

Chapter XIII

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?'

'Damm!' 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 cowered 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.'