

Chapter VIII

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 arrive 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 it! - 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, Richards 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 imperturable 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 tom-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 its 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 Chesea, 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 circumbmbient 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 stragglng 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 spelling-book. The several duties of instruction in this establishment were this discharged. English grammar, composition, geography, and the use of the dumb-bells, by Miss Melissa Wackles; writing, arthmetic, 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, busom girl of twenty; and Miss Jane numbered scarcely sixteen years. Mrs Wackles was an excellent but rather vemenous 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, embelished 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 diltory kind which is usuauully 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-gardner 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 ben 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 snubb 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 Chegs,' said Miss Sophy to Dick Swiveller, 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 wormword 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 Cheegs! 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 mean time, 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.