

Chapter XXVII

When they had travelled slowly forward for some short distance, Nell ventured to steal a look round the caravan and observe it more closely. One half of it - that moiety in which the comfortable proprietress was then seated - was carpeted, and so partitioned off at the further end as to accommodate a sleeping-place, constructed after the fashion of a berth on board ship, which was shaded, like the little windows, with fair white curtains, and looked comfortable enough, though by what kind of gymnastic exercise the lady of the caravan ever contrived to get into it, was an unfathomable mystery. The other half served for a kitchen, and was fitted up with a stove whose small chimney passed through the roof. It held also a closet or larder, several chests, a great pitcher of water, and a few cooking-utensils and articles of crockery. These latter necessaries hung upon the walls, which, in that portion of the establishment devoted to the lady of the caravan, were ornamented with such gayer and lighter decorations as a triangle and a couple of well-thumbed tambourines.

The lady of the caravan sat at one window in all the pride and poetry of the musical instruments, and little Nell and her grandfather sat at the other in all the humility of the kettle and saucepans, while the machine jogged on and shifted the darkening prospect very slowly. At first the two travellers spoke little, and only in whispers, but as they grew more familiar with the place they ventured to converse with greater freedom, and talked about the country through which they were passing, and the different objects that presented themselves, until the old man fell asleep; which the lady of the caravan observing, invited Nell to come and sit beside her.

'Well, child,' she said, 'how do you like this way of travelling?'

Nell replied that she thought it was very pleasant indeed, to which the lady assented in the case of people who had their spirits. For herself, she said, she was troubled with a lowness in that respect which required a constant stimulant; though whether the aforesaid stimulant was derived from the suspicious bottle of which mention has been already made or from other sources, she did not say.

'That's the happiness of you young people,' she continued. 'You don't know what it is to be low in your feelings. You always have your appetites too, and what a comfort that is.'

Nell thought that she could sometimes dispense with her own appetite very conveniently; and thought, moreover, that there was nothing either in the lady's personal appearance or in her manner of taking tea, to lead to the conclusion that her natural relish for meat and drink had at all failed her. She silently assented, however, as in duty

bound, to what the lady had said, and waited until she should speak again.

Instead of speaking, however, she sat looking at the child for a long time in silence, and then getting up, brought out from a corner a large roll of canvas about a yard in width, which she laid upon the floor and spread open with her foot until it nearly reached from one end of the caravan to the other.

'There, child,' she said, 'read that.'

Nell walked down it, and read aloud, in enormous black letters, the inscription, 'Jarley's WAX-WORK.'

'Read it again,' said the lady, complacently.

'Jarley's Wax-Work,' repeated Nell.

'That's me,' said the lady. 'I am Mrs Jarley.'

Giving the child an encouraging look, intended to reassure her and let her know, that, although she stood in the presence of the original Jarley, she must not allow herself to be utterly overwhelmed and borne down, the lady of the caravan unfolded another scroll, whereon was the inscription, 'One hundred figures the full size of life,' and then another scroll, on which was written, 'The only stupendous collection of real wax-work in the world,' and then several smaller scrolls with such inscriptions as 'Now exhibiting within' - 'The genuine and only Jarley' - 'Jarley's unrivalled collection' - 'Jarley is the delight of the Nobility and Gentry' - 'The Royal Family are the patrons of Jarley.' When she had exhibited these leviathans of public announcement to the astonished child, she brought forth specimens of the lesser fry in the shape of hand-bills, some of which were couched in the form of parodies on popular melodies, as 'Believe me if all Jarley's wax-work so rare' - 'I saw thy show in youthful prime' - 'Over the water to Jarley;' while, to consult all tastes, others were composed with a view to the lighter and more facetious spirits, as a parody on the favourite air of 'If I had a donkey,' beginning

If I know'd a donkey wot wouldn't go
To see Mrs JARLEY'S wax-work show,
Do you think I'd acknowledge him?
Oh no no! Then run to Jarley's -

- besides several compositions in prose, purporting to be dialogues between the Emperor of China and an oyster, or the Archbishop of Canterbury and a dissenter on the subject of church-rates, but all having the same moral, namely, that the reader must make haste to Jarley's, and that children and servants were admitted at half-price.

When she had brought all these testimonials of her important position in society to bear upon her young companion, Mrs Jarley rolled them up, and having put them carefully away, sat down again, and looked at the child in triumph.

'Never go into the company of a filthy Punch any more,' said Mrs Jarley, 'after this.'

'I never saw any wax-work, ma'am,' said Nell. 'Is it funnier than Punch?'

'Funnier!' said Mrs Jarley in a shrill voice. 'It is not funny at all.'

'Oh!' said Nell, with all possible humility.

'It isn't funny at all,' repeated Mrs Jarley. 'It's calm and - what's that word again - critical? - no - classical, that's it - it's calm and classical. No low beatings and knockings about, no jokings and squeakings like your precious Punches, but always the same, with a constantly unchanging air of coldness and gentility; and so like life, that if wax-work only spoke and walked about, you'd hardly know the difference. I won't go so far as to say, that, as it is, I've seen wax-work quite like life, but I've certainly seen some life that was exactly like wax-work.'

'Is it here, ma'am?' asked Nell, whose curiosity was awakened by this description.

'Is what here, child?'

'The wax-work, ma'am.'

'Why, bless you, child, what are you thinking of? How could such a collection be here, where you see everything except the inside of one little cupboard and a few boxes? It's gone on in the other wans to the assembly-rooms, and there it'll be exhibited the day after to-morrow. You are going to the same town, and you'll see it I dare say. It's natural to expect that you'll see it, and I've no doubt you will. I suppose you couldn't stop away if you was to try ever so much.'

'I shall not be in the town, I think, ma'am,' said the child.

'Not there!' cried Mrs Jarley. 'Then where will you be?'

'I - I - don't quite know. I am not certain.'

'You don't mean to say that you're travelling about the country without knowing where you're going to?' said the lady of the caravan.

'What curious people you are! What line are you in? You looked to me at the races, child, as if you were quite out of your element, and had got there by accident.'

'We were there quite by accident,' returned Nell, confused by this abrupt questioning. 'We are poor people, ma'am, and are only wandering about. We have nothing to do; - I wish we had.'

'You amaze me more and more,' said Mrs Jarley, after remaining for some time as mute as one of her own figures. 'Why, what do you call yourselves? Not beggars?'

'Indeed, ma'am, I don't know what else we are,' returned the child.

'Lord bless me,' said the lady of the caravan. 'I never heard of such a thing. Who'd have thought it!'

She remained so long silent after this exclamation, that Nell feared she felt her having been induced to bestow her protection and conversation upon one so poor, to be an outrage upon her dignity that nothing could repair. This persuasion was rather confirmed than otherwise by the tone in which she at length broke silence and said,

'And yet you can read. And write too, I shouldn't wonder?'

'Yes, ma'am,' said the child, fearful of giving new offence by the confession.

'Well, and what a thing that is,' returned Mrs Jarley. 'I can't!'

Nell said 'indeed' in a tone which might imply, either that she was reasonably surprised to find the genuine and only Jarley, who was the delight of the Nobility and Gentry and the peculiar pet of the Royal Family, destitute of these familiar arts; or that she presumed so great a lady could scarcely stand in need of such ordinary accomplishments. In whatever way Mrs Jarley received the response, it did not provoke her to further questioning, or tempt her into any more remarks at the time, for she relapsed into a thoughtful silence, and remained in that state so long that Nell withdrew to the other window and rejoined her grandfather, who was now awake.

At length the lady of the caravan shook off her fit of meditation, and, summoning the driver to come under the window at which she was seated, held a long conversation with him in a low tone of voice, as if she were asking his advice on an important point, and discussing the pros and cons of some very weighty matter. This conference at length concluded, she drew in her head again, and beckoned Nell to approach.

'And the old gentleman too,' said Mrs Jarley; 'for I want to have a word with him. Do you want a good situation for your grand-daughter, master? If you do, I can put her in the way of getting one. What do you say?'

'I can't leave her,' answered the old man. 'We can't separate. What would become of me without her?'

'I should have thought you were old enough to take care of yourself, if you ever will be,' retorted Mrs Jarley sharply.

'But he never will be,' said the child in an earnest whisper. 'I fear he never will be again. Pray do not speak harshly to him. We are very thankful to you,' she added aloud; 'but neither of us could part from the other if all the wealth of the world were halved between us.'

Mrs Jarley was a little disconcerted by this reception of her proposal, and looked at the old man, who tenderly took Nell's hand and detained it in his own, as if she could have very well dispensed with his company or even his earthly existence. After an awkward pause, she thrust her head out of the window again, and had another conference with the driver upon some point on which they did not seem to agree quite so readily as on their former topic of discussion; but they concluded at last, and she addressed the grandfather again.

'If you're really disposed to employ yourself,' said Mrs Jarley, 'there would be plenty for you to do in the way of helping to dust the figures, and take the checks, and so forth. What I want your grand-daughter for, is to point 'em out to the company; they would be soon learnt, and she has a way with her that people wouldn't think unpleasant, though she does come after me; for I've been always accustomed to go round with visitors myself, which I should keep on doing now, only that my spirits make a little ease absolutely necessary. It's not a common offer, bear in mind,' said the lady, rising into the tone and manner in which she was accustomed to address her audiences; 'it's Jarley's wax-work, remember. The duty's very light and genteel, the company particularly select, the exhibition takes place in assembly-rooms, town-halls, large rooms at inns, or auction galleries. There is none of your open-air wagrancy at Jarley's, recollect; there is no tarpaulin and sawdust at Jarley's, remember. Every expectation held out in the handbills is realised to the utmost, and the whole forms an effect of imposing brilliancy hitherto unrivalled in this kingdom. Remember that the price of admission is only sixpence, and that this is an opportunity which may never occur again!'

Descending from the sublime when she had reached this point, to the details of common life, Mrs Jarley remarked that with reference to salary she could pledge herself to no specific sum until she had

sufficiently tested Nell's abilities, and narrowly watched her in the performance of her duties. But board and lodging, both for her and her grandfather, she bound herself to provide, and she furthermore passed her word that the board should always be good in quality, and in quantity plentiful.

Nell and her grandfather consulted together, and while they were so engaged, Mrs Jarley with her hands behind her walked up and down the caravan, as she had walked after tea on the dull earth, with uncommon dignity and self-esteem. Nor will this appear so slight a circumstance as to be unworthy of mention, when it is remembered that the caravan was in uneasy motion all the time, and that none but a person of great natural stateliness and acquired grace could have forborne to stagger.

'Now, child?' cried Mrs Jarley, coming to a halt as Nell turned towards her.

'We are very much obliged to you, ma'am,' said Nell, 'and thankfully accept your offer.'

'And you'll never be sorry for it,' returned Mrs Jarley. 'I'm pretty sure of that. So as that's all settled, let us have a bit of supper.'

In the meanwhile, the caravan blundered on as if it too had been drinking strong beer and was drowsy, and came at last upon the paved streets of a town which were clear of passengers, and quiet, for it was by this time near midnight, and the townspeople were all abed. As it was too late an hour to repair to the exhibition room, they turned aside into a piece of waste ground that lay just within the old town-gate, and drew up there for the night, near to another caravan, which, notwithstanding that it bore on the lawful panel the great name of Jarley, and was employed besides in conveying from place to place the wax-work which was its country's pride, was designated by a grovelling stamp-office as a 'Common Stage Waggon,' and numbered too - seven thousand odd hundred - as though its precious freight were mere flour or coals!

This ill-used machine being empty (for it had deposited its burden at the place of exhibition, and lingered here until its services were again required) was assigned to the old man as his sleeping-place for the night; and within its wooden walls, Nell made him up the best bed she could, from the materials at hand. For herself, she was to sleep in Mrs Jarley's own travelling- carriage, as a signal mark of that lady's favour and confidence.

She had taken leave of her grandfather and was returning to the other waggon, when she was tempted by the coolness of the night to linger

for a little while in the air. The moon was shining down upon the old gateway of the town, leaving the low archway very black and dark; and with a mingled sensation of curiosity and fear, she slowly approached the gate, and stood still to look up at it, wondering to see how dark, and grim, and old, and cold, it looked.

There was an empty niche from which some old statue had fallen or been carried away hundreds of years ago, and she was thinking what strange people it must have looked down upon when it stood there, and how many hard struggles might have taken place, and how many murders might have been done, upon that silent spot, when there suddenly emerged from the black shade of the arch, a man. The instant he appeared, she recognised him - Who could have failed to recognise, in that instant, the ugly misshapen Quilp!

The street beyond was so narrow, and the shadow of the houses on one side of the way so deep, that he seemed to have risen out of the earth. But there he was. The child withdrew into a dark corner, and saw him pass close to her. He had a stick in his hand, and, when he had got clear of the shadow of the gateway, he leant upon it, looked back - directly, as it seemed, towards where she stood - and beckoned.

To her? oh no, thank God, not to her; for as she stood, in an extremity of fear, hesitating whether to scream for help, or come from her hiding-place and fly, before he should draw nearer, there issued slowly forth from the arch another figure - that of a boy - who carried on his back a trunk.

'Faster, sirrah!' cried Quilp, looking up at the old gateway, and showing in the moonlight like some monstrous image that had come down from its niche and was casting a backward glance at its old house, 'faster!'

'It's a dreadful heavy load, Sir,' the boy pleaded. 'I've come on very fast, considering.'

'YOU have come fast, considering!' retorted Quilp; 'you creep, you dog, you crawl, you measure distance like a worm. There are the chimes now, half-past twelve.'

He stopped to listen, and then turning upon the boy with a suddenness and ferocity that made him start, asked at what hour that London coach passed the corner of the road. The boy replied, at one.

'Come on then,' said Quilp, 'or I shall be too late. Faster - do you hear me? Faster.'

The boy made all the speed he could, and Quilp led onward, constantly turning back to threaten him, and urge him to greater haste. Nell did not dare to move until they were out of sight and hearing, and then hurried to where she had left her grandfather, feeling as if the very passing of the dwarf so near him must have filled him with alarm and terror. But he was sleeping soundly, and she softly withdrew.

As she was making her way to her own bed, she determined to say nothing of this adventure, as upon whatever errand the dwarf had come (and she feared it must have been in search of them) it was clear by his inquiry about the London coach that he was on his way homeward, and as he had passed through that place, it was but reasonable to suppose that they were safer from his inquiries there, than they could be elsewhere. These reflections did not remove her own alarm, for she had been too much terrified to be easily composed, and felt as if she were hemmed in by a legion of Quilps, and the very air itself were filled with them.

The delight of the Nobility and Gentry and the patronised of Royalty had, by some process of self-abridgment known only to herself, got into her travelling bed, where she was snoring peacefully, while the large bonnet, carefully disposed upon the drum, was revealing its glories by the light of a dim lamp that swung from the roof. The child's bed was already made upon the floor, and it was a great comfort to her to hear the steps removed as soon as she had entered, and to know that all easy communication between persons outside and the brass knocker was by this means effectually prevented. Certain guttural sounds, too, which from time to time ascended through the floor of the caravan, and a rustling of straw in the same direction, apprised her that the driver was couched upon the ground beneath, and gave her an additional feeling of security.

Notwithstanding these protections, she could get none but broken sleep by fits and starts all night, for fear of Quilp, who throughout her uneasy dreams was somehow connected with the wax-work, or was wax-work himself, or was Mrs Jarley and wax-work too, or was himself, Mrs Jarley, wax-work, and a barrel organ all in one, and yet not exactly any of them either. At length, towards break of day, that deep sleep came upon her which succeeds to weariness and overwatching, and which has no consciousness but one of overpowering and irresistible enjoyment.