

Chapter XXXVIII

Kit - for it happens at this juncture, not only that we have breathing time to follow his fortunes, but that the necessities of these adventures so adapt themselves to our ease and inclination as to call upon us imperatively to pursue the track we most desire to take - Kit, while the matters treated of in the last fifteen chapters were yet in progress, was, as the reader may suppose, gradually familiarising himself more and more with Mr and Mrs Garland, Mr Abel, the pony, and Barbara, and gradually coming to consider them one and all as his particular private friends, and Abel Cottage, Finchley, as his own proper home.

Stay - the words are written, and may go, but if they convey any notion that Kit, in the plentiful board and comfortable lodging of his new abode, began to think slightly of the poor fare and furniture of his old dwelling, they do their office badly and commit injustice. Who so mindful of those he left at home - albeit they were but a mother and two young babies - as Kit? What boastful father in the fulness of his heart ever related such wonders of his infant prodigy, as Kit never wearied of telling Barbara in the evening time, concerning little Jacob? Was there ever such a mother as Kit's mother, on her son's showing; or was there ever such comfort in poverty as in the poverty of Kit's family, if any correct judgment might be arrived at, from his own glowing account!

And let me linger in this place, for an instant, to remark that if ever household affections and loves are graceful things, they are graceful in the poor. The ties that bind the wealthy and the proud to home may be forged on earth, but those which link the poor man to his humble hearth are of the truer metal and bear the stamp of Heaven. The man of high descent may love the halls and lands of his inheritance as part of himself: as trophies of his birth and power; his associations with them are associations of pride and wealth and triumph; the poor man's attachment to the tenements he holds, which strangers have held before, and may to-morrow occupy again, has a worthier root, struck deep into a purer soil. His household gods are of flesh and blood, with no alloy of silver, gold, or precious stone; he has no property but in the affections of his own heart; and when they endear bare floors and walls, despite of rags and toil and scanty fare, that man has his love of home from God, and his rude hut becomes a solemn place.

Oh! if those who rule the destinies of nations would but remember this - if they would but think how hard it is for the very poor to have engendered in their hearts, that love of home from which all domestic virtues spring, when they live in dense and squalid masses where social decency is lost, or rather never found - if they would but turn

aside from the wide thoroughfares and great houses, and strive to improve the wretched dwellings in bye-ways where only Poverty may walk - many low roofs would point more truly to the sky, than the loftiest steeple that now rears proudly up from the midst of guilt, and crime, and horrible disease, to mock them by its contrast. In hollow voices from Workhouse, Hospital, and jail, this truth is preached from day to day, and has been proclaimed for years. It is no light matter - no outcry from the working vulgar - no mere question of the people's health and comforts that may be whistled down on Wednesday nights. In love of home, the love of country has its rise; and who are the truer patriots or the better in time of need - those who venerate the land, owning its wood, and stream, and earth, and all that they produce? or those who love their country, boasting not a foot of ground in all its wide domain!

Kit knew nothing about such questions, but he knew that his old home was a very poor place, and that his new one was very unlike it, and yet he was constantly looking back with grateful satisfaction and affectionate anxiety, and often indited square- folded letters to his mother, enclosing a shilling or eighteenpence or such other small remittance, which Mr Abel's liberality enabled him to make. Sometimes being in the neighbourhood, he had leisure to call upon her, and then great was the joy and pride of Kit's mother, and extremely noisy the satisfaction of little Jacob and the baby, and cordial the congratulations of the whole court, who listened with admiring ears to the accounts of Abel Cottage, and could never be told too much of its wonders and magnificence.

Although Kit was in the very highest favour with the old lady and gentleman, and Mr Abel, and Barbara, it is certain that no member of the family evinced such a remarkable partiality for him as the self-willed pony, who, from being the most obstinate and opinionated pony on the face of the earth, was, in his hands, the meekest and most tractable of animals. It is true that in exact proportion as he became manageable by Kit he became utterly ungovernable by anybody else (as if he had determined to keep him in the family at all risks and hazards), and that, even under the guidance of his favourite, he would sometimes perform a great variety of strange freaks and capers, to the extreme discomposure of the old lady's nerves; but as Kit always represented that this was only his fun, or a way he had of showing his attachment to his employers, Mrs Garland gradually suffered herself to be persuaded into the belief, in which she at last became so strongly confirmed, that if, in one of these ebullitions, he had overturned the chaise, she would have been quite satisfied that he did it with the very best intentions.

Besides becoming in a short time a perfect marvel in all stable matters, Kit soon made himself a very tolerable gardener, a handy

fellow within doors, and an indispensable attendant on Mr Abel, who every day gave him some new proof of his confidence and approbation. Mr Witherden the notary, too, regarded him with a friendly eye; and even Mr Chuckster would sometimes condescend to give him a slight nod, or to honour him with that peculiar form of recognition which is called 'taking a sight,' or to favour him with some other salute combining pleasantry with patronage.

One morning Kit drove Mr Abel to the Notary's office, as he sometimes did, and having set him down at the house, was about to drive off to a livery stable hard by, when this same Mr Chuckster emerged from the office door, and cried 'Woa-a-a-a-a!' - dwelling upon the note a long time, for the purpose of striking terror into the pony's heart, and asserting the supremacy of man over the inferior animals.

'Pull up, Snobby,' cried Mr Chuckster, addressing himself to Kit. 'You're wanted inside here.'

'Has Mr Abel forgotten anything, I wonder?' said Kit as he dismounted.

'Ask no questions, Snobby,' returned Mr Chuckster, 'but go and see. Woa-a-a then, will you? If that pony was mine, I'd break him.' 'You must be very gentle with him, if you please,' said Kit, 'or you'll find him troublesome. You'd better not keep on pulling his ears, please. I know he won't like it.'

To this remonstrance Mr Chuckster deigned no other answer, than addressing Kit with a lofty and distant air as 'young feller,' and requesting him to cut and come again with all speed. The 'young feller' complying, Mr Chuckster put his hands in his pockets, and tried to look as if he were not minding the pony, but happened to be lounging there by accident.

Kit scraped his shoes very carefully (for he had not yet lost his reverence for the bundles of papers and the tin boxes,) and tapped at the office-door, which was quickly opened by the Notary himself.

'Oh! come in, Christopher,' said Mr Witherden.

'Is that the lad?' asked an elderly gentleman, but of a stout, bluff figure - who was in the room.

'That's the lad,' said Mr Witherden. 'He fell in with my client, Mr Garland, sir, at this very door. I have reason to think he is a good lad, sir, and that you may believe what he says. Let me introduce Mr Abel Garland, sir - his young master; my articled pupil, sir, and most particular friend: - my most particular friend, sir,' repeated the

Notary, drawing out his silk handkerchief and flourishing it about his face.

'Your servant, sir,' said the stranger gentleman.

'Yours, sir, I'm sure,' replied Mr Abel mildly. 'You were wishing to speak to Christopher, sir?'

'Yes, I was. Have I your permission?'

'By all means.'

'My business is no secret; or I should rather say it need be no secret here,' said the stranger, observing that Mr Abel and the Notary were preparing to retire. 'It relates to a dealer in curiosities with whom he lived, and in whom I am earnestly and warmly interested. I have been a stranger to this country, gentlemen, for very many years, and if I am deficient in form and ceremony, I hope you will forgive me.'

'No forgiveness is necessary, sir; - none whatever,' replied the Notary. And so said Mr Abel.

'I have been making inquiries in the neighbourhood in which his old master lived,' said the stranger, 'and I learn that he was served by this lad. I have found out his mother's house, and have been directed by her to this place as the nearest in which I should be likely to find him. That's the cause of my presenting myself here this morning.'

'I am very glad of any cause, sir,' said the Notary, 'which procures me the honour of this visit.'

'Sir,' retorted the stranger, 'you speak like a mere man of the world, and I think you something better. Therefore, pray do not sink your real character in paying unmeaning compliments to me.'

'Hem!' coughed the Notary. 'You're a plain speaker, sir.'

'And a plain dealer,' returned the stranger. 'It may be my long absence and inexperience that lead me to the conclusion; but if plain speakers are scarce in this part of the world, I fancy plain dealers are still scarcer. If my speaking should offend you, sir, my dealing, I hope, will make amends.'

Mr Witherden seemed a little disconcerted by the elderly gentleman's mode of conducting the dialogue; and as for Kit, he looked at him in open-mouthed astonishment: wondering what kind of language he would address to him, if he talked in that free and easy way to a

Notary. It was with no harshness, however, though with something of constitutional irritability and haste, that he turned to Kit and said:

'If you think, my lad, that I am pursuing these inquiries with any other view than that of serving and reclaiming those I am in search of, you do me a very great wrong, and deceive yourself. Don't be deceived, I beg of you, but rely upon my assurance. The fact is, gentlemen,' he added, turning again to the Notary and his pupil, 'that I am in a very painful and wholly unexpected position. I came to this city with a darling object at my heart, expecting to find no obstacle or difficulty in the way of its attainment. I find myself suddenly checked and stopped short, in the execution of my design, by a mystery which I cannot penetrate. Every effort I have made to penetrate it, has only served to render it darker and more obscure; and I am afraid to stir openly in the matter, lest those whom I anxiously pursue, should fly still farther from me. I assure you that if you could give me any assistance, you would not be sorry to do so, if you knew how greatly I stand in need of it, and what a load it would relieve me from.'

There was a simplicity in this confidence which occasioned it to find a quick response in the breast of the good-natured Notary, who replied, in the same spirit, that the stranger had not mistaken his desire, and that if he could be of service to him, he would, most readily.

Kit was then put under examination and closely questioned by the unknown gentleman, touching his old master and the child, their lonely way of life, their retired habits, and strict seclusion. The nightly absence of the old man, the solitary existence of the child at those times, his illness and recovery, Quilp's possession of the house, and their sudden disappearance, were all the subjects of much questioning and answer. Finally, Kit informed the gentleman that the premises were now to let, and that a board upon the door referred all inquirers to Mr Sampson Brass, Solicitor, of Bevis Marks, from whom he might perhaps learn some further particulars.

'Not by inquiry,' said the gentleman shaking his head. 'I live there.'

'Live at Brass's the attorney's!' cried Mr Witherden in some surprise: having professional knowledge of the gentleman in question.

'Aye,' was the reply. 'I entered on his lodgings t'other day, chiefly because I had seen this very board. it matters little to me where I live, and I had a desperate hope that some intelligence might be cast in my way there, which would not reach me elsewhere. Yes, I live at Brass's - more shame for me, I suppose?'

'That's a mere matter of opinion,' said the Notary, shrugging his shoulders. 'He is looked upon as rather a doubtful character.'

'Doubtful?' echoed the other. 'I am glad to hear there's any doubt about it. I supposed that had been thoroughly settled, long ago. But will you let me speak a word or two with you in private?'

Mr Witherden consenting, they walked into that gentleman's private closet, and remained there, in close conversation, for some quarter of an hour, when they returned into the outer office. The stranger had left his hat in Mr Witherden's room, and seemed to have established himself in this short interval on quite a friendly footing.

'I'll not detain you any longer now,' he said, putting a crown into Kit's hand, and looking towards the Notary. 'You shall hear from me again. Not a word of this, you know, except to your master and mistress.'

'Mother, sir, would be glad to know - ' said Kit, faltering.

'Glad to know what?'

'Anything - so that it was no harm - about Miss Nell.'

'Would she? Well then, you may tell her if she can keep a secret. But mind, not a word of this to anybody else. Don't forget that. Be particular.'

'I'll take care, sir,' said Kit. 'Thankee, sir, and good morning.'

Now, it happened that the gentleman, in his anxiety to impress upon Kit that he was not to tell anybody what had passed between them, followed him out to the door to repeat his caution, and it further happened that at that moment the eyes of Mr Richard Swiveller were turned in that direction, and beheld his mysterious friend and Kit together.

It was quite an accident, and the way in which it came about was this. Mr Chuckster, being a gentleman of a cultivated taste and refined spirit, was one of that Lodge of Glorious Apollos whereof Mr Swiveller was Perpetual Grand. Mr Swiveller, passing through the street in the execution of some Brazen errand, and beholding one of his Glorious Brotherhood intently gazing on a pony, crossed over to give him that fraternal greeting with which Perpetual Grands are, by the very constitution of their office, bound to cheer and encourage their disciples. He had scarcely bestowed upon him his blessing, and followed it with a general remark touching the present state and prospects of the weather, when, lifting up his eyes, he beheld the single gentleman of Bevis Marks in earnest conversation with Christopher Nubbles.

'Hallo!' said Dick, 'who is that?'

'He called to see my Governor this morning,' replied Mr Chuckster; 'beyond that, I don't know him from Adam.'

'At least you know his name?' said Dick.

To which Mr Chuckster replied, with an elevation of speech becoming a Glorious Apollo, that he was 'everlastingly blessed' if he did.

'All I know, my dear feller,' said Mr Chuckster, running his fingers through his hair, 'is, that he is the cause of my having stood here twenty minutes, for which I hate him with a mortal and undying hatred, and would pursue him to the confines of eternity if I could afford the time.'

While they were thus discoursing, the subject of their conversation (who had not appeared to recognise Mr Richard Swiveller) re-entered the house, and Kit came down the steps and joined them; to whom Mr Swiveller again propounded his inquiry with no better success.

'He is a very nice gentleman, Sir,' said Kit, 'and that's all I know about him.'

Mr Chuckster waxed wroth at this answer, and without applying the remark to any particular case, mentioned, as a general truth, that it was expedient to break the heads of Snobs, and to tweak their noses. Without expressing his concurrence in this sentiment, Mr Swiveller after a few moments of abstraction inquired which way Kit was driving, and, being informed, declared it was his way, and that he would trespass on him for a lift. Kit would gladly have declined the proffered honour, but as Mr Swiveller was already established in the seat beside him, he had no means of doing so, otherwise than by a forcible ejection, and therefore, drove briskly off - so briskly indeed, as to cut short the leave-taking between Mr Chuckster and his Grand Master, and to occasion the former gentleman some inconvenience from having his corns squeezed by the impatient pony.

As Whisker was tired of standing, and Mr Swiveller was kind enough to stimulate him by shrill whistles, and various sporting cries, they rattled off at too sharp a pace to admit of much conversation: especially as the pony, incensed by Mr Swiveller's admonitions, took a particular fancy for the lamp-posts and cart-wheels, and evinced a strong desire to run on the pavement and rasp himself against the brick walls. It was not, therefore, until they had arrived at the stable, and the chaise had been extricated from a very small doorway, into which the pony dragged it under the impression that he could take it along with him into his usual stall, that Mr Swiveller found time to talk.

'It's hard work,' said Richard. 'What do you say to some beer?'

Kit at first declined, but presently consented, and they adjourned to the neighbouring bar together.

'We'll drink our friend what's-his-name,' said Dick, holding up the bright frothy pot; ' - that was talking to you this morning, you know - I know him - a good fellow, but eccentric - very - here's what's-his-name!'

Kit pledged him.

'He lives in my house,' said Dick; 'at least in the house occupied by the firm in which I'm a sort of a - of a managing partner - a difficult fellow to get anything out of, but we like him - we like him.'

'I must be going, sir, if you please,' said Kit, moving away.

'Don't be in a hurry, Christopher,' replied his patron, 'we'll drink your mother.'

'Thank you, sir.'

'An excellent woman that mother of yours, Christopher,' said Mr Swiveller. 'Who ran to catch me when I fell, and kissed the place to make it well? My mother. A charming woman. He's a liberal sort of fellow. We must get him to do something for your mother. Does he know her, Christopher?'

Kit shook his head, and glancing slyly at his questioner, thanked him, and made off before he could say another word.

'Humph!' said Mr Swiveller pondering, 'this is queer. Nothing but mysteries in connection with Brass's house. I'll keep my own counsel, however. Everybody and anybody has been in my confidence as yet, but now I think I'll set up in business for myself. Queer - very queer!'

After pondering deeply and with a face of exceeding wisdom for some time, Mr Swiveller drank some more of the beer, and summoning a small boy who had been watching his proceedings, poured forth the few remaining drops as a libation on the gravel, and bade him carry the empty vessel to the bar with his compliments, and above all things to lead a sober and temperate life, and abstain from all intoxicating and exciting liquors. Having given him this piece of moral advice for his trouble (which, as he wisely observed, was far better than half-pence) the Perpetual Grand Master of the Glorious Apollos thrust his hands into his pockets and sauntered away: still pondering as he went.