

Chapter XIV

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 turnout, 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 immovable.

'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 articed 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.