

Chapter XII

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.