

## Chapter XXIX

Unquestionably Mrs Jarley had an inventive genius. In the midst of the various devices for attracting visitors to the exhibition, little Nell was not forgotten. The light cart in which the Brigand usually made his perambulations being gaily dressed with flags and streamers, and the Brigand placed therein, contemplating the miniature of his beloved as usual, Nell was accommodated with a seat beside him, decorated with artificial flowers, and in this state and ceremony rode slowly through the town every morning, dispersing handbills from a basket, to the sound of drum and trumpet. The beauty of the child, coupled with her gentle and timid bearing, produced quite a sensation in the little country place. The Brigand, heretofore a source of exclusive interest in the streets, became a mere secondary consideration, and to be important only as a part of the show of which she was the chief attraction. Grown-up folks began to be interested in the bright-eyed girl, and some score of little boys fell desperately in love, and constantly left enclosures of nuts and apples, directed in small-text, at the wax-work door.

This desirable impression was not lost on Mrs Jarley, who, lest Nell should become too cheap, soon sent the Brigand out alone again, and kept her in the exhibition room, where she described the figures every half-hour to the great satisfaction of admiring audiences. And these audiences were of a very superior description, including a great many young ladies' boarding-schools, whose favour Mrs Jarley had been at great pains to conciliate, by altering the face and costume of Mr Grimaldi as clown to represent Mr Lindley Murray as he appeared when engaged in the composition of his English Grammar, and turning a murderess of great renown into Mrs Hannah More - both of which likenesses were admitted by Miss Monflathers, who was at the head of the head Boarding and Day Establishment in the town, and who condescended to take a Private View with eight chosen young ladies, to be quite startling from their extreme correctness. Mr Pitt in a nightcap and bedgown, and without his boots, represented the poet Cowper with perfect exactness; and Mary Queen of Scots in a dark wig, white shirt-collar, and male attire, was such a complete image of Lord Byron that the young ladies quite screamed when they saw it. Miss Monflathers, however, rebuked this enthusiasm, and took occasion to reprove Mrs Jarley for not keeping her collection more select: observing that His Lordship had held certain opinions quite incompatible with wax-work honours, and adding something about a Dean and Chapter, which Mrs Jarley did not understand.

Although her duties were sufficiently laborious, Nell found in the lady of the caravan a very kind and considerate person, who had not only a peculiar relish for being comfortable herself, but for making everybody about her comfortable also; which latter taste, it may be remarked, is,

even in persons who live in much finer places than caravans, a far more rare and uncommon one than the first, and is not by any means its necessary consequence. As her popularity procured her various little fees from the visitors on which her patroness never demanded any toll, and as her grandfather too was well-treated and useful, she had no cause of anxiety in connexion with the wax-work, beyond that which sprung from her recollection of Quilp, and her fears that he might return and one day suddenly encounter them.

Quilp indeed was a perpetual night-mare to the child, who was constantly haunted by a vision of his ugly face and stunted figure. She slept, for their better security, in the room where the wax-work figures were, and she never retired to this place at night but she tortured herself - she could not help it - with imagining a resemblance, in some one or other of their death-like faces, to the dwarf, and this fancy would sometimes so gain upon her that she would almost believe he had removed the figure and stood within the clothes. Then there were so many of them with their great glassy eyes - and, as they stood one behind the other all about her bed, they looked so like living creatures, and yet so unlike in their grim stillness and silence, that she had a kind of terror of them for their own sakes, and would often lie watching their dusky figures until she was obliged to rise and light a candle, or go and sit at the open window and feel a companionship in the bright stars. At these times, she would recall the old house and the window at which she used to sit alone; and then she would think of poor Kit and all his kindness, until the tears came into her eyes, and she would weep and smile together.

Often and anxiously at this silent hour, her thoughts reverted to her grandfather, and she would wonder how much he remembered of their former life, and whether he was ever really mindful of the change in their condition and of their late helplessness and destitution. When they were wandering about, she seldom thought of this, but now she could not help considering what would become of them if he fell sick, or her own strength were to fail her. He was very patient and willing, happy to execute any little task, and glad to be of use; but he was in the same listless state, with no prospect of improvement - a mere child - a poor, thoughtless, vacant creature - a harmless fond old man, susceptible of tender love and regard for her, and of pleasant and painful impressions, but alive to nothing more. It made her very sad to know that this was so - so sad to see it that sometimes when he sat idly by, smiling and nodding to her when she looked round, or when he caressed some little child and carried it to and fro, as he was fond of doing by the hour together, perplexed by its simple questions, yet patient under his own infirmity, and seeming almost conscious of it too, and humbled even before the mind of an infant - so sad it made her to see him thus, that she would burst into tears, and,

withdrawing into some secret place, fall down upon her knees and pray that he might be restored.

But, the bitterness of her grief was not in beholding him in this condition, when he was at least content and tranquil, nor in her solitary meditations on his altered state, though these were trials for a young heart. Cause for deeper and heavier sorrow was yet to come.

One evening, a holiday night with them, Nell and her grandfather went out to walk. They had been rather closely confined for some days, and the weather being warm, they strolled a long distance. Clear of the town, they took a footpath which struck through some pleasant fields, judging that it would terminate in the road they quitted and enable them to return that way. It made, however, a much wider circuit than they had supposed, and thus they were tempted onward until sunset, when they reached the track of which they were in search, and stopped to rest.

It had been gradually getting overcast, and now the sky was dark and lowering, save where the glory of the departing sun piled up masses of gold and burning fire, decaying embers of which gleamed here and there through the black veil, and shone redly down upon the earth. The wind began to moan in hollow murmurs, as the sun went down carrying glad day elsewhere; and a train of dull clouds coming up against it, menaced thunder and lightning. Large drops of rain soon began to fall, and, as the storm clouds came sailing onward, others supplied the void they left behind and spread over all the sky. Then was heard the low rumbling of distant thunder, then the lightning quivered, and then the darkness of an hour seemed to have gathered in an instant.

Fearful of taking shelter beneath a tree or hedge, the old man and the child hurried along the high road, hoping to find some house in which they could seek a refuge from the storm, which had now burst forth in earnest, and every moment increased in violence. Drenched with the pelting rain, confused by the deafening thunder, and bewildered by the glare of the forked lightning, they would have passed a solitary house without being aware of its vicinity, had not a man, who was standing at the door, called lustily to them to enter.

'Your ears ought to be better than other folks' at any rate, if you make so little of the chance of being struck blind,' he said, retreating from the door and shading his eyes with his hands as the jagged lightning came again. 'What were you going past for, eh?' he added, as he closed the door and led the way along a passage to a room behind.

'We didn't see the house, sir, till we heard you calling,' Nell replied.

'No wonder,' said the man, 'with this lightning in one's eyes, by-the-by. You had better stand by the fire here, and dry yourselves a bit. You can call for what you like if you want anything. If you don't want anything, you are not obliged to give an order. Don't be afraid of that. This is a public-house, that's all. The Valiant Soldier is pretty well known hereabouts.'

'Is this house called the Valiant Soldier, Sir?' asked Nell.

'I thought everybody knew that,' replied the landlord. 'Where have you come from, if you don't know the Valiant Soldier as well as the church catechism? This is the Valiant Soldier, by James Groves - Jem Groves - honest Jem Groves, as is a man of unblemished moral character, and has a good dry skittle-ground. If any man has got anything to say against Jem Groves, let him say it TO Jem Groves, and Jem Groves can accommodate him with a customer on any terms from four pound a side to forty.'

With these words, the speaker tapped himself on the waistcoat to intimate that he was the Jem Groves so highly eulogized; sparred scientifically at a counterfeit Jem Groves, who was sparring at society in general from a black frame over the chimney-piece; and, applying a half-emptied glass of spirits and water to his lips, drank Jem Groves's health.

The night being warm, there was a large screen drawn across the room, for a barrier against the heat of the fire. It seemed as if somebody on the other side of this screen had been insinuating doubts of Mr Groves's prowess, and had thereby given rise to these egotistical expressions, for Mr Groves wound up his defiance by giving a loud knock upon it with his knuckles and pausing for a reply from the other side.

'There an't many men,' said Mr Groves, no answer being returned, 'who would ventur' to cross Jem Groves under his own roof. There's only one man, I know, that has nerve enough for that, and that man's not a hundred mile from here neither. But he's worth a dozen men, and I let him say of me whatever he likes in consequence - he knows that.'

In return for this complimentary address, a very gruff hoarse voice bade Mr Groves 'hold his noise and light a candle.' And the same voice remarked that the same gentleman 'needn't waste his breath in brag, for most people knew pretty well what sort of stuff he was made of.'

'Nell, they're - they're playing cards,' whispered the old man, suddenly interested. 'Don't you hear them?'

'Look sharp with that candle,' said the voice; 'it's as much as I can do to see the pips on the cards as it is; and get this shutter closed as quick as you can, will you? Your beer will be the worse for to-night's thunder I expect. - Game! Seven-and-sixpence to me, old Isaac. Hand over.'

'Do you hear, Nell, do you hear them?' whispered the old man again, with increased earnestness, as the money chinked upon the table.

'I haven't seen such a storm as this,' said a sharp cracked voice of most disagreeable quality, when a tremendous peal of thunder had died away, 'since the night when old Luke Withers won thirteen times running on the red. We all said he had the Devil's luck and his own, and as it was the kind of night for the Devil to be out and busy, I suppose he was looking over his shoulder, if anybody could have seen him.'

'Ah!' returned the gruff voice; 'for all old Luke's winning through thick and thin of late years, I remember the time when he was the unluckiest and unfortunatest of men. He never took a dice-box in his hand, or held a card, but he was plucked, pigeoned, and cleaned out completely.'

'Do you hear what he says?' whispered the old man. 'Do you hear that, Nell?' The child saw with astonishment and alarm that his whole appearance had undergone a complete change. His face was flushed and eager, his eyes were strained, his teeth set, his breath came short and thick, and the hand he laid upon her arm trembled so violently that she shook beneath its grasp.

'Bear witness,' he muttered, looking upward, 'that I always said it; that I knew it, dreamed of it, felt it was the truth, and that it must be so! What money have we, Nell? Come! I saw you with money yesterday. What money have we? Give it to me.'

'No, no, let me keep it, grandfather,' said the frightened child. 'Let us go away from here. Do not mind the rain. Pray let us go.'

'Give it to me, I say,' returned the old man fiercely. 'Hush, hush, don't cry, Nell. If I spoke sharply, dear, I didn't mean it. It's for thy good. I have wronged thee, Nell, but I will right thee yet, I will indeed. Where is the money?'

'Do not take it,' said the child. 'Pray do not take it, dear. For both our sakes let me keep it, or let me throw it away - better let me throw it away, than you take it now. Let us go; do let us go.'

'Give me the money,' returned the old man, 'I must have it. There - there - that's my dear Nell. I'll right thee one day, child, I'll right thee, never fear!'

She took from her pocket a little purse. He seized it with the same rapid impatience which had characterised his speech, and hastily made his way to the other side of the screen. It was impossible to restrain him, and the trembling child followed close behind.

The landlord had placed a light upon the table, and was engaged in drawing the curtain of the window. The speakers whom they had heard were two men, who had a pack of cards and some silver money between them, while upon the screen itself the games they had played were scored in chalk. The man with the rough voice was a burly fellow of middle age, with large black whiskers, broad cheeks, a coarse wide mouth, and bull neck, which was pretty freely displayed as his shirt collar was only confined by a loose red neckerchief. He wore his hat, which was of a brownish-white, and had beside him a thick knotted stick. The other man, whom his companion had called Isaac, was of a more slender figure - stooping, and high in the shoulders - with a very ill-favoured face, and a most sinister and villainous squint.

'Now old gentleman,' said Isaac, looking round. 'Do you know either of us? This side of the screen is private, sir.'

'No offence, I hope,' returned the old man.

'But by G - , sir, there is offence,' said the other, interrupting him, 'when you intrude yourself upon a couple of gentlemen who are particularly engaged.'

'I had no intention to offend,' said the old man, looking anxiously at the cards. 'I thought that - '

'But you had no right to think, sir,' retorted the other. 'What the devil has a man at your time of life to do with thinking?'

'Now bully boy,' said the stout man, raising his eyes from his cards for the first time, 'can't you let him speak?'

The landlord, who had apparently resolved to remain neutral until he knew which side of the question the stout man would espouse, chimed in at this place with 'Ah, to be sure, can't you let him speak, Isaac List?'

'Can't I let him speak,' sneered Isaac in reply, mimicking as nearly as he could, in his shrill voice, the tones of the landlord. 'Yes, I can let him speak, Jemmy Groves.'

'Well then, do it, will you?' said the landlord.

Mr List's squint assumed a portentous character, which seemed to threaten a prolongation of this controversy, when his companion, who had been looking sharply at the old man, put a timely stop to it.

'Who knows,' said he, with a cunning look, 'but the gentleman may have civilly meant to ask if he might have the honour to take a hand with us!'

'I did mean it,' cried the old man. 'That is what I mean. That is what I want now!'

'I thought so,' returned the same man. 'Then who knows but the gentleman, anticipating our objection to play for love, civilly desired to play for money?'

The old man replied by shaking the little purse in his eager hand, and then throwing it down upon the table, and gathering up the cards as a miser would clutch at gold.

'Oh! That indeed,' said Isaac; 'if that's what the gentleman meant, I beg the gentleman's pardon. Is this the gentleman's little purse? A very pretty little purse. Rather a light purse,' added Isaac, throwing it into the air and catching it dexterously, 'but enough to amuse a gentleman for half an hour or so.'

'We'll make a four-handed game of it, and take in Groves,' said the stout man. 'Come, Jemmy.'

The landlord, who conducted himself like one who was well used to such little parties, approached the table and took his seat. The child, in a perfect agony, drew her grandfather aside, and implored him, even then, to come away.

'Come; and we may be so happy,' said the child.

'We WILL be happy,' replied the old man hastily. 'Let me go, Nell. The means of happiness are on the cards and the dice. We must rise from little winnings to great. There's little to be won here; but great will come in time. I shall but win back my own, and it's all for thee, my darling.'

'God help us!' cried the child. 'Oh! what hard fortune brought us here?'

'Hush!' rejoined the old man laying his hand upon her mouth, 'Fortune will not bear chiding. We must not reproach her, or she shuns us; I have found that out.'

'Now, mister,' said the stout man. 'If you're not coming yourself, give us the cards, will you?'

'I am coming,' cried the old man. 'Sit thee down, Nell, sit thee down and look on. Be of good heart, it's all for thee - all - every penny. I don't tell them, no, no, or else they wouldn't play, dreading the chance that such a cause must give me. Look at them. See what they are and what thou art. Who doubts that we must win!'

'The gentleman has thought better of it, and isn't coming,' said Isaac, making as though he would rise from the table. 'I'm sorry the gentleman's daunted - nothing venture, nothing have - but the gentleman knows best.'

'Why I am ready. You have all been slow but me,' said the old man. 'I wonder who is more anxious to begin than I.'

As he spoke he drew a chair to the table; and the other three closing round it at the same time, the game commenced.

The child sat by, and watched its progress with a troubled mind. Regardless of the run of luck, and mindful only of the desperate passion which had its hold upon her grandfather, losses and gains were to her alike. Exulting in some brief triumph, or cast down by a defeat, there he sat so wild and restless, so feverishly and intensely anxious, so terribly eager, so ravenous for the paltry stakes, that she could have almost better borne to see him dead. And yet she was the innocent cause of all this torture, and he, gambling with such a savage thirst for gain as the most insatiable gambler never felt, had not one selfish thought!

On the contrary, the other three - knaves and gamesters by their trade - while intent upon their game, were yet as cool and quiet as if every virtue had been centered in their breasts. Sometimes one would look up to smile to another, or to snuff the feeble candle, or to glance at the lightning as it shot through the open window and fluttering curtain, or to listen to some louder peal of thunder than the rest, with a kind of momentary impatience, as if it put him out; but there they sat, with a calm indifference to everything but their cards, perfect philosophers in appearance, and with no greater show of passion or excitement than if they had been made of stone.

The storm had raged for full three hours; the lightning had grown fainter and less frequent; the thunder, from seeming to roll and break



above their heads, had gradually died away into a deep hoarse distance; and still the game went on, and still the anxious child was quite forgotten.