

Chapter X

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 cries 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.