your repeated assurances that you would make of my advances treble and quadruple the interest you paid me, that I'd have advanced you, even now, what you want, on your simple note of hand, if I hadn't unexpectedly become acquainted with your secret way of life.'

'Who is it,' retorted the old man desperately, 'that, notwithstanding all my caution, told you? Come. Let me know the name – the person.'

The crafty dwarf, bethinking himself that his giving up the child would lead to the disclosure of the artifice he had employed, which, as nothing was to be gained by it, it was well to conceal, stopped short in his answer and said, 'Now, who do you think?'

'It was Kit, it must have been the boy; he played the spy, and you tampered with him?' said the old man.

'How came you to think of him?' said the dwarf in a tone of great commiseration. 'Yes, it was Kit. Poor Kit!'

So saying, he nodded in a friendly manner, and took his leave: stopping when he had passed the outer door a little distance, and grinning with extraordinary delight.

'Poor Kit!' muttered Quilp. 'I think it was Kit who said I was an uglier dwarf than could be seen anywhere for a penny, wasn't it. Ha ha ha! Poor Kit!'

And with that he went his way, still chuckling as he went.

CHAPTER 10

Daniel Quilp neither entered nor left the old man's house, unobserved. In the shadow of an archway nearly opposite, leading to one of the many passages which diverged from the main street, there lingered one, who, having taken up his position when the twilight first came on, still maintained it with undiminished patience, and leaning against the wall with the manner of a person who had a long time to wait, and being well used to it was quite resigned, scarcely changed his attitude for the hour together.

This patient loungee attracted little attention from any of those who passed, and bestowed as little upon them. His eyes were constantly directed towards one object; the window at which the child was accustomed to sit. If he withdrew them for a moment, it was only to glance at a clock in some neighbouring shop, and then to strain his sight once more in the old quarter with increased earnestness and attention.

It had been remarked that this personage evinced no weariness in his place of concealment; nor did he, long as his waiting was. But as the time went on, he manifested some anxiety and surprise, glancing at the clock more frequently and at the window less hopefully than before. At length, the clock was hidden from his sight by some envious shutters, then the church steeples proclaimed eleven at night, then the quarter past, and then the conviction seemed to obtrude itself on his mind that it was no use tarrying there any longer.

That the conviction was an unwelcome one, and that he was by no means willing to yield to it, was apparent from his reluctance to quit the spot; from the tardy steps with which he often left it, still looking over his shoulder at the same window; and from the precipitation with which he as often returned, when a fancied noise or the changing and imperfect light induced him to suppose it had been softly raised. At length, he gave the matter up, as hopeless for that night, and suddenly breaking into a run as though to force himself away, scampered off at his utmost speed, nor once ventured to look behind him lest he should be tempted back again.

Without relaxing his pace, or stopping to take breath, this mysterious individual dashed on through a great many alleys and narrow ways until he at length arrived in a square paved court, when he subsided into a walk, and making for a small house from the window of which a light was shining, lifted the latch of the door and passed in.

'Bless us!' cried a woman turning sharply round, 'who's that? Oh! It's you, Kit!'

'Yes, mother, it's me.'

'Why, how tired you look, my dear!'

'Old master an't gone out to-night,' said Kit; 'and so she hasn't been at the window at all.' With which words, he sat down by the fire and looked very mournful and discontented.

The room in which Kit sat himself down, in this condition, was an extremely poor and homely place, but with that air of comfort about it, nevertheless, which – or the spot must be a wretched one indeed – cleanliness and order can always impart in some degree. Late as the Dutch clock showed it to be, the poor woman was still hard at work at an ironing-table; a young child lay sleeping in a cradle near the fire; and another, a sturdy boy of two or three years old, very wide awake, with a very tight night-cap on his head, and a night-gown very much too small for him on his body, was sitting bolt upright in a clothes-basket, staring over the rim with his great round eyes, and looking as if he had thoroughly made up his mind never to go to sleep any more; which, as he had already declined to take his natural rest and had been brought out of bed in consequence, opened a cheerful prospect for his relations and friends. It was rather a queer-looking family: Kit, his mother, and the children, being all strongly alike.

Kit was disposed to be out of temper, as the best of us are too often – but he looked at the youngest child who was sleeping soundly, and from him to his other brother in the clothes-basket,

and from him to their mother, who had been at work without complaint since morning, and thought it would be a better and kinder thing to be good-humoured. So he rocked the cradle with his foot; made a face at the rebel in the clothes-basket, which put him in high good-humour directly; and stoutly determined to be talkative and make himself agreeable.

‘Ah, mother!’ said Kit, taking out his clasp-knife, and falling upon a great piece of bread and meat which she had had ready for him, hours before, ‘what a one you are! There an’t many such as you, I know.’

‘I hope there are many a great deal better, Kit,’ said Mrs Nubbles; ‘and that there are, or ought to be, accordin’ to what the parson at chapel says.’

‘Much he knows about it,’ returned Kit contemptuously. ‘Wait till he’s a widder and works like you do, and gets as little, and does as much, and keeps his spirit up the same, and then I’ll ask him what’s o’clock and trust him for being right to half a second.’

‘Well,’ said Mrs Nubbles, evading the point, ‘your beer’s down there by the fender, Kit.’

‘I see,’ replied her son, taking up the porter pot, ‘my love to you, mother. And the parson’s health too if you like. I don’t bear him any malice, not I!’

‘Did you tell me, just now, that your master hadn’t gone out to-night?’ inquired Mrs Nubbles.

‘Yes,’ said Kit, ‘worse luck!’

‘You should say better luck, I think,’ returned his mother, ‘because Miss Nelly won’t have been left alone.’

‘Ah!’ said Kit, ‘I forgot that. I said worse luck, because I’ve been watching ever since eight o’clock, and seen nothing of her.’

‘I wonder what she’d say,’ cried his mother, stopping in her work and looking round, ‘if she knew that every night, when she – poor thing – is sitting alone at that window, you are watching in the open street for fear any harm should come to her, and that you never leave the place or come home to your bed though you’re ever so tired, till such time as you think she’s safe in hers.’

‘Never mind what she’d say,’ replied Kit, with something like a blush on his uncouth face; ‘she’ll never know nothing, and consequently, she’ll never say nothing.’

Mrs Nubbles ironed away in silence for a minute or two, and coming to the fireplace for another iron, glanced stealthily at Kit while she rubbed it on a board and dusted it with a duster, but said nothing until she had returned to her table again: when, holding the iron at an alarmingly short distance from her cheek, to test its temperature, and looking round with a smile, she observed:

‘I know what some people would say, Kit – ’

‘Nonsense,’ interposed Kit with a perfect apprehension of what was to follow.

‘No, but they would indeed. Some people would say that you’d fallen in love with her, I know they would.’

To this, Kit only replied by bashfully bidding his mother ‘get out,’ and forming sundry strange figures with his legs and arms, accompanied by sympathetic contortions of his face. Not deriving from these means the relief which he sought, he bit off an immense mouthful from the bread and meat, and took a quick drink of the porter; by which artificial aids he choked himself and effected a diversion of the subject.

‘Speaking seriously though, Kit,’ said his mother, taking up the theme afresh, after a time, ‘for of course I was only in joke just now, it’s very good and thoughtful, and like you, to do this, and never let anybody know it, though some day I hope she may come to know it, for I’m sure she would be very grateful to you and feel it very much. It’s a cruel thing to keep the dear child shut up there. I don’t wonder that the old gentleman wants to keep it from you.’

‘He don’t think it’s cruel, bless you,’ said Kit, ‘and don’t mean it to be so, or he wouldn’t do it – I do consider, mother, that he wouldn’t do it for all the gold and silver in the world. No, no, that he wouldn’t. I know him better than that.’

‘Then what does he do it for, and why does he keep it so close from you?’ said Mrs Nubbles.

‘That I don’t know,’ returned her son. ‘If he hadn’t tried to keep it so close though, I should never have found it out, for it was his getting me away at night and sending me off so much earlier than he used to, that first made me curious to know what was going on. Hark! what’s that?’

‘It’s only somebody outside.’

‘It’s somebody crossing over here,’ said Kit, standing up to listen, ‘and coming very fast too. He can’t have gone out after I left, and the house caught fire, mother!’

The boy stood, for a moment, really bereft, by the apprehension he had conjured up, of the power to move. The footsteps drew nearer, the door was opened with a hasty hand, and the child herself, pale and breathless, and hastily wrapped in a few disordered garments, hurried into the room.

‘Miss Nelly! What is the matter!’ cried mother and son together.

‘I must not stay a moment,’ she returned, ‘grandfather has been taken very ill. I found him in a fit upon the floor –’

‘I’ll run for a doctor’ – said Kit, seizing his brimless hat. ‘I’ll be there directly, I’ll –’

‘No, no,’ cried Nell, ‘there is one there, you’re not wanted, you – you – must never come near us any more!’

‘What!’ roared Kit.

‘Never again,’ said the child. ‘Don’t ask me why, for I don’t know. Pray don’t ask me why, pray don’t be sorry, pray don’t be vexed with me! I have nothing to do with it indeed!’

Kit looked at her with his eyes stretched wide; and opened and shut his mouth a great many times; but couldn’t get out one word.

‘He complains and raves of you,’ said the child, ‘I don’t know what you have done, but I hope it’s nothing very bad.’

‘I done!’ roared Kit.

‘He cried that you’re the cause of all his misery,’ returned the child with tearful eyes; ‘he screamed and called for you; they say you must not come near him or he will die. You must not return to us any more. I came to tell you. I thought it would be better that I should come than somebody quite strange. Oh, Kit, what have you done? You, in whom I trusted so much, and who were almost the only friend I had!’

The unfortunate Kit looked at his young mistress harder and harder, and with eyes growing wider and wider, but was perfectly motionless and silent.

‘I have brought his money for the week,’ said the child, looking to the woman and laying it on the table – ‘and – and – a little more, for he was always good and kind to me. I hope he will be sorry and do well somewhere else and not take this to heart too much. It grieves me very much to part with him like this, but there is no help. It must be done. Good night!’

With the tears streaming down her face, and her slight figure trembling with the agitation of the scene she had left, the shock she had received, the errand she had just discharged, and a thousand painful and affectionate feelings, the child hastened to the door, and disappeared as rapidly as she had come.

The poor woman, who had no cause to doubt her son, but every reason for relying on his honesty and truth, was staggered, notwithstanding, by his not having advanced one word in his defence. Visions of gallantry, knavery, robbery; and of the nightly absences from home for which he had accounted so strangely, having been occasioned by some unlawful pursuit; flocked into her brain and rendered her afraid to question him. She rocked herself upon a chair, wringing her hands and weeping bitterly, but Kit made no attempt to comfort her and remained quite bewildered. The baby in the cradle woke up and cried; the boy in the clothes-basket fell over on his back with the basket upon him, and was seen no more; the mother wept louder yet and rocked faster; but Kit, insensible to all the din and tumult, remained in a state of utter stupefaction.

CHAPTER 11

Quiet and solitude were destined to hold uninterrupted rule no longer, beneath the roof that sheltered the child. Next morning, the old man was in a raging fever accompanied with delirium; and sinking under the influence of this disorder he lay for many weeks in imminent peril of his life. There was watching enough, now, but it was the watching of strangers who made a greedy trade of it, and who, in the intervals in their attendance upon the sick man huddled together with a ghastly good-fellowship, and ate and drank and made merry; for disease and death were their ordinary household gods.

Yet, in all the hurry and crowding of such a time, the child was more alone than she had ever been before; alone in spirit, alone in her devotion to him who was wasting away upon his burning bed; alone in her unfeigned sorrow, and her unpurchased sympathy. Day after day, and night after night, found her still by the pillow of the unconscious sufferer, still anticipating his every want, still listening to those repetitions of her name and those anxieties and cares for her, which were ever uppermost among his feverish wanderings.

The house was no longer theirs. Even the sick chamber seemed to be retained, on the uncertain tenure of Mr Quilp's favour. The old man's illness had not lasted many days when he took formal possession of the premises and all upon them, in virtue of certain legal powers to that effect, which few understood and none presumed to call in question. This important step secured, with the assistance of a man of law whom he brought with him for the purpose, the dwarf proceeded to establish himself and his coadjutor in the house, as an assertion of his claim against all comers; and then set about making his quarters comfortable, after his own fashion.

To this end, Mr Quilp encamped in the back parlour, having first put an effectual stop to any further business by shutting up the shop. Having looked out, from among the old furniture, the handsomest and most commodious chair he could possibly find (which he reserved for his own use) and an especially hideous and uncomfortable one (which he considerably appropriated to the accommodation of his friend) he caused them to be carried into this room, and took up his position in great state. The apartment was very far removed from the old man's chamber, but Mr Quilp deemed it prudent, as a precaution against infection from fever, and a means of wholesome fumigation, not only to smoke, himself, without cessation, but to insist upon it that his legal friend did the like. Moreover, he sent an express to the wharf for the tumbling boy, who arriving with all despatch was enjoined to sit himself down in another chair just inside the door, continually to smoke a great pipe which the dwarf had provided for the purpose, and to take it from his lips under any pretence whatever, were it only for one minute at a time, if he dared. These arrangements completed, Mr Quilp looked round him with chuckling satisfaction, and remarked that he called that comfort.

The legal gentleman, whose melodious name was Brass, might have called it comfort also but for two drawbacks: one was, that he could by no exertion sit easy in his chair, the seat of which was very hard, angular, slippery, and sloping; the other, that tobacco-smoke always caused him great internal discomposure and annoyance. But as he was quite a creature of Mr Quilp's and had a thousand reasons for conciliating his good opinion, he tried to smile, and nodded his acquiescence with the best grace he could assume.

This Brass was an attorney of no very good repute, from Bevis Marks in the city of London; he was a tall, meagre man, with a nose like a wen, a protruding forehead, retreating eyes, and hair of a deep red. He wore a long black surtout reaching nearly to his ankles, short black trousers, high shoes, and cotton stockings of a bluish grey. He had a cringing manner, but a very harsh voice; and his blandest smiles were so extremely forbidding, that to have had his company under the least repulsive circumstances, one would have wished him to be out of temper that he might only scowl.

Quilp looked at his legal adviser, and seeing that he was winking very much in the anguish of his pipe, that he sometimes shuddered when he happened to inhale its full flavour, and that he constantly fanned the smoke from him, was quite overjoyed and rubbed his hands with glee.

‘Smoke away, you dog,’ said Quilp, turning to the boy; ‘fill your pipe again and smoke it fast, down to the last whiff, or I’ll put the sealing-waxed end of it in the fire and rub it red hot upon your tongue.’

Luckily the boy was case-hardened, and would have smoked a small lime-kiln if anybody had treated him with it. Wherefore, he only muttered a brief defiance of his master, and did as he was ordered.

‘Is it good, Brass, is it nice, is it fragrant, do you feel like the Grand Turk?’ said Quilp.

Mr Brass thought that if he did, the Grand Turk’s feelings were by no means to be envied, but he said it was famous, and he had no doubt he felt very like that Potentate.

‘This is the way to keep off fever,’ said Quilp, ‘this is the way to keep off every calamity of life! We’ll never leave off, all the time we stop here – smoke away, you dog, or you shall swallow the pipe!’

‘Shall we stop here long, Mr Quilp?’ inquired his legal friend, when the dwarf had given his boy this gentle admonition.

‘We must stop, I suppose, till the old gentleman up stairs is dead,’ returned Quilp.

‘He he he!’ laughed Mr Brass, ‘oh! very good!’

‘Smoke away!’ cried Quilp. ‘Never stop! You can talk as you smoke. Don’t lose time.’

‘He he he!’ cried Brass faintly, as he again applied himself to the odious pipe. ‘But if he should get better, Mr Quilp?’

‘Then we shall stop till he does, and no longer,’ returned the dwarf.

‘How kind it is of you, Sir, to wait till then!’ said Brass. ‘Some people, Sir, would have sold or removed the goods – oh dear, the very instant the law allowed ‘em. Some people, Sir, would have been all flintiness and granite. Some people, sir, would have – ’

‘Some people would have spared themselves the jabbering of such a parrot as you,’ interposed the dwarf.

‘He he he!’ cried Brass. ‘You have such spirits!’

The smoking sentinel at the door interposed in this place, and without taking his pipe from his lips, growled,

‘Here’s the gal a comin’ down.’

‘The what, you dog?’ said Quilp.

‘The gal,’ returned the boy. ‘Are you deaf?’

‘Oh!’ said Quilp, drawing in his breath with great relish as if he were taking soup, ‘you and I will have such a settling presently; there’s such a scratching and bruising in store for you, my dear young friend! Aha! Nelly! How is he now, my duck of diamonds?’

‘He’s very bad,’ replied the weeping child.

‘What a pretty little Nell!’ cried Quilp.

‘Oh beautiful, sir, beautiful indeed,’ said Brass. ‘Quite charming.’

‘Has she come to sit upon Quilp’s knee,’ said the dwarf, in what he meant to be a soothing tone, ‘or is she going to bed in her own little room inside here? Which is poor Nelly going to do?’

‘What a remarkable pleasant way he has with children!’ muttered Brass, as if in confidence between himself and the ceiling; ‘upon my word it’s quite a treat to hear him.’

‘I’m not going to stay at all,’ faltered Nell. ‘I want a few things out of that room, and then I – I – won’t come down here any more.’

‘And a very nice little room it is!’ said the dwarf looking into it as the child entered. ‘Quite a bower! You’re sure you’re not going to use it; you’re sure you’re not coming back, Nelly?’

‘No,’ replied the child, hurrying away, with the few articles of dress she had come to remove; ‘never again! Never again.’

'She's very sensitive,' said Quilp, looking after her. 'Very sensitive; that's a pity. The bedstead is much about my size. I think I shall make it *my* little room.'

Mr Brass encouraging this idea, as he would have encouraged any other emanating from the same source, the dwarf walked in to try the effect. This he did, by throwing himself on his back upon the bed with his pipe in his mouth, and then kicking up his legs and smoking violently. Mr Brass applauding this picture very much, and the bed being soft and comfortable, Mr Quilp determined to use it, both as a sleeping place by night and as a kind of Divan by day; and in order that it might be converted to the latter purpose at once, remained where he was, and smoked his pipe out. The legal gentleman being by this time rather giddy and perplexed in his ideas (for this was one of the operations of the tobacco on his nervous system), took the opportunity of slinking away into the open air, where, in course of time, he recovered sufficiently to return with a countenance of tolerable composure. He was soon led on by the malicious dwarf to smoke himself into a relapse, and in that state stumbled upon a settee where he slept till morning.

Such were Mr Quilp's first proceedings on entering upon his new property. He was, for some days, restrained by business from performing any particular pranks, as his time was pretty well occupied between taking, with the assistance of Mr Brass, a minute inventory of all the goods in the place, and going abroad upon his other concerns which happily engaged him for several hours at a time. His avarice and caution being, now, thoroughly awakened, however, he was never absent from the house one night; and his eagerness for some termination, good or bad, to the old man's disorder, increasing rapidly, as the time passed by, soon began to vent itself in open murmurs and exclamations of impatience.

Nell shrank timidly from all the dwarf's advances towards conversation, and fled from the very sound of his voice; nor were the lawyer's smiles less terrible to her than Quilp's grimaces. She lived in such continual dread and apprehension of meeting one or other of them on the stairs or in the passages if she stirred from her grandfather's chamber, that she seldom left it, for a moment, until late at night, when the silence encouraged her to venture forth and breathe the purer air of some empty room.

One night, she had stolen to her usual window, and was sitting there very sorrowfully – for the old man had been worse that day – when she thought she heard her name pronounced by a voice in the street. Looking down, she recognised Kit, whose endeavours to attract her attention had roused her from her sad reflections.

'Miss Nell!' said the boy in a low voice.

'Yes,' replied the child, doubtful whether she ought to hold any communication with the supposed culprit, but inclining to her old favourite still; 'what do you want?'

'I have wanted to say a word to you, for a long time,' the boy replied, 'but the people below have driven me away and wouldn't let me see you. You don't believe – I hope you don't really believe – that I deserve to be cast off as I have been; do you, miss?'

'I must believe it,' returned the child. 'Or why would grandfather have been so angry with you?'

'I don't know,' replied Kit. 'I'm sure I never deserved it from him, no, nor from you. I can say that, with a true and honest heart, any way. And then to be driven from the door, when I only came to ask how old master was – !'

'They never told me that,' said the child. 'I didn't know it indeed. I wouldn't have had them do it for the world.'

'Thank'ee, miss,' returned Kit, 'it's comfortable to hear you say that. I said I never would believe that it was your doing.'

'That was right!' said the child eagerly.

'Miss Nell,' cried the boy coming under the window, and speaking in a lower tone, 'there are new masters down stairs. It's a change for you.'

'It is indeed,' replied the child.

'And so it will be for him when he gets better,' said the boy, pointing towards the sick room.

‘ – If he ever does,’ added the child, unable to restrain her tears.

‘Oh, he’ll do that, he’ll do that,’ said Kit. ‘I’m sure he will. You mustn’t be cast down, Miss Nell. Now don’t be, pray!’

These words of encouragement and consolation were few and roughly said, but they affected the child and made her, for the moment, weep the more.

‘He’ll be sure to get better now,’ said the boy anxiously, ‘if you don’t give way to low spirits and turn ill yourself, which would make him worse and throw him back, just as he was recovering. When he does, say a good word – say a kind word for me, Miss Nell!’

‘They tell me I must not even mention your name to him for a long, long time,’ rejoined the child, ‘I dare not; and even if I might, what good would a kind word do you, Kit? We shall be very poor. We shall scarcely have bread to eat.’

‘It’s not that I may be taken back,’ said the boy, ‘that I ask the favour of you. It isn’t for the sake of food and wages that I’ve been waiting about so long in hopes to see you. Don’t think that I’d come in a time of trouble to talk of such things as them.’

The child looked gratefully and kindly at him, but waited that he might speak again.

‘No, it’s not that,’ said Kit hesitating, ‘it’s something very different from that. I haven’t got much sense, I know, but if he could be brought to believe that I’d been a faithful servant to him, doing the best I could, and never meaning harm, perhaps he mightn’t – ’

Here Kit faltered so long that the child entreated him to speak out, and quickly, for it was very late, and time to shut the window.

‘Perhaps he mightn’t think it over venturesome of me to say – well then, to say this,’ cried Kit with sudden boldness. ‘This home is gone from you and him. Mother and I have got a poor one, but that’s better than this with all these people here; and why not come there, till he’s had time to look about, and find a better!’

The child did not speak. Kit, in the relief of having made his proposition, found his tongue loosened, and spoke out in its favour with his utmost eloquence.

‘You think,’ said the boy, ‘that it’s very small and inconvenient. So it is, but it’s very clean. Perhaps you think it would be noisy, but there’s not a quieter court than ours in all the town. Don’t be afraid of the children; the baby hardly ever cries, and the other one is very good – besides, I’d mind ‘em. They wouldn’t vex you much, I’m sure. Do try, Miss Nell, do try. The little front room up stairs is very pleasant. You can see a piece of the church-clock, through the chimneys, and almost tell the time; mother says it would be just the thing for you, and so it would, and you’d have her to wait upon you both, and me to run of errands. We don’t mean money, bless you; you’re not to think of that! Will you try him, Miss Nell? Only say you’ll try him. Do try to make old master come, and ask him first what I have done. Will you only promise that, Miss Nell?’

Before the child could reply to this earnest solicitation, the street-door opened, and Mr Brass thrusting out his night-capped head called in a surly voice, ‘Who’s there!’ Kit immediately glided away, and Nell, closing the window softly, drew back into the room.

Before Mr Brass had repeated his inquiry many times, Mr Quilp, also embellished with a night-cap, emerged from the same door and looked carefully up and down the street, and up at all the windows of the house, from the opposite side. Finding that there was nobody in sight, he presently returned into the house with his legal friend, protesting (as the child heard from the staircase), that there was a league and plot against him; that he was in danger of being robbed and plundered by a band of conspirators who prowled about the house at all seasons; and that he would delay no longer but take immediate steps for disposing of the property and returning to his own peaceful roof. Having growled forth these, and a great many other threats of the same nature, he coiled himself once more in the child’s little bed, and Nell crept softly up the stairs.

It was natural enough that her short and unfinished dialogue with Kit should leave a strong impression on her mind, and influence her dreams that night and her recollections for a long, long

time. Surrounded by unfeeling creditors, and mercenary attendants upon the sick, and meeting in the height of her anxiety and sorrow with little regard or sympathy even from the women about her, it is not surprising that the affectionate heart of the child should have been touched to the quick by one kind and generous spirit, however uncouth the temple in which it dwelt. Thank Heaven that the temples of such spirits are not made with hands, and that they may be even more worthily hung with poor patch-work than with purple and fine linen!

CHAPTER 12

At length, the crisis of the old man's disorder was past, and he began to mend. By very slow and feeble degrees his consciousness came back; but the mind was weakened and its functions were impaired. He was patient, and quiet; often sat brooding, but not despondently, for a long space; was easily amused, even by a sun-beam on the wall or ceiling; made no complaint that the days were long, or the nights tedious; and appeared indeed to have lost all count of time, and every sense of care or weariness. He would sit, for hours together, with Nell's small hand in his, playing with the fingers and stopping sometimes to smooth her hair or kiss her brow; and, when he saw that tears were glistening in her eyes, would look, amazed, about him for the cause, and forget his wonder even while he looked.

The child and he rode out; the old man propped up with pillows, and the child beside him. They were hand in hand as usual. The noise and motion in the streets fatigued his brain at first, but he was not surprised, or curious, or pleased, or irritated. He was asked if he remembered this, or that. 'O yes,' he said, 'quite well – why not?' Sometimes he turned his head, and looked, with earnest gaze and outstretched neck, after some stranger in the crowd, until he disappeared from sight; but, to the question why he did this, he answered not a word.

He was sitting in his easy chair one day, and Nell upon a stool beside him, when a man outside the door inquired if he might enter. 'Yes,' he said without emotion, 'it was Quilp, he knew. Quilp was master there. Of course he might come in.' And so he did.

'I'm glad to see you well again at last, neighbour,' said the dwarf, sitting down opposite him. 'You're quite strong now?'

'Yes,' said the old man feebly, 'yes.'

'I don't want to hurry you, you know, neighbour,' said the dwarf, raising his voice, for the old man's senses were duller than they had been; 'but, as soon as you can arrange your future proceedings, the better.'

'Surely,' said the old man. 'The better for all parties.'

'You see,' pursued Quilp after a short pause, 'the goods being once removed, this house would be uncomfortable; uninhabitable in fact.'

'You say true,' returned the old man. 'Poor Nell too, what would she do?'

'Exactly,' bawled the dwarf nodding his head; 'that's very well observed. Then will you consider about it, neighbour?'

'I will, certainly,' replied the old man. 'We shall not stop here.'

'So I supposed,' said the dwarf. 'I have sold the things. They have not yielded quite as much as they might have done, but pretty well – pretty well. To-day's Tuesday. When shall they be moved? There's no hurry – shall we say this afternoon?'

'Say Friday morning,' returned the old man.

'Very good,' said the dwarf. 'So be it – with the understanding that I can't go beyond that day, neighbour, on any account.'

'Good,' returned the old man. 'I shall remember it.'

Mr Quilp seemed rather puzzled by the strange, even spiritless way in which all this was said; but as the old man nodded his head and repeated 'on Friday morning. I shall remember it,' he had no excuse for dwelling on the subject any further, and so took a friendly leave with many expressions of good-will and many compliments to his friend on his looking so remarkably well; and went below stairs to report progress to Mr Brass.

All that day, and all the next, the old man remained in this state. He wandered up and down the house and into and out of the various rooms, as if with some vague intent of bidding them adieu, but he referred neither by direct allusions nor in any other manner to the interview of the morning or the necessity of finding some other shelter. An indistinct idea he had, that the child was desolate and

in want of help; for he often drew her to his bosom and bade her be of good cheer, saying that they would not desert each other; but he seemed unable to contemplate their real position more distinctly, and was still the listless, passionless creature that suffering of mind and body had left him.

We call this a state of childishness, but it is the same poor hollow mockery of it, that death is of sleep. Where, in the dull eyes of doating men, are the laughing light and life of childhood, the gaiety that has known no check, the frankness that has felt no chill, the hope that has never withered, the joys that fade in blossoming? Where, in the sharp lineaments of rigid and unsightly death, is the calm beauty of slumber, telling of rest for the waking hours that are past, and gentle hopes and loves for those which are to come? Lay death and sleep down, side by side, and say who shall find the two akin. Send forth the child and childish man together, and blush for the pride that libels our own old happy state, and gives its title to an ugly and distorted image.

Thursday arrived, and there was no alteration in the old man. But a change came upon him that evening as he and the child sat silently together.

In a small dull yard below his window, there was a tree – green and flourishing enough, for such a place – and as the air stirred among its leaves, it threw a rippling shadow on the white wall. The old man sat watching the shadows as they trembled in this patch of light, until the sun went down; and when it was night, and the moon was slowly rising, he still sat in the same spot.

To one who had been tossing on a restless bed so long, even these few green leaves and this tranquil light, although it languished among chimneys and house-tops, were pleasant things. They suggested quiet places afar off, and rest, and peace. The child thought, more than once that he was moved: and had forborne to speak. But now he shed tears – tears that it lightened her aching heart to see – and making as though he would fall upon his knees, besought her to forgive him.

‘Forgive you – what?’ said Nell, interposing to prevent his purpose. ‘Oh grandfather, what should I forgive?’

‘All that is past, all that has come upon thee, Nell, all that was done in that uneasy dream,’ returned the old man.

‘Do not talk so,’ said the child. ‘Pray do not. Let us speak of something else.’

‘Yes, yes, we will,’ he rejoined. ‘And it shall be of what we talked of long ago – many months – months is it, or weeks, or days? which is it Nell?’

‘I do not understand you,’ said the child.

‘It has come back upon me to-day, it has all come back since we have been sitting here. I bless thee for it, Nell!’

‘For what, dear grandfather?’

‘For what you said when we were first made beggars, Nell. Let us speak softly. Hush! for if they knew our purpose down stairs, they would cry that I was mad and take thee from me. We will not stop here another day. We will go far away from here.’

‘Yes, let us go,’ said the child earnestly. ‘Let us begone from this place, and never turn back or think of it again. Let us wander barefoot through the world, rather than linger here.’

‘We will,’ answered the old man, ‘we will travel afoot through the fields and woods, and by the side of rivers, and trust ourselves to God in the places where He dwells. It is far better to lie down at night beneath an open sky like that yonder – see how bright it is – than to rest in close rooms which are always full of care and weary dreams. Thou and I together, Nell, may be cheerful and happy yet, and learn to forget this time, as if it had never been.’

‘We will be happy,’ cried the child. ‘We never can be here.’

‘No, we never can again – never again – that’s truly said,’ rejoined the old man. ‘Let us steal away to-morrow morning – early and softly, that we may not be seen or heard – and leave no trace or track for them to follow by. Poor Nell! Thy cheek is pale, and thy eyes are heavy with watching and weeping for me – I know – for me; but thou wilt be well again, and merry too, when we are

far away. To-morrow morning, dear, we'll turn our faces from this scene of sorrow, and be as free and happy as the birds.'

And then the old man clasped his hands above her head, and said, in a few broken words, that from that time forth they would wander up and down together, and never part more until Death took one or other of the twain.

The child's heart beat high with hope and confidence. She had no thought of hunger, or cold, or thirst, or suffering. She saw in this, but a return of the simple pleasures they had once enjoyed, a relief from the gloomy solitude in which she had lived, an escape from the heartless people by whom she had been surrounded in her late time of trial, the restoration of the old man's health and peace, and a life of tranquil happiness. Sun, and stream, and meadow, and summer days, shone brightly in her view, and there was no dark tint in all the sparkling picture.

The old man had slept, for some hours, soundly in his bed, and she was yet busily engaged in preparing for their flight. There were a few articles of clothing for herself to carry, and a few for him; old garments, such as became their fallen fortunes, laid out to wear; and a staff to support his feeble steps, put ready for his use. But this was not all her task; for now she must visit the old rooms for the last time.

And how different the parting with them was, from any she had expected, and most of all from that which she had oftenest pictured to herself. How could she ever have thought of bidding them farewell in triumph, when the recollection of the many hours she had passed among them rose to her swelling heart, and made her feel the wish a cruelty: lonely and sad though many of those hours had been! She sat down at the window where she had spent so many evenings – darker far than this – and every thought of hope or cheerfulness that had occurred to her in that place came vividly upon her mind, and blotted out all its dull and mournful associations in an instant.

Her own little room too, where she had so often knelt down and prayed at night – prayed for the time which she hoped was dawning now – the little room where she had slept so peacefully, and dreamed such pleasant dreams! It was hard not to be able to glance round it once more, and to be forced to leave it without one kind look or grateful tear. There were some trifles there – poor useless things – that she would have liked to take away; but that was impossible.

This brought to mind her bird, her poor bird, who hung there yet. She wept bitterly for the loss of this little creature – until the idea occurred to her – she did not know how, or why, it came into her head – that it might, by some means, fall into the hands of Kit who would keep it for her sake, and think, perhaps, that she had left it behind in the hope that he might have it, and as an assurance that she was grateful to him. She was calmed and comforted by the thought, and went to rest with a lighter heart.

From many dreams of rambling through light and sunny places, but with some vague object unattained which ran indistinctly through them all, she awoke to find that it was yet night, and that the stars were shining brightly in the sky. At length, the day began to glimmer, and the stars to grow pale and dim. As soon as she was sure of this, she arose, and dressed herself for the journey.

The old man was yet asleep, and as she was unwilling to disturb him, she left him to slumber on, until the sun rose. He was anxious that they should leave the house without a minute's loss of time, and was soon ready.

The child then took him by the hand, and they trod lightly and cautiously down the stairs, trembling whenever a board creaked, and often stopping to listen. The old man had forgotten a kind of wallet which contained the light burden he had to carry; and the going back a few steps to fetch it seemed an interminable delay.

At last they reached the passage on the ground floor, where the snoring of Mr Quilp and his legal friend sounded more terrible in their ears than the roars of lions. The bolts of the door were rusty, and difficult to unfasten without noise. When they were all drawn back, it was found to be locked, and worst of all, the key was gone. Then the child remembered, for the first time, one of the

nurses having told her that Quilp always locked both the house-doors at night, and kept the keys on the table in his bedroom.

It was not without great fear and trepidation that little Nell slipped off her shoes and gliding through the store-room of old curiosities, where Mr Brass – the ugliest piece of goods in all the stock – lay sleeping on a mattress, passed into her own little chamber.

Here she stood, for a few moments, quite transfixed with terror at the sight of Mr Quilp, who was hanging so far out of bed that he almost seemed to be standing on his head, and who, either from the uneasiness of this posture, or in one of his agreeable habits, was gasping and growling with his mouth wide open, and the whites (or rather the dirty yellows) of his eyes distinctly visible. It was no time, however, to ask whether anything ailed him; so, possessing herself of the key after one hasty glance about the room, and repassing the prostrate Mr Brass, she rejoined the old man in safety. They got the door open without noise, and passing into the street, stood still.

‘Which way?’ said the child.

The old man looked, irresolutely and helplessly, first at her, then to the right and left, then at her again, and shook his head. It was plain that she was thenceforth his guide and leader. The child felt it, but had no doubts or misgiving, and putting her hand in his, led him gently away.

It was the beginning of a day in June; the deep blue sky unsullied by a cloud, and teeming with brilliant light. The streets were, as yet, nearly free from passengers, the houses and shops were closed, and the healthy air of morning fell like breath from angels, on the sleeping town.

The old man and the child passed on through the glad silence, elate with hope and pleasure. They were alone together, once again; every object was bright and fresh; nothing reminded them, otherwise than by contrast, of the monotony and constraint they had left behind; church towers and steeples, frowning and dark at other times, now shone in the sun; each humble nook and corner rejoiced in light; and the sky, dimmed only by excessive distance, shed its placid smile on everything beneath.

Forth from the city, while it yet slumbered, went the two poor adventurers, wandering they knew not whither.

CHAPTER 13

Daniel Quilp of Tower Hill, and Sampson Brass of Bevis Marks in the city of London, Gentleman, one of her Majesty's attornies of the Courts of the King's Bench and Common Pleas at Westminster and a solicitor of the High Court of Chancery, slumbered on, unconscious and unsuspecting of any mischance, until a knocking on the street door, often repeated and gradually mounting up from a modest single rap to a perfect battery of knocks, fired in long discharges with a very short interval between, caused the said Daniel Quilp to struggle into a horizontal position, and to stare at the ceiling with a drowsy indifference, betokening that he heard the noise and rather wondered at the same, and couldn't be at the trouble of bestowing any further thought upon the subject.

As the knocking, however, instead of accommodating itself to his lazy state, increased in vigour and became more importunate, as if in earnest remonstrance against his falling asleep again, now that he had once opened his eyes, Daniel Quilp began by degrees to comprehend the possibility of there being somebody at the door; and thus he gradually came to recollect that it was Friday morning, and he had ordered Mrs Quilp to be in waiting upon him at an early hour.

Mr Brass, after writhing about, in a great many strange attitudes, and often twisting his face and eyes into an expression like that which is usually produced by eating gooseberries very early in the season, was by this time awake also. Seeing that Mr Quilp invested himself in his every-day garments, he hastened to do the like, putting on his shoes before his stockings, and thrusting his legs into his coat sleeves, and making such other small mistakes in his toilet as are not uncommon to those who dress in a hurry, and labour under the agitation of having been suddenly roused.

While the attorney was thus engaged, the dwarf was groping under the table, muttering desperate imprecations on himself, and mankind in general, and all inanimate objects to boot, which suggested to Mr Brass the question, 'what's the matter?'

'The key,' said the dwarf, looking viciously about him, 'the door-key – that's the matter. D'ye know anything of it?'

'How should I know anything of it, sir?' returned Mr Brass.

'How should you?' repeated Quilp with a sneer. 'You're a nice lawyer, an't you? Ugh, you idiot!'

Not caring to represent to the dwarf in his present humour, that the loss of a key by another person could scarcely be said to affect his (Brass's) legal knowledge in any material degree, Mr Brass humbly suggested that it must have been forgotten over night, and was, doubtless, at that moment in its native key-hole. Notwithstanding that Mr Quilp had a strong conviction to the contrary, founded on his recollection of having carefully taken it out, he was fain to admit that this was possible, and therefore went grumbling to the door where, sure enough, he found it.

Now, just as Mr Quilp laid his hand upon the lock, and saw with great astonishment that the fastenings were undone, the knocking came again with the most irritating violence, and the daylight which had been shining through the key-hole was intercepted on the outside by a human eye. The dwarf was very much exasperated, and wanting somebody to wreak his ill-humour upon, determined to dart out suddenly, and favour Mrs Quilp with a gentle acknowledgment of her attention in making that hideous uproar.

With this view, he drew back the lock very silently and softly, and opening the door all at once, pounced out upon the person on the other side, who had at that moment raised the knocker for another application, and at whom the dwarf ran head first: throwing out his hands and feet together, and biting the air in the fulness of his malice.

So far, however, from rushing upon somebody who offered no resistance and implored his mercy, Mr Quilp was no sooner in the arms of the individual whom he had taken for his wife than he found himself complimented with two staggering blows on the head, and two more, of the same quality, in the chest; and closing with his assailant, such a shower of buffets rained down upon his

person as sufficed to convince him that he was in skilful and experienced hands. Nothing daunted by this reception, he clung tight to his opponent, and bit and hammered away with such good-will and heartiness, that it was at least a couple of minutes before he was dislodged. Then, and not until then, Daniel Quilp found himself, all flushed and dishevelled, in the middle of the street, with Mr Richard Swiveller performing a kind of dance round him and requiring to know 'whether he wanted any more?'

'There's plenty more of it at the same shop,' said Mr Swiveller, by turns advancing and retreating in a threatening attitude, 'a large and extensive assortment always on hand – country orders executed with promptitude and despatch – will you have a little more, Sir – don't say no, if you'd rather not.'

'I thought it was somebody else,' said Quilp, rubbing his shoulders, 'why didn't you say who you were?'

'Why didn't you say who *you* were?' returned Dick, 'instead of flying out of the house like a Bedlamite?'

'It was you that – that knocked,' said the dwarf, getting up with a short groan, 'was it?'

'Yes, I am the man,' replied Dick. 'That lady had begun when I came, but she knocked too soft, so I relieved her.' As he said this, he pointed towards Mrs Quilp, who stood trembling at a little distance.

'Humph!' muttered the dwarf, darting an angry look at his wife, 'I thought it was your fault! And you, sir – don't you know there has been somebody ill here, that you knock as if you'd beat the door down?'

'Damme!' answered Dick, 'that's why I did it. I thought there was somebody dead here.'

'You came for some purpose, I suppose,' said Quilp. 'What is it you want?'

'I want to know how the old gentleman is,' rejoined Mr Swiveller, 'and to hear from Nell herself, with whom I should like to have a little talk. I'm a friend of the family, sir – at least I'm the friend of one of the family, and that's the same thing.'

'You'd better walk in then,' said the dwarf. 'Go on, sir, go on. Now, Mrs Quilp – after you, ma'am.'

Mrs Quilp hesitated, but Mr Quilp insisted. And it was not a contest of politeness, or by any means a matter of form, for she knew very well that her husband wished to enter the house in this order, that he might have a favourable opportunity of inflicting a few pinches on her arms, which were seldom free from impressions of his fingers in black and blue colours. Mr Swiveller, who was not in the secret, was a little surprised to hear a suppressed scream, and, looking round, to see Mrs Quilp following him with a sudden jerk; but he did not remark on these appearances, and soon forgot them.

'Now, Mrs Quilp,' said the dwarf when they had entered the shop, 'go you up stairs, if you please, to Nelly's room, and tell her that she's wanted.'

'You seem to make yourself at home here,' said Dick, who was unacquainted with Mr Quilp's authority.

'I *am* at home, young gentleman,' returned the dwarf.

Dick was pondering what these words might mean, and still more what the presence of Mr Brass might mean, when Mrs Quilp came hurrying down stairs, declaring that the rooms above were empty.

'Empty, you fool!' said the dwarf.

'I give you my word, Quilp,' answered his trembling wife, 'that I have been into every room and there's not a soul in any of them.'

'And that,' said Mr Brass, clapping his hands once, with an emphasis, 'explains the mystery of the key!'

Quilp looked frowningly at him, and frowningly at his wife, and frowningly at Richard Swiveller; but, receiving no enlightenment from any of them, hurried up stairs, whence he soon hurried down again, confirming the report which had already been made.

‘It’s a strange way of going,’ he said, glancing at Swiveller, ‘very strange not to communicate with me who am such a close and intimate friend of his! Ah! he’ll write to me no doubt, or he’ll bid Nelly write – yes, yes, that’s what he’ll do. Nelly’s very fond of me. Pretty Nell!’

Mr Swiveller looked, as he was, all open-mouthed astonishment. Still glancing furtively at him, Quilp turned to Mr Brass and observed, with assumed carelessness, that this need not interfere with the removal of the goods.

‘For indeed,’ he added, ‘we knew that they’d go away to-day, but not that they’d go so early, or so quietly. But they have their reasons, they have their reasons.’

‘Where in the devil’s name are they gone?’ said the wondering Dick.

Quilp shook his head, and pursed up his lips, in a manner which implied that he knew very well, but was not at liberty to say.

‘And what,’ said Dick, looking at the confusion about him, ‘what do you mean by moving the goods?’

‘That I have bought ‘em, Sir,’ rejoined Quilp. ‘Eh? What then?’

‘Has the sly old fox made his fortune then, and gone to live in a tranquil cot in a pleasant spot with a distant view of the changing sea?’ said Dick, in great bewilderment.

‘Keeping his place of retirement very close, that he may not be visited too often by affectionate grandsons and their devoted friends, eh?’ added the dwarf, rubbing his hands hard; ‘I say nothing, but is that your meaning?’

Richard Swiveller was utterly aghast at this unexpected alteration of circumstances, which threatened the complete overthrow of the project in which he bore so conspicuous a part, and seemed to nip his prospects in the bud. Having only received from Frederick Trent, late on the previous night, information of the old man’s illness, he had come upon a visit of condolence and inquiry to Nell, prepared with the first instalment of that long train of fascinations which was to fire her heart at last. And here, when he had been thinking of all kinds of graceful and insinuating approaches, and meditating on the fearful retaliation which was slowly working against Sophy Wackles – here were Nell, the old man, and all the money gone, melted away, decamped he knew not whither, as if with a fore-knowledge of the scheme and a resolution to defeat it in the very outset, before a step was taken.

In his secret heart, Daniel Quilp was both surprised and troubled by the flight which had been made. It had not escaped his keen eye that some indispensable articles of clothing were gone with the fugitives, and knowing the old man’s weak state of mind, he marvelled what that course of proceeding might be in which he had so readily procured the concurrence of the child. It must not be supposed (or it would be a gross injustice to Mr Quilp) that he was tortured by any disinterested anxiety on behalf of either. His uneasiness arose from a misgiving that the old man had some secret store of money which he had not suspected; and the idea of its escaping his clutches, overwhelmed him with mortification and self-reproach.

In this frame of mind, it was some consolation to him to find that Richard Swiveller was, for different reasons, evidently irritated and disappointed by the same cause. It was plain, thought the dwarf, that he had come there, on behalf of his friend, to cajole or frighten the old man out of some small fraction of that wealth of which they supposed him to have an abundance. Therefore, it was a relief to vex his heart with a picture of the riches the old man hoarded, and to expatiate on his cunning in removing himself even beyond the reach of importunity.

‘Well,’ said Dick, with a blank look, ‘I suppose it’s of no use my staying here.’

‘Not the least in the world,’ rejoined the dwarf.

‘You’ll mention that I called, perhaps?’ said Dick.

Mr Quilp nodded, and said he certainly would, the very first time he saw them.

‘And say,’ added Mr Swiveller, ‘say, sir, that I was wafted here upon the pinions of concord; that I came to remove, with the rake of friendship, the seeds of mutual violence and heart-burning,

and to sow in their place, the germs of social harmony. Will you have the goodness to charge yourself with that commission, Sir?’

‘Certainly!’ rejoined Quilp.

‘Will you be kind enough to add to it, Sir,’ said Dick, producing a very small limp card, ‘that that is my address, and that I am to be found at home every morning. Two distinct knocks, sir, will produce the slavey at any time. My particular friends, Sir, are accustomed to sneeze when the door is opened, to give her to understand that they *are* my friends and have no interested motives in asking if I’m at home. I beg your pardon; will you allow me to look at that card again?’

‘Oh! by all means,’ rejoined Quilp.

‘By a slight and not unnatural mistake, sir,’ said Dick, substituting another in its stead, ‘I had handed you the pass-ticket of a select convivial circle called the Glorious Apollers of which I have the honour to be Perpetual Grand. That is the proper document, Sir. Good morning.’

Quilp bade him good day; the perpetual Grand Master of the Glorious Apollers, elevating his hat in honour of Mrs Quilp, dropped it carelessly on the side of his head again, and disappeared with a flourish.

By this time, certain vans had arrived for the conveyance of the goods, and divers strong men in caps were balancing chests of drawers and other trifles of that nature upon their heads, and performing muscular feats which heightened their complexions considerably. Not to be behind-hand in the bustle, Mr Quilp went to work with surprising vigour; hustling and driving the people about, like an evil spirit; setting Mrs Quilp upon all kinds of arduous and impracticable tasks; carrying great weights up and down, with no apparent effort; kicking the boy from the wharf, whenever he could get near him; and inflicting, with his loads, a great many sly bumps and blows on the shoulders of Mr Brass, as he stood upon the door-steps to answer all the inquiries of curious neighbours, which was his department. His presence and example diffused such alacrity among the persons employed, that, in a few hours, the house was emptied of everything, but pieces of matting, empty porter-pots, and scattered fragments of straw.

Seated, like an African chief, on one of these pieces of matting, the dwarf was regaling himself in the parlour, with bread and cheese and beer, when he observed without appearing to do so, that a boy was prying in at the outer door. Assured that it was Kit, though he saw little more than his nose, Mr Quilp hailed him by his name; whereupon Kit came in and demanded what he wanted.

‘Come here, you sir,’ said the dwarf. ‘Well, so your old master and young mistress have gone?’

‘Where?’ rejoined Kit, looking round.

‘Do you mean to say you don’t know where?’ answered Quilp sharply. ‘Where have they gone, eh?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Kit.

‘Come,’ retorted Quilp, ‘let’s have no more of this! Do you mean to say that you don’t know they went away by stealth, as soon as it was light this morning?’

‘No,’ said the boy, in evident surprise.

‘You don’t know that?’ cried Quilp. ‘Don’t I know that you were hanging about the house the other night, like a thief, eh? Weren’t you told then?’

‘No,’ replied the boy.

‘You were not?’ said Quilp. ‘What were you told then; what were you talking about?’

Kit, who knew no particular reason why he should keep the matter secret now, related the purpose for which he had come on that occasion, and the proposal he had made.

‘Oh!’ said the dwarf after a little consideration. ‘Then, I think they’ll come to you yet.’

‘Do you think they will?’ cried Kit eagerly.

‘Aye, I think they will,’ returned the dwarf. ‘Now, when they do, let me know; d’ye hear? Let me know, and I’ll give you something. I want to do ‘em a kindness, and I can’t do ‘em a kindness unless I know where they are. You hear what I say?’

Kit might have returned some answer which would not have been agreeable to his irascible questioner, if the boy from the wharf, who had been skulking about the room in search of anything that might have been left about by accident, had not happened to cry, 'Here's a bird! What's to be done with this?'

'Wring its neck,' rejoined Quilp.

'Oh no, don't do that,' said Kit, stepping forward. 'Give it to me.'

'Oh yes, I dare say,' cried the other boy. 'Come! You let the cage alone, and let me wring its neck will you? He said I was to do it. You let the cage alone will you.'

'Give it here, give it to me, you dogs,' roared Quilp. 'Fight for it, you dogs, or I'll wring its neck myself!'

Without further persuasion, the two boys fell upon each other, tooth and nail, while Quilp, holding up the cage in one hand, and chopping the ground with his knife in an ecstasy, urged them on by his taunts and cries to fight more fiercely. They were a pretty equal match, and rolled about together, exchanging blows which were by no means child's play, until at length Kit, planting a well-directed hit in his adversary's chest, disengaged himself, sprung nimbly up, and snatching the cage from Quilp's hands made off with his prize.

He did not stop once until he reached home, where his bleeding face occasioned great consternation, and caused the elder child to howl dreadfully.

'Goodness gracious, Kit, what is the matter, what have you been doing?' cried Mrs Nubbles.

'Never you mind, mother,' answered her son, wiping his face on the jack-towel behind the door. 'I'm not hurt, don't you be afraid for me. I've been a fightin' for a bird and won him, that's all. Hold your noise, little Jacob. I never see such a naughty boy in all my days!'

'You have been fighting for a bird!' exclaimed his mother.

'Ah! Fightin' for a bird!' replied Kit, 'and here he is – Miss Nelly's bird, mother, that they was agoin' to wring the neck of! I stopped that though – ha ha ha! They wouldn't wring his neck and me by, no, no. It wouldn't do, mother, it wouldn't do at all. Ha ha ha!'

Kit laughing so heartily, with his swollen and bruised face looking out of the towel, made little Jacob laugh, and then his mother laughed, and then the baby crowed and kicked with great glee, and then they all laughed in concert: partly because of Kit's triumph, and partly because they were very fond of each other. When this fit was over, Kit exhibited the bird to both children, as a great and precious rarity – it was only a poor linnet – and looking about the wall for an old nail, made a scaffolding of a chair and table and twisted it out with great exultation.

'Let me see,' said the boy, 'I think I'll hang him in the winder, because it's more light and cheerful, and he can see the sky there, if he looks up very much. He's such a one to sing, I can tell you!'

So, the scaffolding was made again, and Kit, climbing up with the poker for a hammer, knocked in the nail and hung up the cage, to the immeasurable delight of the whole family. When it had been adjusted and straightened a great many times, and he had walked backwards into the fire-place in his admiration of it, the arrangement was pronounced to be perfect.

'And now, mother,' said the boy, 'before I rest any more, I'll go out and see if I can find a horse to hold, and then I can buy some birdseed, and a bit of something nice for you, into the bargain.'

CHAPTER 14

As it was very easy for Kit to persuade himself that the old house was in his way, his way being anywhere, he tried to look upon his passing it once more as a matter of imperative and disagreeable necessity, quite apart from any desire of his own, to which he could not choose but yield. It is not uncommon for people who are much better fed and taught than Christopher Nubbles had ever been, to make duties of their inclinations in matters of more doubtful propriety, and to take great credit for the self-denial with which they gratify themselves.

There was no need of any caution this time, and no fear of being detained by having to play out a return match with Daniel Quilp's boy. The place was entirely deserted, and looked as dusty and dingy as if it had been so for months. A rusty padlock was fastened on the door, ends of discoloured blinds and curtains flapped drearily against the half-opened upper windows, and the crooked holes cut in the closed shutters below, were black with the darkness of the inside. Some of the glass in the window he had so often watched, had been broken in the rough hurry of the morning, and that room looked more deserted and dull than any. A group of idle urchins had taken possession of the door-steps; some were plying the knocker and listening with delighted dread to the hollow sounds it spread through the dismantled house; others were clustered about the keyhole, watching half in jest and half in earnest for 'the ghost,' which an hour's gloom, added to the mystery that hung about the late inhabitants, had already raised. Standing all alone in the midst of the business and bustle of the street, the house looked a picture of cold desolation; and Kit, who remembered the cheerful fire that used to burn there on a winter's night and the no less cheerful laugh that made the small room ring, turned quite mournfully away.

It must be especially observed in justice to poor Kit that he was by no means of a sentimental turn, and perhaps had never heard that adjective in all his life. He was only a soft-hearted grateful fellow, and had nothing genteel or polite about him; consequently, instead of going home again, in his grief, to kick the children and abuse his mother (for, when your finely strung people are out of sorts, they must have everybody else unhappy likewise), he turned his thoughts to the vulgar expedient of making them more comfortable if he could.

Bless us, what a number of gentlemen on horseback there were riding up and down, and how few of them wanted their horses held! A good city speculator or a parliamentary commissioner could have told to a fraction, from the crowds that were cantering about, what sum of money was realised in London, in the course of a year, by holding horses alone. And undoubtedly it would have been a very large one, if only a twentieth part of the gentlemen without grooms had had occasion to alight; but they had not; and it is often an ill-natured circumstance like this, which spoils the most ingenious estimate in the world.

Kit walked about, now with quick steps and now with slow; now lingering as some rider slackened his horse's pace and looked about him; and now darting at full speed up a bye-street as he caught a glimpse of some distant horseman going lazily up the shady side of the road, and promising to stop, at every door. But on they all went, one after another, and there was not a penny stirring. 'I wonder,' thought the boy, 'if one of these gentlemen knew there was nothing in the cupboard at home, whether he'd stop on purpose, and make believe that he wanted to call somewhere, that I might earn a trifle?'

He was quite tired out with pacing the streets, to say nothing of repeated disappointments, and was sitting down upon a step to rest, when there approached towards him a little clattering jingling four-wheeled chaise, drawn by a little obstinate-looking rough-coated pony, and driven by a little fat placid-faced old gentleman. Beside the little old gentleman sat a little old lady, plump and placid like himself, and the pony was coming along at his own pace and doing exactly as he pleased with the whole concern. If the old gentleman remonstrated by shaking the reins, the pony replied by shaking

his head. It was plain that the utmost the pony would consent to do, was to go in his own way up any street that the old gentleman particularly wished to traverse, but that it was an understanding between them that he must do this after his own fashion or not at all.

As they passed where he sat, Kit looked so wistfully at the little turn-out, that the old gentleman looked at him. Kit rising and putting his hand to his hat, the old gentleman intimated to the pony that he wished to stop, to which proposal the pony (who seldom objected to that part of his duty) graciously acceded.

'I beg your pardon, sir,' said Kit. 'I'm sorry you stopped, sir. I only meant did you want your horse minded.'

'I'm going to get down in the next street,' returned the old gentleman. 'If you like to come on after us, you may have the job.'

Kit thanked him, and joyfully obeyed. The pony ran off at a sharp angle to inspect a lamp-post on the opposite side of the way, and then went off at a tangent to another lamp-post on the other side. Having satisfied himself that they were of the same pattern and materials, he came to a stop apparently absorbed in meditation.

'Will you go on, sir,' said the old gentleman, gravely, 'or are we to wait here for you till it's too late for our appointment?'

The pony remained immoveable.

'Oh you naughty Whisker,' said the old lady. 'Fie upon you! I'm ashamed of such conduct.'

The pony appeared to be touched by this appeal to his feelings, for he trotted on directly, though in a sulky manner, and stopped no more until he came to a door whereon was a brass plate with the words 'Witherden – Notary.' Here the old gentleman got out and helped out the old lady, and then took from under the seat a nosegay resembling in shape and dimensions a full-sized warming-pan with the handle cut short off. This, the old lady carried into the house with a staid and stately air, and the old gentleman (who had a club-foot) followed close upon her.

They went, as it was easy to tell from the sound of their voices, into the front parlour, which seemed to be a kind of office. The day being very warm and the street a quiet one, the windows were wide open; and it was easy to hear through the Venetian blinds all that passed inside.

At first there was a great shaking of hands and shuffling of feet, succeeded by the presentation of the nosegay; for a voice, supposed by the listener to be that of Mr Witherden the Notary, was heard to exclaim a great many times, 'oh, delicious!' 'oh, fragrant, indeed!' and a nose, also supposed to be the property of that gentleman, was heard to inhale the scent with a snuffle of exceeding pleasure.

'I brought it in honour of the occasion, Sir,' said the old lady.

'Ah! an occasion indeed, ma'am, an occasion which does honour to me, ma'am, honour to me,' rejoined Mr Witherden, the notary. 'I have had many a gentleman articulated to me, ma'am, many a one. Some of them are now rolling in riches, unmindful of their old companion and friend, ma'am, others are in the habit of calling upon me to this day and saying, "Mr Witherden, some of the pleasantest hours I ever spent in my life were spent in this office – were spent, Sir, upon this very stool"; but there was never one among the number, ma'am, attached as I have been to many of them, of whom I augured such bright things as I do of your only son.'

'Oh dear!' said the old lady. 'How happy you do make us when you tell us that, to be sure!'

'I tell you, ma'am,' said Mr Witherden, 'what I think as an honest man, which, as the poet observes, is the noblest work of God. I agree with the poet in every particular, ma'am. The mountainous Alps on the one hand, or a humming-bird on the other, is nothing, in point of workmanship, to an honest man – or woman – or woman.'

'Anything that Mr Witherden can say of me,' observed a small quiet voice, 'I can say, with interest, of him, I am sure.'

‘It’s a happy circumstance, a truly happy circumstance,’ said the Notary, ‘to happen too upon his eight-and-twentieth birthday, and I hope I know how to appreciate it. I trust, Mr Garland, my dear Sir, that we may mutually congratulate each other upon this auspicious occasion.’

To this the old gentleman replied that he felt assured they might. There appeared to be another shaking of hands in consequence, and when it was over, the old gentleman said that, though he said it who should not, he believed no son had ever been a greater comfort to his parents than Abel Garland had been to his.

‘Marrying as his mother and I did, late in life, sir, after waiting for a great many years, until we were well enough off – coming together when we were no longer young, and then being blessed with one child who has always been dutiful and affectionate – why, it’s a source of great happiness to us both, sir.’

‘Of course it is, I have no doubt of it,’ returned the Notary in a sympathising voice. ‘It’s the contemplation of this sort of thing, that makes me deplore my fate in being a bachelor. There was a young lady once, sir, the daughter of an outfitting warehouse of the first respectability – but that’s a weakness. Chuckster, bring in Mr Abel’s articles.’

‘You see, Mr Witherden,’ said the old lady, ‘that Abel has not been brought up like the run of young men. He has always had a pleasure in our society, and always been with us. Abel has never been absent from us, for a day; has he, my dear?’

‘Never, my dear,’ returned the old gentleman, ‘except when he went to Margate one Saturday with Mr Tomkinley that had been a teacher at that school he went to, and came back upon the Monday; but he was very ill after that, you remember, my dear; it was quite a dissipation.’

‘He was not used to it, you know,’ said the old lady, ‘and he couldn’t bear it, that’s the truth. Besides he had no comfort in being there without us, and had nobody to talk to or enjoy himself with.’

‘That was it, you know,’ interposed the same small quiet voice that had spoken once before. ‘I was quite abroad, mother, quite desolate, and to think that the sea was between us – oh, I never shall forget what I felt when I first thought that the sea was between us!’

‘Very natural under the circumstances,’ observed the Notary. ‘Mr Abel’s feelings did credit to his nature, and credit to your nature, ma’am, and his father’s nature, and human nature. I trace the same current now, flowing through all his quiet and unobtrusive proceedings. – I am about to sign my name, you observe, at the foot of the articles which Mr Chuckster will witness; and placing my finger upon this blue wafer with the vandyked corners, I am constrained to remark in a distinct tone of voice – don’t be alarmed, ma’am, it is merely a form of law – that I deliver this, as my act and deed. Mr Abel will place his name against the other wafer, repeating the same cabalistic words, and the business is over. Ha ha ha! You see how easily these things are done!’

There was a short silence, apparently, while Mr Abel went through the prescribed form, and then the shaking of hands and shuffling of feet were renewed, and shortly afterwards there was a clinking of wine-glasses and a great talkativeness on the part of everybody. In about a quarter of an hour Mr Chuckster (with a pen behind his ear and his face inflamed with wine) appeared at the door, and condescending to address Kit by the jocose appellation of ‘Young Snob,’ informed him that the visitors were coming out.

Out they came forthwith; Mr Witherden, who was short, chubby, fresh-coloured, brisk, and pompous, leading the old lady with extreme politeness, and the father and son following them, arm in arm. Mr Abel, who had a quaint old-fashioned air about him, looked nearly of the same age as his father, and bore a wonderful resemblance to him in face and figure, though wanting something of his full, round, cheerfulness, and substituting in its place a timid reserve. In all other respects, in the neatness of the dress, and even in the club-foot, he and the old gentleman were precisely alike.

Having seen the old lady safely in her seat, and assisted in the arrangement of her cloak and a small basket which formed an indispensable portion of her equipage, Mr Abel got into a little box behind which had evidently been made for his express accommodation, and smiled at everybody

present by turns, beginning with his mother and ending with the pony. There was then a great to-do to make the pony hold up his head that the bearing-rein might be fastened; at last even this was effected; and the old gentleman, taking his seat and the reins, put his hand in his pocket to find a sixpence for Kit.

He had no sixpence, neither had the old lady, nor Mr Abel, nor the Notary, nor Mr Chuckster. The old gentleman thought a shilling too much, but there was no shop in the street to get change at, so he gave it to the boy.

‘There,’ he said jokingly, ‘I’m coming here again next Monday at the same time, and mind you’re here, my lad, to work it out.’

‘Thank you, Sir,’ said Kit. ‘I’ll be sure to be here.’

He was quite serious, but they all laughed heartily at his saying so, especially Mr Chuckster, who roared outright and appeared to relish the joke amazingly. As the pony, with a presentiment that he was going home, or a determination that he would not go anywhere else (which was the same thing) trotted away pretty nimbly, Kit had no time to justify himself, and went his way also. Having expended his treasure in such purchases as he knew would be most acceptable at home, not forgetting some seed for the wonderful bird, he hastened back as fast as he could, so elated with his success and great good fortune, that he more than half expected Nell and the old man would have arrived before him.

CHAPTER 15

Often, while they were yet pacing the silent streets of the town on the morning of their departure, the child trembled with a mingled sensation of hope and fear as in some far-off figure imperfectly seen in the clear distance, her fancy traced a likeness to honest Kit. But although she would gladly have given him her hand and thanked him for what he had said at their last meeting, it was always a relief to find, when they came nearer to each other, that the person who approached was not he, but a stranger; for even if she had not dreaded the effect which the sight of him might have wrought upon her fellow-traveller, she felt that to bid farewell to anybody now, and most of all to him who had been so faithful and so true, was more than she could bear. It was enough to leave dumb things behind, and objects that were insensible both to her love and sorrow. To have parted from her only other friend upon the threshold of that wild journey, would have wrung her heart indeed.

Why is it that we can better bear to part in spirit than in body, and while we have the fortitude to act farewell have not the nerve to say it? On the eve of long voyages or an absence of many years, friends who are tenderly attached will separate with the usual look, the usual pressure of the hand, planning one final interview for the morrow, while each well knows that it is but a poor feint to save the pain of uttering that one word, and that the meeting will never be. Should possibilities be worse to bear than certainties? We do not shun our dying friends; the not having distinctly taken leave of one among them, whom we left in all kindness and affection, will often embitter the whole remainder of a life.

The town was glad with morning light; places that had shown ugly and distrustful all night long, now wore a smile; and sparkling sunbeams dancing on chamber windows, and twinkling through blind and curtain before sleepers' eyes, shed light even into dreams, and chased away the shadows of the night. Birds in hot rooms, covered up close and dark, felt it was morning, and chafed and grew restless in their little cells; bright-eyed mice crept back to their tiny homes and nestled timidly together; the sleek house-cat, forgetful of her prey, sat winking at the rays of sun starting through keyhole and cranny in the door, and longed for her stealthy run and warm sleek bask outside. The nobler beasts confined in dens, stood motionless behind their bars and gazed on fluttering boughs, and sunshine peeping through some little window, with eyes in which old forests gleamed – then trod impatiently the track their prisoned feet had worn – and stopped and gazed again. Men in their dungeons stretched their cramp cold limbs and cursed the stone that no bright sky could warm. The flowers that sleep by night, opened their gentle eyes and turned them to the day. The light, creation's mind, was everywhere, and all things owned its power.

The two pilgrims, often pressing each other's hands, or exchanging a smile or cheerful look, pursued their way in silence. Bright and happy as it was, there was something solemn in the long, deserted streets, from which, like bodies without souls, all habitual character and expression had departed, leaving but one dead uniform repose, that made them all alike. All was so still at that early hour, that the few pale people whom they met seemed as much unsuited to the scene, as the sickly lamp which had been here and there left burning, was powerless and faint in the full glory of the sun.

Before they had penetrated very far into the labyrinth of men's abodes which yet lay between them and the outskirts, this aspect began to melt away, and noise and bustle to usurp its place. Some straggling carts and coaches rumbling by, first broke the charm, then others came, then others yet more active, then a crowd. The wonder was, at first, to see a tradesman's window open, but it was a rare thing soon to see one closed; then, smoke rose slowly from the chimneys, and sashes were thrown up to let in air, and doors were opened, and servant girls, looking lazily in all directions but their brooms, scattered brown clouds of dust into the eyes of shrinking passengers, or listened disconsolately to milkmen who spoke of country fairs, and told of waggons in the mews, with awnings and all things complete, and gallant swains to boot, which another hour would see upon their journey.

This quarter passed, they came upon the haunts of commerce and great traffic, where many people were resorting, and business was already rife. The old man looked about him with a startled and bewildered gaze, for these were places that he hoped to shun. He pressed his finger on his lip, and drew the child along by narrow courts and winding ways, nor did he seem at ease until they had left it far behind, often casting a backward look towards it, murmuring that ruin and self-murder were crouching in every street, and would follow if they scented them; and that they could not fly too fast.

Again this quarter passed, they came upon a straggling neighbourhood, where the mean houses parcelled off in rooms, and windows patched with rags and paper, told of the populous poverty that sheltered there. The shops sold goods that only poverty could buy, and sellers and buyers were pinched and griped alike. Here were poor streets where faded gentility essayed with scanty space and shipwrecked means to make its last feeble stand, but tax-gatherer and creditor came there as elsewhere, and the poverty that yet faintly struggled was hardly less squalid and manifest than that which had long ago submitted and given up the game.

This was a wide, wide track – for the humble followers of the camp of wealth pitch their tents round about it for many a mile – but its character was still the same. Damp rotten houses, many to let, many yet building, many half-built and mouldering away – lodgings, where it would be hard to tell which needed pity most, those who let or those who came to take – children, scantily fed and clothed, spread over every street, and sprawling in the dust – scolding mothers, stamping their slipshod feet with noisy threats upon the pavement – shabby fathers, hurrying with dispirited looks to the occupation which brought them ‘daily bread’ and little more – mangling-women, washer-women, cobblers, tailors, chandlers, driving their trades in parlours and kitchens and back room and garrets, and sometimes all of them under the same roof – brick-fields skirting gardens paled with staves of old casks, or timber pillaged from houses burnt down, and blackened and blistered by the flames – mounds of dock-weed, nettles, coarse grass and oyster-shells, heaped in rank confusion – small dissenting chapels to teach, with no lack of illustration, the miseries of Earth, and plenty of new churches, erected with a little superfluous wealth, to show the way to Heaven.

At length these streets becoming more straggling yet, dwindled and dwindled away, until there were only small garden patches bordering the road, with many a summer house innocent of paint and built of old timber or some fragments of a boat, green as the tough cabbage-stalks that grew about it, and grottoed at the seams with toad-stools and tight-sticking snails. To these succeeded pert cottages, two and two with plots of ground in front, laid out in angular beds with stiff box borders and narrow paths between, where footstep never strayed to make the gravel rough. Then came the public-house, freshly painted in green and white, with tea-gardens and a bowling green, spurning its old neighbour with the horse-trough where the waggons stopped; then, fields; and then, some houses, one by one, of goodly size with lawns, some even with a lodge where dwelt a porter and his wife. Then came a turnpike; then fields again with trees and hay-stacks; then, a hill, and on the top of that, the traveller might stop, and – looking back at old Saint Paul’s looming through the smoke, its cross peeping above the cloud (if the day were clear), and glittering in the sun; and casting his eyes upon the Babel out of which it grew until he traced it down to the furthest outposts of the invading army of bricks and mortar whose station lay for the present nearly at his feet – might feel at last that he was clear of London.

Near such a spot as this, and in a pleasant field, the old man and his little guide (if guide she were, who knew not whither they were bound) sat down to rest. She had had the precaution to furnish her basket with some slices of bread and meat, and here they made their frugal breakfast.

The freshness of the day, the singing of the birds, the beauty of the waving grass, the deep green leaves, the wild flowers, and the thousand exquisite scents and sounds that floated in the air – deep joys to most of us, but most of all to those whose life is in a crowd or who live solitarily in great cities as in the bucket of a human well – sunk into their breasts and made them very glad. The child had repeated her artless prayers once that morning, more earnestly perhaps than she had ever done

in all her life, but as she felt all this, they rose to her lips again. The old man took off his hat – he had no memory for the words – but he said amen, and that they were very good.

There had been an old copy of the Pilgrim's Progress, with strange plates, upon a shelf at home, over which she had often pored whole evenings, wondering whether it was true in every word, and where those distant countries with the curious names might be. As she looked back upon the place they had left, one part of it came strongly on her mind.

'Dear grandfather,' she said, 'only that this place is prettier and a great deal better than the real one, if that in the book is like it, I feel as if we were both Christian, and laid down on this grass all the cares and troubles we brought with us; never to take them up again.'

'No – never to return – never to return' – replied the old man, waving his hand towards the city. 'Thou and I are free of it now, Nell. They shall never lure us back.'

'Are you tired?' said the child, 'are you sure you don't feel ill from this long walk?'

'I shall never feel ill again, now that we are once away,' was his reply. 'Let us be stirring, Nell. We must be further away – a long, long way further. We are too near to stop, and be at rest. Come!'

There was a pool of clear water in the field, in which the child laved her hands and face, and cooled her feet before setting forth to walk again. She would have the old man refresh himself in this way too, and making him sit down upon the grass, cast the water on him with her hands, and dried it with her simple dress.

'I can do nothing for myself, my darling,' said the grandfather; 'I don't know how it is, I could once, but the time's gone. Don't leave me, Nell; say that thou'lt not leave me. I loved thee all the while, indeed I did. If I lose thee too, my dear, I must die!'

He laid his head upon her shoulder and moaned piteously. The time had been, and a very few days before, when the child could not have restrained her tears and must have wept with him. But now she soothed him with gentle and tender words, smiled at his thinking they could ever part, and rallied him cheerfully upon the jest. He was soon calmed and fell asleep, singing to himself in a low voice, like a little child.

He awoke refreshed, and they continued their journey. The road was pleasant, lying between beautiful pastures and fields of corn, about which, poised high in the clear blue sky, the lark trilled out her happy song. The air came laden with the fragrance it caught upon its way, and the bees, upborne upon its scented breath, hummed forth their drowsy satisfaction as they floated by.

They were now in the open country; the houses were very few and scattered at long intervals, often miles apart. Occasionally they came upon a cluster of poor cottages, some with a chair or low board put across the open door to keep the scrambling children from the road, others shut up close while all the family were working in the fields. These were often the commencement of a little village: and after an interval came a wheelwright's shed or perhaps a blacksmith's forge; then a thriving farm with sleepy cows lying about the yard, and horses peering over the low wall and scampering away when harnessed horses passed upon the road, as though in triumph at their freedom. There were dull pigs too, turning up the ground in search of dainty food, and grunting their monotonous grumblings as they prowled about, or crossed each other in their quest; plump pigeons skimming round the roof or strutting on the eaves; and ducks and geese, far more graceful in their own conceit, waddling awkwardly about the edges of the pond or sailing glibly on its surface. The farm-yard passed, then came the little inn; the humbler beer-shop; and the village tradesman's; then the lawyer's and the parson's, at whose dread names the beer-shop trembled; the church then peeped out modestly from a clump of trees; then there were a few more cottages; then the cage, and pound, and not unfrequently, on a bank by the way-side, a deep old dusty well. Then came the trim-hedged fields on either hand, and the open road again.

They walked all day, and slept that night at a small cottage where beds were let to travellers. Next morning they were afoot again, and though jaded at first, and very tired, recovered before long and proceeded briskly forward.

They often stopped to rest, but only for a short space at a time, and still kept on, having had but slight refreshment since the morning. It was nearly five o'clock in the afternoon, when drawing near another cluster of labourers' huts, the child looked wistfully in each, doubtful at which to ask for permission to rest awhile, and buy a draught of milk.

It was not easy to determine, for she was timid and fearful of being repulsed. Here was a crying child, and there a noisy wife. In this, the people seemed too poor; in that, too many. At length she stopped at one where the family were seated round the table – chiefly because there was an old man sitting in a cushioned chair beside the hearth, and she thought he was a grandfather and would feel for hers.

There were besides, the cottager and his wife, and three young sturdy children, brown as berries. The request was no sooner preferred, than granted. The eldest boy ran out to fetch some milk, the second dragged two stools towards the door, and the youngest crept to his mother's gown, and looked at the strangers from beneath his sunburnt hand.

'God save you, master,' said the old cottager in a thin piping voice; 'are you travelling far?'

'Yes, Sir, a long way' – replied the child; for her grandfather appealed to her.

'From London?' inquired the old man.

The child said yes.

Ah! He had been in London many a time – used to go there often once, with waggons. It was nigh two-and-thirty year since he had been there last, and he did hear say there were great changes. Like enough! He had changed, himself, since then. Two-and-thirty year was a long time and eighty-four a great age, though there was some he had known that had lived to very hard upon a hundred – and not so hearty as he, neither – no, nothing like it.

'Sit thee down, master, in the elbow chair,' said the old man, knocking his stick upon the brick floor, and trying to do so sharply. 'Take a pinch out o' that box; I don't take much myself, for it comes dear, but I find it wakes me up sometimes, and ye're but a boy to me. I should have a son pretty nigh as old as you if he'd lived, but they listed him for a so'ger – he come back home though, for all he had but one poor leg. He always said he'd be buried near the sun-dial he used to climb upon when he was a baby, did my poor boy, and his words come true – you can see the place with your own eyes; we've kept the turf up, ever since.'

He shook his head, and looking at his daughter with watery eyes, said she needn't be afraid that he was going to talk about that, any more. He didn't wish to trouble nobody, and if he had troubled anybody by what he said, he asked pardon, that was all.

The milk arrived, and the child producing her little basket, and selecting its best fragments for her grandfather, they made a hearty meal. The furniture of the room was very homely of course – a few rough chairs and a table, a corner cupboard with their little stock of crockery and delf, a gaudy tea-tray, representing a lady in bright red, walking out with a very blue parasol, a few common, coloured scripture subjects in frames upon the wall and chimney, an old dwarf clothes-press and an eight-day clock, with a few bright saucepans and a kettle, comprised the whole. But everything was clean and neat, and as the child glanced round, she felt a tranquil air of comfort and content to which she had long been unaccustomed.

'How far is it to any town or village?' she asked of the husband.

'A matter of good five mile, my dear,' was the reply, 'but you're not going on to-night?'

'Yes, yes, Nell,' said the old man hastily, urging her too by signs. 'Further on, further on, darling, further away if we walk till midnight.'

'There's a good barn hard by, master,' said the man, 'or there's travellers' lodging, I know, at the Plow an' Harrer. Excuse me, but you do seem a little tired, and unless you're very anxious to get on –'

'Yes, yes, we are,' returned the old man fretfully. 'Further away, dear Nell, pray further away.'

'We must go on, indeed,' said the child, yielding to his restless wish. 'We thank you very much, but we cannot stop so soon. I'm quite ready, grandfather.'

But the woman had observed, from the young wanderer's gait, that one of her little feet was blistered and sore, and being a woman and a mother too, she would not suffer her to go until she had washed the place and applied some simple remedy, which she did so carefully and with such a gentle hand – rough-grained and hard though it was, with work – that the child's heart was too full to admit of her saying more than a fervent 'God bless you!' nor could she look back nor trust herself to speak, until they had left the cottage some distance behind. When she turned her head, she saw that the whole family, even the old grandfather, were standing in the road watching them as they went, and so, with many waves of the hand, and cheering nods, and on one side at least not without tears, they parted company.

They trudged forward, more slowly and painfully than they had done yet, for another mile or thereabouts, when they heard the sound of wheels behind them, and looking round observed an empty cart approaching pretty briskly. The driver on coming up to them stopped his horse and looked earnestly at Nell.

'Didn't you stop to rest at a cottage yonder?' he said.

'Yes, sir,' replied the child.

'Ah! They asked me to look out for you,' said the man. 'I'm going your way. Give me your hand – jump up, master.'

This was a great relief, for they were very much fatigued and could scarcely crawl along. To them the jolting cart was a luxurious carriage, and the ride the most delicious in the world. Nell had scarcely settled herself on a little heap of straw in one corner, when she fell asleep, for the first time that day.

She was awakened by the stopping of the cart, which was about to turn up a bye-lane. The driver kindly got down to help her out, and pointing to some trees at a very short distance before them, said that the town lay there, and that they had better take the path which they would see leading through the churchyard. Accordingly, towards this spot, they directed their weary steps.

CHAPTER 16

The sun was setting when they reached the wicket-gate at which the path began, and, as the rain falls upon the just and unjust alike, it shed its warm tint even upon the resting-places of the dead, and bade them be of good hope for its rising on the morrow. The church was old and grey, with ivy clinging to the walls, and round the porch. Shunning the tombs, it crept about the mounds, beneath which slept poor humble men: twining for them the first wreaths they had ever won, but wreaths less liable to wither and far more lasting in their kind, than some which were graven deep in stone and marble, and told in pompous terms of virtues meekly hidden for many a year, and only revealed at last to executors and mourning legatees.

The clergyman's horse, stumbling with a dull blunt sound among the graves, was cropping the grass; at once deriving orthodox consolation from the dead parishioners, and enforcing last Sunday's text that this was what all flesh came to; a lean ass who had sought to expound it also, without being qualified and ordained, was pricking his ears in an empty pound hard by, and looking with hungry eyes upon his priestly neighbour.

The old man and the child quitted the gravel path, and strayed among the tombs; for there the ground was soft, and easy to their tired feet. As they passed behind the church, they heard voices near at hand, and presently came on those who had spoken.

They were two men who were seated in easy attitudes upon the grass, and so busily engaged as to be at first unconscious of intruders. It was not difficult to divine that they were of a class of itinerant showmen – exhibitors of the freaks of Punch – for, perched cross-legged upon a tombstone behind them, was a figure of that hero himself, his nose and chin as hooked and his face as beaming as usual. Perhaps his imperturbable character was never more strikingly developed, for he preserved his usual equable smile notwithstanding that his body was dangling in a most uncomfortable position, all loose and limp and shapeless, while his long peaked cap, unequally balanced against his exceedingly slight legs, threatened every instant to bring him toppling down.

In part scattered upon the ground at the feet of the two men, and in part jumbled together in a long flat box, were the other persons of the Drama. The hero's wife and one child, the hobby-horse, the doctor, the foreign gentleman who not being familiar with the language is unable in the representation to express his ideas otherwise than by the utterance of the word 'Shallalalah' three distinct times, the radical neighbour who will by no means admit that a tin bell is an organ, the executioner, and the devil, were all here. Their owners had evidently come to that spot to make some needful repairs in the stage arrangements, for one of them was engaged in binding together a small gallows with thread, while the other was intent upon fixing a new black wig, with the aid of a small hammer and some tacks, upon the head of the radical neighbour, who had been beaten bald.

They raised their eyes when the old man and his young companion were close upon them, and pausing in their work, returned their looks of curiosity. One of them, the actual exhibitor no doubt, was a little merry-faced man with a twinkling eye and a red nose, who seemed to have unconsciously imbibed something of his hero's character. The other – that was he who took the money – had rather a careful and cautious look, which was perhaps inseparable from his occupation also.

The merry man was the first to greet the strangers with a nod; and following the old man's eyes, he observed that perhaps that was the first time he had ever seen a Punch off the stage. (Punch, it may be remarked, seemed to be pointing with the tip of his cap to a most flourishing epitaph, and to be chuckling over it with all his heart.)

'Why do you come here to do this?' said the old man, sitting down beside them, and looking at the figures with extreme delight.

'Why you see,' rejoined the little man, 'we're putting up for to-night at the public-house yonder, and it wouldn't do to let 'em see the present company undergoing repair.'

‘No!’ cried the old man, making signs to Nell to listen, ‘why not, eh? why not?’

‘Because it would destroy all the delusion, and take away all the interest, wouldn’t it?’ replied the little man. ‘Would you care a ha’penny for the Lord Chancellor if you know’d him in private and without his wig? – certainly not.’

‘Good!’ said the old man, venturing to touch one of the puppets, and drawing away his hand with a shrill laugh. ‘Are you going to show ‘em to-night? are you?’

‘That is the intention, governor,’ replied the other, ‘and unless I’m much mistaken, Tommy Codlin is calculating at this minute what we’ve lost through your coming upon us. Cheer up, Tommy, it can’t be much.’

The little man accompanied these latter words with a wink, expressive of the estimate he had formed of the travellers’ finances.

To this Mr Codlin, who had a surly, grumbling manner, replied, as he twitched Punch off the tombstone and flung him into the box, ‘I don’t care if we haven’t lost a farden, but you’re too free. If you stood in front of the curtain and see the public’s faces as I do, you’d know human natur’ better.’

‘Ah! it’s been the spoiling of you, Tommy, your taking to that branch,’ rejoined his companion. ‘When you played the ghost in the reg’lar drama in the fairs, you believed in everything – except ghosts. But now you’re a universal mistruster. I never see a man so changed.’

‘Never mind,’ said Mr Codlin, with the air of a discontented philosopher. ‘I know better now, and p’raps I’m sorry for it.’

Turning over the figures in the box like one who knew and despised them, Mr Codlin drew one forth and held it up for the inspection of his friend:

‘Look here; here’s all this judy’s clothes falling to pieces again. You haven’t got a needle and thread I suppose?’

The little man shook his head, and scratched it ruefully as he contemplated this severe indisposition of a principal performer. Seeing that they were at a loss, the child said timidly:

‘I have a needle, Sir, in my basket, and thread too. Will you let me try to mend it for you? I think I could do it neater than you could.’

Even Mr Codlin had nothing to urge against a proposal so seasonable. Nelly, kneeling down beside the box, was soon busily engaged in her task, and accomplishing it to a miracle.

While she was thus engaged, the merry little man looked at her with an interest which did not appear to be diminished when he glanced at her helpless companion. When she had finished her work he thanked her, and inquired whither they were travelling.

‘N – no further to-night, I think,’ said the child, looking towards her grandfather.

‘If you’re wanting a place to stop at,’ the man remarked, ‘I should advise you to take up at the same house with us. That’s it. The long, low, white house there. It’s very cheap.’

The old man, notwithstanding his fatigue, would have remained in the churchyard all night if his new acquaintances had remained there too. As he yielded to this suggestion a ready and rapturous assent, they all rose and walked away together; he keeping close to the box of puppets in which he was quite absorbed, the merry little man carrying it slung over his arm by a strap attached to it for the purpose, Nelly having hold of her grandfather’s hand, and Mr Codlin sauntering slowly behind, casting up at the church tower and neighbouring trees such looks as he was accustomed in town-practice to direct to drawing-room and nursery windows, when seeking for a profitable spot on which to plant the show.

The public-house was kept by a fat old landlord and landlady who made no objection to receiving their new guests, but praised Nelly’s beauty and were at once prepossessed in her behalf. There was no other company in the kitchen but the two showmen, and the child felt very thankful that they had fallen upon such good quarters. The landlady was very much astonished to learn that they had come all the way from London, and appeared to have no little curiosity touching their farther

destination. The child parried her inquiries as well as she could, and with no great trouble, for finding that they appeared to give her pain, the old lady desisted.

'These two gentlemen have ordered supper in an hour's time,' she said, taking her into the bar; 'and your best plan will be to sup with them. Meanwhile you shall have a little taste of something that'll do you good, for I'm sure you must want it after all you've gone through to-day. Now, don't look after the old gentleman, because when you've drank that, he shall have some too.'

As nothing could induce the child to leave him alone, however, or to touch anything in which he was not the first and greatest sharer, the old lady was obliged to help him first. When they had been thus refreshed, the whole house hurried away into an empty stable where the show stood, and where, by the light of a few flaring candles stuck round a hoop which hung by a line from the ceiling, it was to be forthwith exhibited.

And now Mr Thomas Codlin, the misanthrope, after blowing away at the Pan's pipes until he was intensely wretched, took his station on one side of the checked drapery which concealed the mover of the figures, and putting his hands in his pockets prepared to reply to all questions and remarks of Punch, and to make a dismal feint of being his most intimate private friend, of believing in him to the fullest and most unlimited extent, of knowing that he enjoyed day and night a merry and glorious existence in that temple, and that he was at all times and under every circumstance the same intelligent and joyful person that the spectators then beheld him. All this Mr Codlin did with the air of a man who had made up his mind for the worst and was quite resigned; his eye slowly wandering about during the briskest repartee to observe the effect upon the audience, and particularly the impression made upon the landlord and landlady, which might be productive of very important results in connexion with the supper.

Upon this head, however, he had no cause for any anxiety, for the whole performance was applauded to the echo, and voluntary contributions were showered in with a liberality which testified yet more strongly to the general delight. Among the laughter none was more loud and frequent than the old man's. Nell's was unheard, for she, poor child, with her head drooping on his shoulder, had fallen asleep, and slept too soundly to be roused by any of his efforts to awaken her to a participation in his glee.

The supper was very good, but she was too tired to eat, and yet would not leave the old man until she had kissed him in his bed. He, happily insensible to every care and anxiety, sat listening with a vacant smile and admiring face to all that his new friend said; and it was not until they retired yawning to their room, that he followed the child up stairs.

It was but a loft partitioned into two compartments, where they were to rest, but they were well pleased with their lodging and had hoped for none so good. The old man was uneasy when he had lain down, and begged that Nell would come and sit at his bedside as she had done for so many nights. She hastened to him, and sat there till he slept.

There was a little window, hardly more than a chink in the wall, in her room, and when she left him, she opened it, quite wondering at the silence. The sight of the old church, and the graves about it in the moonlight, and the dark trees whispering among themselves, made her more thoughtful than before. She closed the window again, and sitting down upon the bed, thought of the life that was before them.

She had a little money, but it was very little, and when that was gone, they must begin to beg. There was one piece of gold among it, and an emergency might come when its worth to them would be increased a hundred fold. It would be best to hide this coin, and never produce it unless their case was absolutely desperate, and no other resource was left them.

Her resolution taken, she sewed the piece of gold into her dress, and going to bed with a lighter heart sunk into a deep slumber.

CHAPTER 17

Another bright day shining in through the small casement, and claiming fellowship with the kindred eyes of the child, awoke her. At sight of the strange room and its unaccustomed objects she started up in alarm, wondering how she had been moved from the familiar chamber in which she seemed to have fallen asleep last night, and whither she had been conveyed. But, another glance around called to her mind all that had lately passed, and she sprung from her bed, hoping and trustful.

It was yet early, and the old man being still asleep, she walked out into the churchyard, brushing the dew from the long grass with her feet, and often turning aside into places where it grew longer than in others, that she might not tread upon the graves. She felt a curious kind of pleasure in lingering among these houses of the dead, and read the inscriptions on the tombs of the good people (a great number of good people were buried there), passing on from one to another with increasing interest.

It was a very quiet place, as such a place should be, save for the cawing of the rooks who had built their nests among the branches of some tall old trees, and were calling to one another, high up in the air. First, one sleek bird, hovering near his ragged house as it swung and dangled in the wind, uttered his hoarse cry, quite by chance as it would seem, and in a sober tone as though he were but talking to himself. Another answered, and he called again, but louder than before; then another spoke and then another; and each time the first, aggravated by contradiction, insisted on his case more strongly. Other voices, silent till now, struck in from boughs lower down and higher up and midway, and to the right and left, and from the tree-tops; and others, arriving hastily from the grey church turrets and old belfry window, joined the clamour which rose and fell, and swelled and dropped again, and still went on; and all this noisy contention amidst a skimming to and fro, and lighting on fresh branches, and frequent change of place, which satirised the old restlessness of those who lay so still beneath the moss and turf below, and the strife in which they had worn away their lives.

Frequently raising her eyes to the trees whence these sounds came down, and feeling as though they made the place more quiet than perfect silence would have done, the child loitered from grave to grave, now stopping to replace with careful hands the bramble which had started from some green mound it helped to keep in shape, and now peeping through one of the low latticed windows into the church, with its worm-eaten books upon the desks, and baize of whitened-green mouldering from the pew sides and leaving the naked wood to view. There were the seats where the poor old people sat, worn spare, and yellow like themselves; the rugged font where children had their names, the homely altar where they knelt in after life, the plain black tressels that bore their weight on their last visit to the cool old shady church. Everything told of long use and quiet slow decay; the very bell-rope in the porch was frayed into a fringe, and hoary with old age.

She was looking at a humble stone which told of a young man who had died at twenty-three years old, fifty-five years ago, when she heard a faltering step approaching, and looking round saw a feeble woman bent with the weight of years, who tottered to the foot of that same grave and asked her to read the writing on the stone. The old woman thanked her when she had done, saying that she had had the words by heart for many a long, long year, but could not see them now.

‘Were you his mother?’ said the child.

‘I was his wife, my dear.’

She the wife of a young man of three-and-twenty! Ah, true! It was fifty-five years ago.

‘You wonder to hear me say that,’ remarked the old woman, shaking her head. ‘You’re not the first. Older folk than you have wondered at the same thing before now. Yes, I was his wife. Death doesn’t change us more than life, my dear.’

‘Do you come here often?’ asked the child.

‘I sit here very often in the summer time,’ she answered, ‘I used to come here once to cry and mourn, but that was a weary while ago, bless God!’

‘I pluck the daisies as they grow, and take them home,’ said the old woman after a short silence. ‘I like no flowers so well as these, and haven’t for five-and-fifty years. It’s a long time, and I’m getting very old.’

Then growing garrulous upon a theme which was new to one listener though it were but a child, she told her how she had wept and moaned and prayed to die herself, when this happened; and how when she first came to that place, a young creature strong in love and grief, she had hoped that her heart was breaking as it seemed to be. But that time passed by, and although she continued to be sad when she came there, still she could bear to come, and so went on until it was pain no longer, but a solemn pleasure, and a duty she had learned to like. And now that five-and-fifty years were gone, she spoke of the dead man as if he had been her son or grandson, with a kind of pity for his youth, growing out of her own old age, and an exalting of his strength and manly beauty as compared with her own weakness and decay; and yet she spoke about him as her husband too, and thinking of herself in connexion with him, as she used to be and not as she was now, talked of their meeting in another world, as if he were dead but yesterday, and she, separated from her former self, were thinking of the happiness of that comely girl who seemed to have died with him.

The child left her gathering the flowers that grew upon the grave, and thoughtfully retraced her steps.

The old man was by this time up and dressed. Mr Codlin, still doomed to contemplate the harsh realities of existence, was packing among his linen the candle-ends which had been saved from the previous night’s performance; while his companion received the compliments of all the loungers in the stable-yard, who, unable to separate him from the master-mind of Punch, set him down as next in importance to that merry outlaw, and loved him scarcely less. When he had sufficiently acknowledged his popularity he came in to breakfast, at which meal they all sat down together.

‘And where are you going to-day?’ said the little man, addressing himself to Nell.

‘Indeed I hardly know – we have not determined yet,’ replied the child.

‘We’re going on to the races,’ said the little man. ‘If that’s your way and you like to have us for company, let us travel together. If you prefer going alone, only say the word and you’ll find that we shan’t trouble you.’

‘We’ll go with you,’ said the old man. ‘Nell – with them, with them.’

The child considered for a moment, and reflecting that she must shortly beg, and could scarcely hope to do so at a better place than where crowds of rich ladies and gentlemen were assembled together for purposes of enjoyment and festivity, determined to accompany these men so far. She therefore thanked the little man for his offer, and said, glancing timidly towards his friend, that if there was no objection to their accompanying them as far as the race town —

‘Objection!’ said the little man. ‘Now be gracious for once, Tommy, and say that you’d rather they went with us. I know you would. Be gracious, Tommy.’

‘Trotters,’ said Mr Codlin, who talked very slowly and ate very greedily, as is not uncommon with philosophers and misanthropes; ‘you’re too free.’

‘Why what harm can it do?’ urged the other.

‘No harm at all in this particular case, perhaps,’ replied Mr Codlin; ‘but the principle’s a dangerous one, and you’re too free I tell you.’

‘Well, are they to go with us or not?’

‘Yes, they are,’ said Mr Codlin; ‘but you might have made a favour of it, mightn’t you?’

The real name of the little man was Harris, but it had gradually merged into the less euphonious one of Trotters, which, with the prefatory adjective, Short, had been conferred upon him by reason of the small size of his legs. Short Trotters however, being a compound name, inconvenient of use in friendly dialogue, the gentleman on whom it had been bestowed was known among his intimates either as ‘Short,’ or ‘Trotters,’ and was seldom accosted at full length as Short Trotters, except in formal conversations and on occasions of ceremony.

Short, then, or Trotters, as the reader pleases, returned unto the remonstrance of his friend Mr Thomas Codlin a jocose answer calculated to turn aside his discontent; and applying himself with great relish to the cold boiled beef, the tea, and bread and butter, strongly impressed upon his companions that they should do the like. Mr Codlin indeed required no such persuasion, as he had already eaten as much as he could possibly carry and was now moistening his clay with strong ale, whereof he took deep draughts with a silent relish and invited nobody to partake – thus again strongly indicating his misanthropical turn of mind.

Breakfast being at length over, Mr Codlin called the bill, and charging the ale to the company generally (a practice also savouring of misanthropy) divided the sum-total into two fair and equal parts, assigning one moiety to himself and friend, and the other to Nelly and her grandfather. These being duly discharged and all things ready for their departure, they took farewell of the landlord and landlady and resumed their journey.

And here Mr Codlin's false position in society and the effect it wrought upon his wounded spirit, were strongly illustrated; for whereas he had been last night accosted by Mr Punch as 'master,' and had by inference left the audience to understand that he maintained that individual for his own luxurious entertainment and delight, here he was, now, painfully walking beneath the burden of that same Punch's temple, and bearing it bodily upon his shoulders on a sultry day and along a dusty road. In place of enlivening his patron with a constant fire of wit or the cheerful rattle of his quarter-staff on the heads of his relations and acquaintance, here was that beaming Punch utterly devoid of spine, all slack and drooping in a dark box, with his legs doubled up round his neck, and not one of his social qualities remaining.

Mr Codlin trudged heavily on, exchanging a word or two at intervals with Short, and stopping to rest and growl occasionally. Short led the way; with the flat box, the private luggage (which was not extensive) tied up in a bundle, and a brazen trumpet slung from his shoulder-blade. Nell and her grandfather walked next him on either hand, and Thomas Codlin brought up the rear.

When they came to any town or village, or even to a detached house of good appearance, Short blew a blast upon the brazen trumpet and carolled a fragment of a song in that hilarious tone common to Punches and their consorts. If people hurried to the windows, Mr Codlin pitched the temple, and hastily unfurling the drapery and concealing Short therewith, flourished hysterically on the pipes and performed an air. Then the entertainment began as soon as might be; Mr Codlin having the responsibility of deciding on its length and of protracting or expediting the time for the hero's final triumph over the enemy of mankind, according as he judged that the after-crop of half-pence would be plentiful or scant. When it had been gathered in to the last farthing, he resumed his load and on they went again.

Sometimes they played out the toll across a bridge or ferry, and once exhibited by particular desire at a turnpike, where the collector, being drunk in his solitude, paid down a shilling to have it to himself. There was one small place of rich promise in which their hopes were blighted, for a favourite character in the play having gold-lace upon his coat and being a meddling wooden-headed fellow was held to be a libel on the beadle, for which reason the authorities enforced a quick retreat; but they were generally well received, and seldom left a town without a troop of ragged children shouting at their heels.

They made a long day's journey, despite these interruptions, and were yet upon the road when the moon was shining in the sky. Short beguiled the time with songs and jests, and made the best of everything that happened. Mr Codlin on the other hand, cursed his fate, and all the hollow things of earth (but Punch especially), and limped along with the theatre on his back, a prey to the bitterest chagrin.

They had stopped to rest beneath a finger-post where four roads met, and Mr Codlin in his deep misanthropy had let down the drapery and seated himself in the bottom of the show, invisible to mortal eyes and disdainful of the company of his fellow creatures, when two monstrous shadows

were seen stalking towards them from a turning in the road by which they had come. The child was at first quite terrified by the sight of these gaunt giants – for such they looked as they advanced with lofty strides beneath the shadow of the trees – but Short, telling her there was nothing to fear, blew a blast upon the trumpet, which was answered by a cheerful shout.

‘It’s Grinder’s lot, an’t it?’ cried Mr Short in a loud key.

‘Yes,’ replied a couple of shrill voices.

‘Come on then,’ said Short. ‘Let’s have a look at you. I thought it was you.’

Thus invited, ‘Grinder’s lot’ approached with redoubled speed and soon came up with the little party.

Mr Grinder’s company, familiarly termed a lot, consisted of a young gentleman and a young lady on stilts, and Mr Grinder himself, who used his natural legs for pedestrian purposes and carried at his back a drum. The public costume of the young people was of the Highland kind, but the night being damp and cold, the young gentleman wore over his kilt a man’s pea jacket reaching to his ankles, and a glazed hat; the young lady too was muffled in an old cloth pelisse and had a handkerchief tied about her head. Their Scotch bonnets, ornamented with plumes of jet black feathers, Mr Grinder carried on his instrument.

‘Bound for the races, I see,’ said Mr Grinder coming up out of breath. ‘So are we. How are you, Short?’ With that they shook hands in a very friendly manner. The young people being too high up for the ordinary salutations, saluted Short after their own fashion. The young gentleman twisted up his right stilt and patted him on the shoulder, and the young lady rattled her tambourine.

‘Practice?’ said Short, pointing to the stilts.

‘No,’ returned Grinder. ‘It comes either to walkin’ in ‘em or carryin’ of ‘em, and they like walkin’ in ‘em best. It’s wery pleasant for the prospects. Which road are you takin’? We go the nighest.’

‘Why, the fact is,’ said Short, ‘that we are going the longest way, because then we could stop for the night, a mile and a half on. But three or four mile gained to-night is so many saved to-morrow, and if you keep on, I think our best way is to do the same.’

‘Where’s your partner?’ inquired Grinder.

‘Here he is,’ cried Mr Thomas Codlin, presenting his head and face in the proscenium of the stage, and exhibiting an expression of countenance not often seen there; ‘and he’ll see his partner boiled alive before he’ll go on to-night. That’s what he says.’

‘Well, don’t say such things as them, in a spear which is dewoted to something pleasanter,’ urged Short. ‘Respect associations, Tommy, even if you do cut up rough.’

‘Rough or smooth,’ said Mr Codlin, beating his hand on the little footboard where Punch, when suddenly struck with the symmetry of his legs and their capacity for silk stockings, is accustomed to exhibit them to popular admiration, ‘rough or smooth, I won’t go further than the mile and a half to-night. I put up at the Jolly Sandboys and nowhere else. If you like to come there, come there. If you like to go on by yourself, go on by yourself, and do without me if you can.’

So saying, Mr Codlin disappeared from the scene and immediately presented himself outside the theatre, took it on his shoulders at a jerk, and made off with most remarkable agility.

Any further controversy being now out of the question, Short was fain to part with Mr Grinder and his pupils and to follow his morose companion. After lingering at the finger-post for a few minutes to see the stilts frisking away in the moonlight and the bearer of the drum toiling slowly after them, he blew a few notes upon the trumpet as a parting salute, and hastened with all speed to follow Mr Codlin. With this view he gave his unoccupied hand to Nell, and bidding her be of good cheer as they would soon be at the end of their journey for that night, and stimulating the old man with a similar assurance, led them at a pretty swift pace towards their destination, which he was the less unwilling to make for, as the moon was now overcast and the clouds were threatening rain.

CHAPTER 18

The Jolly Sandboys was a small road-side inn of pretty ancient date, with a sign, representing three Sandboys increasing their jollity with as many jugs of ale and bags of gold, creaking and swinging on its post on the opposite side of the road. As the travellers had observed that day many indications of their drawing nearer and nearer to the race town, such as gipsy camps, carts laden with gambling booths and their appurtenances, itinerant showmen of various kinds, and beggars and trampers of every degree, all wending their way in the same direction, Mr Codlin was fearful of finding the accommodations forestalled; this fear increasing as he diminished the distance between himself and the hostelry, he quickened his pace, and notwithstanding the burden he had to carry, maintained a round trot until he reached the threshold. Here he had the gratification of finding that his fears were without foundation, for the landlord was leaning against the door-post looking lazily at the rain, which had by this time begun to descend heavily, and no tinkling of cracked bell, nor boisterous shout, nor noisy chorus, gave note of company within.

‘All alone?’ said Mr Codlin, putting down his burden and wiping his forehead.

‘All alone as yet,’ rejoined the landlord, glancing at the sky, ‘but we shall have more company to-night I expect. Here one of you boys, carry that show into the barn. Make haste in out of the wet, Tom; when it came on to rain I told ‘em to make the fire up, and there’s a glorious blaze in the kitchen, I can tell you.’

Mr Codlin followed with a willing mind, and soon found that the landlord had not commended his preparations without good reason. A mighty fire was blazing on the hearth and roaring up the wide chimney with a cheerful sound, which a large iron cauldron, bubbling and simmering in the heat, lent its pleasant aid to swell. There was a deep red ruddy blush upon the room, and when the landlord stirred the fire, sending the flames skipping and leaping up – when he took off the lid of the iron pot and there rushed out a savoury smell, while the bubbling sound grew deeper and more rich, and an unctuous steam came floating out, hanging in a delicious mist above their heads – when he did this, Mr Codlin’s heart was touched. He sat down in the chimney-corner and smiled.

Mr Codlin sat smiling in the chimney-corner, eyeing the landlord as with a roguish look he held the cover in his hand, and, feigning that his doing so was needful to the welfare of the cookery, suffered the delightful steam to tickle the nostrils of his guest. The glow of the fire was upon the landlord’s bald head, and upon his twinkling eye, and upon his watering mouth, and upon his pimpled face, and upon his round fat figure. Mr Codlin drew his sleeve across his lips, and said in a murmuring voice, ‘What is it?’

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.