

Chapter XL

Full of that vague kind of penitence which holidays awaken next morning, Kit turned out at sunrise, and, with his faith in last night's enjoyments a little shaken by cool daylight and the return to everyday duties and occupations, went to meet Barbara and her mother at the appointed place. And being careful not to awaken any of the little household, who were yet resting from their unusual fatigues, Kit left his money on the chimney-piece, with an inscription in chalk calling his mother's attention to the circumstance, and informing her that it came from her dutiful son; and went his way, with a heart something heavier than his pockets, but free from any very great oppression notwithstanding.

Oh these holidays! why will they leave us some regret? why cannot we push them back, only a week or two in our memories, so as to put them at once at that convenient distance whence they may be regarded either with a calm indifference or a pleasant effort of recollection! why will they hang about us, like the flavour of yesterday's wine, suggestive of headaches and lassitude, and those good intentions for the future, which, under the earth, form the everlasting pavement of a large estate, and, upon it, usually endure until dinner-time or thereabouts!

Who will wonder that Barbara had a headache, or that Barbara's mother was disposed to be cross, or that she slightly underrated Astley's, and thought the clown was older than they had taken him to be last night? Kit was not surprised to hear her say so - not he. He had already had a misgiving that the inconstant actors in that dazzling vision had been doing the same thing the night before last, and would do it again that night, and the next, and for weeks and months to come, though he would not be there. Such is the difference between yesterday and today. We are all going to the play, or coming home from it.

However, the Sun himself is weak when he first rises, and gathers strength and courage as the day gets on. By degrees, they began to recall circumstances more and more pleasant in their nature, until, what between talking, walking, and laughing, they reached Finchley in such good heart, that Barbara's mother declared she never felt less tired or in better spirits. And so said Kit. Barbara had been silent all the way, but she said so too. Poor little Barbara! She was very quiet.

They were at home in such good time that Kit had rubbed down the pony and made him as spruce as a race-horse, before Mr Garland came down to breakfast; which punctual and industrious conduct the old lady, and the old gentleman, and Mr Abel, highly extolled. At his usual hour (or rather at his usual minute and second, for he was the

soul of punctuality) Mr Abel walked out, to be overtaken by the London coach, and Kit and the old gentleman went to work in the garden.

This was not the least pleasant of Kit's employments. On a fine day they were quite a family party; the old lady sitting hard by with her work-basket on a little table; the old gentleman digging, or pruning, or clipping about with a large pair of shears, or helping Kit in some way or other with great assiduity; and Whisker looking on from his paddock in placid contemplation of them all. To-day they were to trim the grape-vine, so Kit mounted half-way up a short ladder, and began to snip and hammer away, while the old gentleman, with a great interest in his proceedings, handed up the nails and shreds of cloth as he wanted them. The old lady and Whisker looked on as usual.

'Well, Christopher,' said Mr Garland, 'and so you have made a new friend, eh?'

'I beg your pardon, Sir?' returned Kit, looking down from the ladder.

'You have made a new friend, I hear from Mr Abel,' said the old gentleman, 'at the office!'

'Oh! Yes Sir, yes. He behaved very handsome, Sir.'

'I'm glad to hear it,' returned the old gentleman with a smile. 'He is disposed to behave more handsomely still, though, Christopher.'

'Indeed, Sir! It's very kind in him, but I don't want him to, I'm sure,' said Kit, hammering stoutly at an obdurate nail.

'He is rather anxious,' pursued the old gentleman, 'to have you in his own service - take care what you're doing, or you will fall down and hurt yourself.'

'To have me in his service, Sir?' cried Kit, who had stopped short in his work and faced about on the ladder like some dexterous tumbler. 'Why, Sir, I don't think he can be in earnest when he says that.'

'Oh! But he is indeed,' said Mr Garland. 'And he has told Mr Abel so.'

'I never heard of such a thing!' muttered Kit, looking ruefully at his master and mistress. 'I wonder at him; that I do.'

'You see, Christopher,' said Mr Garland, 'this is a point of much importance to you, and you should understand and consider it in that light. This gentleman is able to give you more money than I - not, I hope, to carry through the various relations of master and servant,

more kindness and confidence, but certainly, Christopher, to give you more money.'

'Well,' said Kit, 'after that, Sir - '

'Wait a moment,' interposed Mr Garland. 'That is not all. You were a very faithful servant to your old employers, as I understand, and should this gentleman recover them, as it is his purpose to attempt doing by every means in his power, I have no doubt that you, being in his service, would meet with your reward. Besides,' added the old gentleman with stronger emphasis, 'besides having the pleasure of being again brought into communication with those to whom you seem to be very strongly and disinterestedly attached. You must think of all this, Christopher, and not be rash or hasty in your choice.'

Kit did suffer one twinge, one momentary pang, in keeping the resolution he had already formed, when this last argument passed swiftly into his thoughts, and conjured up the realization of all his hopes and fancies. But it was gone in a minute, and he sturdily rejoined that the gentleman must look out for somebody else, as he did think he might have done at first.

'He has no right to think that I'd be led away to go to him, sir,' said Kit, turning round again after half a minute's hammering. 'Does he think I'm a fool?'

'He may, perhaps, Christopher, if you refuse his offer,' said Mr Garland gravely.

'Then let him, sir,' retorted Kit; 'what do I care, sir, what he thinks? why should I care for his thinking, sir, when I know that I should be a fool, and worse than a fool, sir, to leave the kindest master and mistress that ever was or can be, who took me out of the streets a very poor and hungry lad indeed - poorer and hungrier perhaps than even you think for, sir - to go to him or anybody? If Miss Nell was to come back, ma'am,' added Kit, turning suddenly to his mistress, 'why that would be another thing, and perhaps if she wanted me, I might ask you now and then to let me work for her when all was done at home. But when she comes back, I see now that she'll be rich as old master always said she would, and being a rich young lady, what could she want of me? No, no,' added Kit, shaking his head sorrowfully, 'she'll never want me any more, and bless her, I hope she never may, though I should like to see her too!'

Here Kit drove a nail into the wall, very hard - much harder than was necessary - and having done so, faced about again.

'There's the pony, sir,' said Kit - 'Whisker, ma'am (and he knows so well I'm talking about him that he begins to neigh directly, Sir) - would he let anybody come near him but me, ma'am? Here's the garden, sir, and Mr Abel, ma'am. Would Mr Abel part with me, Sir, or is there anybody that could be fonder of the garden, ma'am? It would break mother's heart, Sir, and even little Jacob would have sense enough to cry his eyes out, ma'am, if he thought that Mr Abel could wish to part with me so soon, after having told me, only the other day, that he hoped we might be together for years to come - '

There is no telling how long Kit might have stood upon the ladder, addressing his master and mistress by turns, and generally turning towards the wrong person, if Barbara had not at that moment come running up to say that a messenger from the office had brought a note, which, with an expression of some surprise at Kit's oratorical appearance, she put into her master's hand.

'Oh!' said the old gentleman after reading it, 'ask the messenger to walk this way.' Barbara tripping off to do as she was bid, he turned to Kit and said that they would not pursue the subject any further, and that Kit could not be more unwilling to part with them, than they would be to part with Kit; a sentiment which the old lady very generously echoed.

'At the same time, Christopher,' added Mr Garland, glancing at the note in his hand, 'if the gentleman should want to borrow you now and then for an hour or so, or even a day or so, at a time, we must consent to lend you, and you must consent to be lent. - Oh! here is the young gentleman. How do you do, Sir?'

This salutation was addressed to Mr Chuckster, who, with his hat extremely on one side, and his hair a long way beyond it, came swaggering up the walk.

'Hope I see you well sir,' returned that gentleman. 'Hope I see YOU well, ma'am. Charming box' this, sir. Delicious country to be sure.'

'You want to take Kit back with you, I find?' observed Mr Garland.

'I have got a chariot-cab waiting on purpose,' replied the clerk. 'A very spanking grey in that cab, sir, if you're a judge of horse-flesh.'

Declining to inspect the spanking grey, on the plea that he was but poorly acquainted with such matters, and would but imperfectly appreciate his beauties, Mr Garland invited Mr Chuckster to partake of a slight repast in the way of lunch. That gentleman readily consenting, certain cold viands, flanked with ale and wine, were speedily prepared for his refreshment.

At this repast, Mr Chuckster exerted his utmost abilities to enchant his entertainers, and impress them with a conviction of the mental superiority of those who dwelt in town; with which view he led the discourse to the small scandal of the day, in which he was justly considered by his friends to shine prodigiously. Thus, he was in a condition to relate the exact circumstances of the difference between the Marquis of Mizzler and Lord Bobby, which it appeared originated in a disputed bottle of champagne, and not in a pigeon-pie, as erroneously reported in the newspapers; neither had Lord Bobby said to the Marquis of Mizzler, 'Mizzler, one of us two tells a lie, and I'm not the man,' as incorrectly stated by the same authorities; but 'Mizzler, you know where I'm to be found, and damme, sir, find me if you want me' - which, of course, entirely changed the aspect of this interesting question, and placed it in a very different light. He also acquainted them with the precise amount of the income guaranteed by the Duke of Thigsberry to Violetta Stetta of the Italian Opera, which it appeared was payable quarterly, and not half-yearly, as the public had been given to understand, and which was EXclusive, and not INclusive (as had been monstrously stated,) of jewellery, perfumery, hair-powder for five footmen, and two daily changes of kid-gloves for a page. Having entreated the old lady and gentleman to set their minds at rest on these absorbing points, for they might rely on his statement being the correct one, Mr Chuckster entertained them with theatrical chit-chat and the court circular; and so wound up a brilliant and fascinating conversation which he had maintained alone, and without any assistance whatever, for upwards of three-quarters of an hour.

'And now that the nag has got his wind again,' said Mr Chuckster rising in a graceful manner, 'I'm afraid I must cut my stick.'

Neither Mr nor Mrs Garland offered any opposition to his tearing himself away (feeling, no doubt, that such a man could ill be spared from his proper sphere of action), and therefore Mr Chuckster and Kit were shortly afterwards upon their way to town; Kit being perched upon the box of the cabriolet beside the driver, and Mr Chuckster seated in solitary state inside, with one of his boots sticking out at each of the front windows.

When they reached the Notary's house, Kit followed into the office, and was desired by Mr Abel to sit down and wait, for the gentleman who wanted him had gone out, and perhaps might not return for some time. This anticipation was strictly verified, for Kit had had his dinner, and his tea, and had read all the lighter matter in the Law-List, and the Post-Office Directory, and had fallen asleep a great many times, before the gentleman whom he had seen before, came in; which he did at last in a very great hurry.

He was closeted with Mr Witherden for some little time, and Mr Abel had been called in to assist at the conference, before Kit, wondering very much what he was wanted for, was summoned to attend them.

'Christopher,' said the gentleman, turning to him directly he entered the room, 'I have found your old master and young mistress.'

'No, Sir! Have you, though?' returned Kit, his eyes sparkling with delight. 'Where are they, Sir? How are they, Sir? Are they - are they near here?'

'A long way from here,' returned the gentleman, shaking his head. 'But I am going away to-night to bring them back, and I want you to go with me.'

'Me, Sir?' cried Kit, full of joy and surprise.

'The place,' said the strange gentleman, turning thoughtfully to the Notary, 'indicated by this man of the dogs, is - how far from here - sixty miles?'

'From sixty to seventy.'

'Humph! If we travel post all night, we shall reach there in good time to-morrow morning. Now, the only question is, as they will not know me, and the child, God bless her, would think that any stranger pursuing them had a design upon her grandfather's liberty - can I do better than take this lad, whom they both know and will readily remember, as an assurance to them of my friendly intentions?'

'Certainly not,' replied the Notary. 'Take Christopher by all means.'

'I beg your pardon, Sir,' said Kit, who had listened to this discourse with a lengthening countenance, 'but if that's the reason, I'm afraid I should do more harm than good - Miss Nell, Sir, she knows me, and would trust in me, I am sure; but old master - I don't know why, gentlemen; nobody does - would not bear me in his sight after he had been ill, and Miss Nell herself told me that I must not go near him or let him see me any more. I should spoil all that you were doing if I went, I'm afraid. I'd give the world to go, but you had better not take me, Sir.'

'Another difficulty!' cried the impetuous gentleman. 'Was ever man so beset as I? Is there nobody else that knew them, nobody else in whom they had any confidence? Solitary as their lives were, is there no one person who would serve my purpose?'

'IS there, Christopher?' said the Notary.

'Not one, Sir,' replied Kit. - 'Yes, though - there's my mother.'

'Did they know her?' said the single gentleman.

'Know her, Sir! why, she was always coming backwards and forwards. They were as kind to her as they were to me. Bless you, Sir, she expected they'd come back to her house.'

'Then where the devil is the woman?' said the impatient gentleman, catching up his hat. 'Why isn't she here? Why is that woman always out of the way when she is most wanted?'

In a word, the single gentleman was bursting out of the office, bent upon laying violent hands on Kit's mother, forcing her into a post-chaise, and carrying her off, when this novel kind of abduction was with some difficulty prevented by the joint efforts of Mr Abel and the Notary, who restrained him by dint of their remonstrances, and persuaded him to sound Kit upon the probability of her being able and willing to undertake such a journey on so short a notice.

This occasioned some doubts on the part of Kit, and some violent demonstrations on that of the single gentleman, and a great many soothing speeches on that of the Notary and Mr Abel. The upshot of the business was, that Kit, after weighing the matter in his mind and considering it carefully, promised, on behalf of his mother, that she should be ready within two hours from that time to undertake the expedition, and engaged to produce her in that place, in all respects equipped and prepared for the journey, before the specified period had expired.

Having given this pledge, which was rather a bold one, and not particularly easy of redemption, Kit lost no time in sallying forth, and taking measures for its immediate fulfilment.