

Chapter XXXVII

The single gentleman among his other peculiarities - and he had a very plentiful stock, of which he every day furnished some new specimen - took a most extraordinary and remarkable interest in the exhibition of Punch. If the sound of a Punch's voice, at ever so remote a distance, reached Bevis Marks, the single gentleman, though in bed and asleep, would start up, and, hurrying on his clothes, make for the spot with all speed, and presently return at the head of a long procession of idlers, having in the midst the theatre and its proprietors. Straightway, the stage would be set up in front of Mr Brass's house; the single gentleman would establish himself at the first floor window; and the entertainment would proceed, with all its exciting accompaniments of fife and drum and shout, to the excessive consternation of all sober votaries of business in that silent thoroughfare. It might have been expected that when the play was done, both players and audience would have dispersed; but the epilogue was as bad as the play, for no sooner was the Devil dead, than the manager of the puppets and his partner were summoned by the single gentleman to his chamber, where they were regaled with strong waters from his private store, and where they held with him long conversations, the purport of which no human being could fathom. But the secret of these discussions was of little importance. It was sufficient to know that while they were proceeding, the concourse without still lingered round the house; that boys beat upon the drum with their fists, and imitated Punch with their tender voices; that the office-window was rendered opaque by flattened noses, and the key-hole of the street-door luminous with eyes; that every time the single gentleman or either of his guests was seen at the upper window, or so much as the end of one of their noses was visible, there was a great shout of execration from the excluded mob, who remained howling and yelling, and refusing consolation, until the exhibitors were delivered up to them to be attended elsewhere. It was sufficient, in short, to know that Bevis Marks was revolutionised by these popular movements, and that peace and quietness fled from its precincts.

Nobody was rendered more indignant by these proceedings than Mr Sampson Brass, who, as he could by no means afford to lose so profitable an inmate, deemed it prudent to pocket his lodger's affront along with his cash, and to annoy the audiences who clustered round his door by such imperfect means of retaliation as were open to him, and which were confined to the trickling down of foul water on their heads from unseen watering pots, pelting them with fragments of tile and mortar from the roof of the house, and bribing the drivers of hackney cabriolets to come suddenly round the corner and dash in among them precipitately. It may, at first sight, be matter of surprise to the thoughtless few that Mr Brass, being a professional gentleman, should not have legally indicted some party or parties, active in the

promotion of the nuisance, but they will be good enough to remember, that as Doctors seldom take their own prescriptions, and Divines do not always practise what they preach, so lawyers are shy of meddling with the Law on their own account: knowing it to be an edged tool of uncertain application, very expensive in the working, and rather remarkable for its properties of close shaving, than for its always shaving the right person.

'Come,' said Mr Brass one afternoon, 'this is two days without a Punch. I'm in hopes he has run through 'em all, at last.'

'Why are you in hopes?' returned Miss Sally. 'What harm do they do?'

'Here's a pretty sort of a fellow!' cried Brass, laying down his pen in despair. 'Now here's an aggravating animal!'

'Well, what harm do they do?' retorted Sally.

'What harm!' cried Brass. 'Is it no harm to have a constant hallooing and hooting under one's very nose, distracting one from business, and making one grind one's teeth with vexation? Is it no harm to be blinded and choked up, and have the king's highway stopped with a set of screamers and roarers whose throats must be made of - of - '

'Brass,' suggested Mr Swiveller.

'Ah! of brass,' said the lawyer, glancing at his clerk, to assure himself that he had suggested the word in good faith and without any sinister intention. 'Is that no harm?'

The lawyer stopped short in his invective, and listening for a moment, and recognising the well-known voice, rested his head upon his hand, raised his eyes to the ceiling, and muttered faintly,

'There's another!'

Up went the single gentleman's window directly.

'There's another,' repeated Brass; 'and if I could get a break and four blood horses to cut into the Marks when the crowd is at its thickest, I'd give eighteen-pence and never grudge it!'

The distant squeak was heard again. The single gentleman's door burst open. He ran violently down the stairs, out into the street, and so past the window, without any hat, towards the quarter whence the sound proceeded - bent, no doubt, upon securing the strangers' services directly.

'I wish I only knew who his friends were,' muttered Sampson, filling his pocket with papers; 'if they'd just get up a pretty little Commission de lunatico at the Gray's Inn Coffee House and give me the job, I'd be content to have the lodgings empty for one while, at all events.'

With which words, and knocking his hat over his eyes as if for the purpose of shutting out even a glimpse of the dreadful visitation, Mr Brass rushed from the house and hurried away.

As Mr Swiveller was decidedly favourable to these performances, upon the ground that looking at a Punch, or indeed looking at anything out of window, was better than working; and as he had been, for this reason, at some pains to awaken in his fellow clerk a sense of their beauties and manifold deserts; both he and Miss Sally rose as with one accord and took up their positions at the window: upon the sill whereof, as in a post of honour, sundry young ladies and gentlemen who were employed in the dry nurture of babies, and who made a point of being present, with their young charges, on such occasions, had already established themselves as comfortably as the circumstances would allow.

The glass being dim, Mr Swiveller, agreeably to a friendly custom which he had established between them, hitched off the brown head-dress from Miss Sally's head, and dusted it carefully therewith. By the time he had handed it back, and its beautiful wearer had put it on again (which she did with perfect composure and indifference), the lodger returned with the show and showmen at his heels, and a strong addition to the body of spectators. The exhibitor disappeared with all speed behind the drapery; and his partner, stationing himself by the side of the Theatre, surveyed the audience with a remarkable expression of melancholy, which became more remarkable still when he breathed a hornpipe tune into that sweet musical instrument which is popularly termed a mouth-organ, without at all changing the mournful expression of the upper part of his face, though his mouth and chin were, of necessity, in lively spasms.

The drama proceeded to its close, and held the spectators enchained in the customary manner. The sensation which kindles in large assemblies, when they are relieved from a state of breathless suspense and are again free to speak and move, was yet rife, when the lodger, as usual, summoned the men up stairs.

'Both of you,' he called from the window; for only the actual exhibitor - a little fat man - prepared to obey the summons. 'I want to talk to you. Come both of you!'

Come, Tommy,' said the little man.

I an't a talker,' replied the other. 'Tell him so. What should I go and talk for?'

'Don't you see the gentleman's got a bottle and glass up there?' returned the little man.

'And couldn't you have said so at first?' retorted the other with sudden alacrity. 'Now, what are you waiting for? Are you going to keep the gentleman expecting us all day? haven't you no manners?'

With this remonstrance, the melancholy man, who was no other than Mr Thomas Codlin, pushed past his friend and brother in the craft, Mr Harris, otherwise Short or Trotters, and hurried before him to the single gentleman's apartment.

'Now, my men,' said the single gentleman; 'you have done very well. What will you take? Tell that little man behind, to shut the door.'

'Shut the door, can't you?' said Mr Codlin, turning gruffly to his friend. 'You might have knowed that the gentleman wanted the door shut, without being told, I think.'

Mr Short obeyed, observing under his breath that his friend seemed unusually 'cranky,' and expressing a hope that there was no dairy in the neighbourhood, or his temper would certainly spoil its contents.

The gentleman pointed to a couple of chairs, and intimated by an emphatic nod of his head that he expected them to be seated. Messrs Codlin and Short, after looking at each other with considerable doubt and indecision, at length sat down - each on the extreme edge of the chair pointed out to him - and held their hats very tight, while the single gentleman filled a couple of glasses from a bottle on the table beside him, and presented them in due form.

'You're pretty well browned by the sun, both of you,' said their entertainer. 'Have you been travelling?'

Mr Short replied in the affirmative with a nod and a smile. Mr Codlin added a corroborative nod and a short groan, as if he still felt the weight of the Temple on his shoulders.

'To fairs, markets, races, and so forth, I suppose?' pursued the single gentleman.

'Yes, sir,' returned Short, 'pretty nigh all over the West of England.'

'I have talked to men of your craft from North, East, and South,' returned their host, in rather a hasty manner; 'but I never lighted on any from the West before.'

'It's our reg'lar summer circuit is the West, master,' said Short; 'that's where it is. We takes the East of London in the spring and winter, and the West of England in the summer time. Many's the hard day's walking in rain and mud, and with never a penny earned, we've had down in the West.'

'Let me fill your glass again.'

'Much obleeged to you sir, I think I will,' said Mr Codlin, suddenly thrusting in his own and turning Short's aside. 'I'm the sufferer, sir, in all the travelling, and in all the staying at home. In town or country, wet or dry, hot or cold, Tom Codlin suffers. But Tom Codlin isn't to complain for all that. Oh, no! Short may complain, but if Codlin grumbles by so much as a word - oh dear, down with him, down with him directly. It isn't his place to grumble. That's quite out of the question.'

'Codlin an't without his usefulness,' observed Short with an arch look, 'but he don't always keep his eyes open. He falls asleep sometimes, you know. Remember them last races, Tommy.'

'Will you never leave off aggravating a man?' said Codlin. 'It's very like I was asleep when five-and-tenpence was collected, in one round, isn't it? I was attending to my business, and couldn't have my eyes in twenty places at once, like a peacock, no more than you could. If I an't a match for an old man and a young child, you an't neither, so don't throw that out against me, for the cap fits your head quite as correct as it fits mine.'

'You may as well drop the subject, Tom,' said Short. 'It isn't particular agreeable to the gentleman, I dare say.'

'Then you shouldn't have brought it up,' returned Mr Codlin; 'and I ask the gentleman's pardon on your account, as a giddy chap that likes to hear himself talk, and don't much care what he talks about, so that he does talk.'

Their entertainer had sat perfectly quiet in the beginning of this dispute, looking first at one man and then at the other, as if he were lying in wait for an opportunity of putting some further question, or reverting to that from which the discourse had strayed. But, from the point where Mr Codlin was charged with sleepiness, he had shown an increasing interest in the discussion: which now attained a very high pitch.

'You are the two men I want,' he said, 'the two men I have been looking for, and searching after! Where are that old man and that child you speak of?'

'Sir?' said Short, hesitating, and looking towards his friend.

'The old man and his grandchild who travelled with you - where are they? It will be worth your while to speak out, I assure you; much better worth your while than you believe. They left you, you say - at those races, as I understand. They have been traced to that place, and there lost sight of. Have you no clue, can you suggest no clue, to their recovery?'

'Did I always say, Thomas,' cried Short, turning with a look of amazement to his friend, 'that there was sure to be an inquiry after them two travellers?'

'YOU said!' returned Mr Codlin. 'Did I always say that that 'ere blessed child was the most interesting I ever see? Did I always say I loved her, and doated on her? Pretty creetur, I think I hear her now. 'Codlin's my friend,' she says, with a tear of gratitude a trickling down her little eye; 'Codlin's my friend,' she says - 'not Short. Short's very well,' she says; 'I've no quarrel with Short; he means kind, I dare say; but Codlin,' she says, 'has the feelings for my money, though he mayn't look it.'

Repeating these words with great emotion, Mr Codlin rubbed the bridge of his nose with his coat-sleeve, and shaking his head mournfully from side to side, left the single gentleman to infer that, from the moment when he lost sight of his dear young charge, his peace of mind and happiness had fled.

'Good Heaven!' said the single gentleman, pacing up and down the room, 'have I found these men at last, only to discover that they can give me no information or assistance! It would have been better to have lived on, in hope, from day to day, and never to have lighted on them, than to have my expectations scattered thus.'

'Stay a minute,' said Short. 'A man of the name of Jerry - you know Jerry, Thomas?'

'Oh, don't talk to me of Jerrys,' replied Mr Codlin. 'How can I care a pinch of snuff for Jerrys, when I think of that 'ere darling child? 'Codlin's my friend,' she says, 'dear, good, kind Codlin, as is always a devising pleasures for me! I don't object to Short,' she says, 'but I cotton to Codlin.' Once,' said that gentleman reflectively, 'she called me Father Codlin. I thought I should have bust!'

'A man of the name of Jerry, sir,' said Short, turning from his selfish colleague to their new acquaintance, 'wot keeps a company of dancing dogs, told me, in a accidental sort of way, that he had seen the old gentleman in connexion with a travelling wax-work, unbeknown to him. As they'd given us the slip, and nothing had come of it, and this was down in the country that he'd been seen, I took no measures about it, and asked no questions - But I can, if you like.'

'Is this man in town?' said the impatient single gentleman. 'Speak faster.'

'No he isn't, but he will be to-morrow, for he lodges in our house,' replied Mr Short rapidly.

'Then bring him here,' said the single gentleman. 'Here's a sovereign a-piece. If I can find these people through your means, it is but a prelude to twenty more. Return to me to-morrow, and keep your own counsel on this subject - though I need hardly tell you that; for you'll do so for your own sakes. Now, give me your address, and leave me.'

The address was given, the two men departed, the crowd went with them, and the single gentleman for two mortal hours walked in uncommon agitation up and down his room, over the wondering heads of Mr Swiveller and Miss Sally Brass.