

Chapter XXXIV

In course of time, that is to say, after a couple of hours or so, of diligent application, Miss Brass arrived at the conclusion of her task, and recorded the fact by wiping her pen upon the green gown, and taking a pinch of snuff from a little round tin box which she carried in her pocket. Having disposed of this temperate refreshment, she arose from her stool, tied her papers into a formal packet with red tape, and taking them under her arm, marched out of the office.

Mr Swiveller had scarcely sprung off his seat and commenced the performance of a maniac hornpipe, when he was interrupted, in the fulness of his joy at being again alone, by the opening of the door, and the reappearance of Miss Sally's head.

'I am going out,' said Miss Brass.

'Very good, ma'am,' returned Dick. 'And don't hurry yourself on my account to come back, ma'am,' he added inwardly.

'If anybody comes on office business, take their messages, and say that the gentleman who attends to that matter isn't in at present, will you?' said Miss Brass.

'I will, ma'am,' replied Dick.

'I shan't be very long,' said Miss Brass, retiring.

'I'm sorry to hear it, ma'am,' rejoined Dick when she had shut the door. 'I hope you may be unexpectedly detained, ma'am. If you could manage to be run over, ma'am, but not seriously, so much the better.'

Uttering these expressions of good-will with extreme gravity, Mr Swiveller sat down in the client's chair and pondered; then took a few turns up and down the room and fell into the chair again.

'So I'm Brass's clerk, am I?' said Dick. 'Brass's clerk, eh? And the clerk of Brass's sister - clerk to a female Dragon. Very good, very good! What shall I be next? Shall I be a convict in a felt hat and a grey suit, trotting about a dockyard with my number neatly embroidered on my uniform, and the order of the garter on my leg, restrained from chafing my ankle by a twisted belcher handkerchief? Shall I be that? Will that do, or is it too genteel? Whatever you please, have it your own way, of course.'

As he was entirely alone, it may be presumed that, in these remarks, Mr Swiveller addressed himself to his fate or destiny, whom, as we learn by the precedents, it is the custom of heroes to taunt in a very

bitter and ironical manner when they find themselves in situations of an unpleasant nature. This is the more probable from the circumstance of Mr Swiveller directing his observations to the ceiling, which these bodily personages are usually supposed to inhabit - except in theatrical cases, when they live in the heart of the great chandelier.

'Quilp offers me this place, which he says he can insure me,' resumed Dick after a thoughtful silence, and telling off the circumstances of his position, one by one, upon his fingers; 'Fred, who, I could have taken my affidavit, would not have heard of such a thing, backs Quilp to my astonishment, and urges me to take it also - staggerer, number one! My aunt in the country stops the supplies, and writes an affectionate note to say that she has made a new will, and left me out of it - staggerer, number two. No money; no credit; no support from Fred, who seems to turn steady all at once; notice to quit the old lodgings - staggerers, three, four, five, and six! Under an accumulation of staggerers, no man can be considered a free agent. No man knocks himself down; if his destiny knocks him down, his destiny must pick him up again. Then I'm very glad that mine has brought all this upon itself, and I shall be as careless as I can, and make myself quite at home to spite it. So go on my buck,' said Mr Swiveller, taking his leave of the ceiling with a significant nod, 'and let us see which of us will be tired first!'

Dismissing the subject of his downfall with these reflections, which were no doubt very profound, and are indeed not altogether unknown in certain systems of moral philosophy, Mr Swiveller shook off his despondency and assumed the cheerful ease of an irresponsible clerk.

As a means towards his composure and self-possession, he entered into a more minute examination of the office than he had yet had time to make; looked into the wig-box, the books, and ink-bottle; untied and inspected all the papers; carved a few devices on the table with a sharp blade of Mr Brass's penknife; and wrote his name on the inside of the wooden coal-scuttle. Having, as it were, taken formal possession of his clerkship in virtue of these proceedings, he opened the window and leaned negligently out of it until a beer-boy happened to pass, whom he commanded to set down his tray and to serve him with a pint of mild porter, which he drank upon the spot and promptly paid for, with the view of breaking ground for a system of future credit and opening a correspondence tending thereto, without loss of time. Then, three or four little boys dropped in, on legal errands from three or four attorneys of the Brass grade: whom Mr Swiveller received and dismissed with about as professional a manner, and as correct and comprehensive an understanding of their business, as would have been shown by a clown in a pantomime under similar circumstances. These things done and over, he got upon his stool again and tried his

hand at drawing caricatures of Miss Brass with a pen and ink, whistling very cheerfully all the time.

He was occupied in this diversion when a coach stopped near the door, and presently afterwards there was a loud double-knock. As this was no business of Mr Swiveller's, the person not ringing the office bell, he pursued his diversion with perfect composure, notwithstanding that he rather thought there was nobody else in the house.

In this, however, he was mistaken; for, after the knock had been repeated with increased impatience, the door was opened, and somebody with a very heavy tread went up the stairs and into the room above. Mr Swiveller was wondering whether this might be another Miss Brass, twin sister to the Dragon, when there came a rapping of knuckles at the office door.

'Come in!' said Dick. 'Don't stand upon ceremony. The business will get rather complicated if I've many more customers. Come in!'

'Oh, please,' said a little voice very low down in the doorway, 'will you come and show the lodgings?'

Dick leant over the table, and descried a small slipshod girl in a dirty coarse apron and bib, which left nothing of her visible but her face and feet. She might as well have been dressed in a violin-case.

'Why, who are you?' said Dick.

To which the only reply was, 'Oh, please will you come and show the lodgings?'

There never was such an old-fashioned child in her looks and manner. She must have been at work from her cradle. She seemed as much afraid of Dick, as Dick was amazed at her.

'I hav'n't got anything to do with the lodgings,' said Dick. 'Tell 'em to call again.'

'Oh, but please will you come and show the lodgings,' returned the girl; 'It's eighteen shillings a week and us finding plate and linen. Boots and clothes is extra, and fires in winter-time is eightpence a day.'

'Why don't you show 'em yourself? You seem to know all about 'em,' said Dick.

'Miss Sally said I wasn't to, because people wouldn't believe the attendance was good if they saw how small I was first.'

'Well, but they'll see how small you are afterwards, won't they?' said Dick.

'Ah! But then they'll have taken 'em for a fortnight certain,' replied the child with a shrewd look; 'and people don't like moving when they're once settled.'

'This is a queer sort of thing,' muttered Dick, rising. 'What do you mean to say you are - the cook?'

'Yes, I do plain cooking;' replied the child. 'I'm housemaid too; I do all the work of the house.'

'I suppose Brass and the Dragon and I do the dirtiest part of it,' thought Dick. And he might have thought much more, being in a doubtful and hesitating mood, but that the girl again urged her request, and certain mysterious bumping sounds on the passage and staircase seemed to give note of the applicant's impatience. Richard Swiveller, therefore, sticking a pen behind each ear, and carrying another in his mouth as a token of his great importance and devotion to business, hurried out to meet and treat with the single gentleman.

He was a little surprised to perceive that the bumping sounds were occasioned by the progress up-stairs of the single gentleman's trunk, which, being nearly twice as wide as the staircase, and exceedingly heavy withal, it was no easy matter for the united exertions of the single gentleman and the coachman to convey up the steep ascent. But there they were, crushing each other, and pushing and pulling with all their might, and getting the trunk tight and fast in all kinds of impossible angles, and to pass them was out of the question; for which sufficient reason, Mr Swiveller followed slowly behind, entering a new protest on every stair against the house of Mr Sampson Brass being thus taken by storm.

To these remonstrances, the single gentleman answered not a word, but when the trunk was at last got into the bed-room, sat down upon it and wiped his bald head and face with his handkerchief. He was very warm, and well he might be; for, not to mention the exertion of getting the trunk up stairs, he was closely muffled in winter garments, though the thermometer had stood all day at eighty-one in the shade.

'I believe, sir,' said Richard Swiveller, taking his pen out of his mouth, 'that you desire to look at these apartments. They are very charming apartments, sir. They command an uninterrupted view of - of over the way, and they are within one minute's walk of - of the corner of the

street. There is exceedingly mild porter, sir, in the immediate vicinity, and the contingent advantages are extraordinary.'

'What's the rent?' said the single gentleman.

'One pound per week,' replied Dick, improving on the terms.

'I'll take 'em.'

'The boots and clothes are extras,' said Dick; 'and the fires in winter time are - '

'Are all agreed to,' answered the single gentleman.

'Two weeks certain,' said Dick, 'are the - '

'Two weeks!' cried the single gentleman gruffly, eyeing him from top to toe. 'Two years. I shall live here for two years. Here. Ten pounds down. The bargain's made.'

'Why you see,' said Dick, 'my name is not Brass, and - '

'Who said it was? My name's not Brass. What then?'

'The name of the master of the house is,' said Dick.

'I'm glad of it,' returned the single gentleman; 'it's a good name for a lawyer. Coachman, you may go. So may you, Sir.'

Mr Swiveller was so much confounded by the single gentleman riding roughshod over him at this rate, that he stood looking at him almost as hard as he had looked at Miss Sally. The single gentleman, however, was not in the slightest degree affected by this circumstance, but proceeded with perfect composure to unwind the shawl which was tied round his neck, and then to pull off his boots. Freed of these encumbrances, he went on to divest himself of his other clothing, which he folded up, piece by piece, and ranged in order on the trunk. Then, he pulled down the window-blinds, drew the curtains, wound up his watch, and, quite leisurely and methodically, got into bed.

'Take down the bill,' were his parting words, as he looked out from between the curtains; 'and let nobody call me till I ring the bell.'

With that the curtains closed, and he seemed to snore immediately.

'This is a most remarkable and supernatural sort of house!' said Mr Swiveller, as he walked into the office with the bill in his hand. 'She-dragons in the business, conducting themselves like professional

gentlemen; plain cooks of three feet high appearing mysteriously from under ground; strangers walking in and going to bed without leave or licence in the middle of the day! If he should be one of the miraculous fellows that turn up now and then, and has gone to sleep for two years, I shall be in a pleasant situation. It's my destiny, however, and I hope Brass may like it. I shall be sorry if he don't. But it's no business of mine - I have nothing whatever to do with it!