

Chapter XLVIII

Popular rumour concerning the single gentleman and his errand, travelling from mouth to mouth, and waxing stronger in the marvellous as it was bandied about - for your popular rumour, unlike the rolling stone of the proverb, is one which gathers a deal of moss in its wanderings up and down - occasioned his dismounting at the inn-door to be looked upon as an exciting and attractive spectacle, which could scarcely be enough admired; and drew together a large concourse of idlers, who having recently been, as it were, thrown out of employment by the closing of the wax-work and the completion of the nuptial ceremonies, considered his arrival as little else than a special providence, and hailed it with demonstrations of the liveliest joy.

Not at all participating in the general sensation, but wearing the depressed and wearied look of one who sought to meditate on his disappointment in silence and privacy, the single gentleman alighted, and handed out Kit's mother with a gloomy politeness which impressed the lookers-on extremely. That done, he gave her his arm and escorted her into the house, while several active waiters ran on before as a skirmishing party, to clear the way and to show the room which was ready for their reception.

'Any room will do,' said the single gentleman. 'Let it be near at hand, that's all.'

'Close here, sir, if you please to walk this way.'

'Would the gentleman like this room?' said a voice, as a little out-of-the-way door at the foot of the well staircase flew briskly open and a head popped out. 'He's quite welcome to it. He's as welcome as flowers in May, or coals at Christmas. Would you like this room, sir? Honour me by walking in. Do me the favour, pray.'

'Goodness gracious me!' cried Kit's mother, falling back in extreme surprise, 'only think of this!'

She had some reason to be astonished, for the person who proffered the gracious invitation was no other than Daniel Quilp. The little door out of which he had thrust his head was close to the inn larder; and there he stood, bowing with grotesque politeness; as much at his ease as if the door were that of his own house; blighting all the legs of mutton and cold roast fowls by his close companionship, and looking like the evil genius of the cellars come from underground upon some work of mischief.

'Would you do me the honour?' said Quilp.

'I prefer being alone,' replied the single gentleman.

'Oh!' said Quilp. And with that, he darted in again with one jerk and clapped the little door to, like a figure in a Dutch clock when the hour strikes.

'Why it was only last night, sir,' whispered Kit's mother, 'that I left him in Little Bethel.'

'Indeed!' said her fellow-passenger. 'When did that person come here, waiter?'

'Come down by the night-coach, this morning, sir.'

'Humph! And when is he going?'

'Can't say, sir, really. When the chambermaid asked him just now if he should want a bed, sir, he first made faces at her, and then wanted to kiss her.'

'Beg him to walk this way,' said the single gentleman. 'I should be glad to exchange a word with him, tell him. Beg him to come at once, do you hear?'

The man stared on receiving these instructions, for the single gentleman had not only displayed as much astonishment as Kit's mother at sight of the dwarf, but, standing in no fear of him, had been at less pains to conceal his dislike and repugnance. He departed on his errand, however, and immediately returned, ushering in its object.

'Your servant, sir,' said the dwarf, 'I encountered your messenger half-way. I thought you'd allow me to pay my compliments to you. I hope you're well. I hope you're very well.'

There was a short pause, while the dwarf, with half-shut eyes and puckered face, stood waiting for an answer. Receiving none, he turned towards his more familiar acquaintance.

'Christopher's mother!' he cried. 'Such a dear lady, such a worthy woman, so blest in her honest son! How is Christopher's mother? Have change of air and scene improved her? Her little family too, and Christopher? Do they thrive? Do they flourish? Are they growing into worthy citizens, eh?'

Making his voice ascend in the scale with every succeeding question, Mr Quilp finished in a shrill squeak, and subsided into the panting look which was customary with him, and which, whether it were assumed or natural, had equally the effect of banishing all expression

from his face, and rendering it, as far as it afforded any index to his mood or meaning, a perfect blank.

'Mr Quilp,' said the single gentleman.

The dwarf put his hand to his great flapped ear, and counterfeited the closest attention.

'We two have met before - '

'Surely,' cried Quilp, nodding his head. 'Oh surely, sir. Such an honour and pleasure - it's both, Christopher's mother, it's both - is not to be forgotten so soon. By no means!'

'You may remember that the day I arrived in London, and found the house to which I drove, empty and deserted, I was directed by some of the neighbours to you, and waited upon you without stopping for rest or refreshment?'

'How precipitate that was, and yet what an earnest and vigorous measure!' said Quilp, conferring with himself, in imitation of his friend Mr Sampson Brass.

'I found,' said the single gentleman, 'you most unaccountably, in possession of everything that had so recently belonged to another man, and that other man, who up to the time of your entering upon his property had been looked upon as affluent, reduced to sudden beggary, and driven from house and home.'

'We had warrant for what we did, my good sir,' rejoined Quilp, 'we had our warrant. Don't say driven either. He went of his own accord - vanished in the night, sir.'

'No matter,' said the single gentleman angrily. 'He was gone.'

'Yes, he was gone,' said Quilp, with the same exasperating composure. 'No doubt he was gone. The only question was, where. And it's a question still.'

'Now, what am I to think,' said the single gentleman, sternly regarding him, 'of you, who, plainly indisposed to give me any information then - nay, obviously holding back, and sheltering yourself with all kinds of cunning, trickery, and evasion - are dogging my footsteps now?'

'I dogging!' cried Quilp.

'Why, are you not?' returned his questioner, fretted into a state of the utmost irritation. 'Were you not a few hours since, sixty miles off, and in the chapel to which this good woman goes to say her prayers?'

'She was there too, I think?' said Quilp, still perfectly unmoved. 'I might say, if I was inclined to be rude, how do I know but you are dogging MY footsteps. Yes, I was at chapel. What then? I've read in books that pilgrims were used to go to chapel before they went on journeys, to put up petitions for their safe return. Wise men! journeys are very perilous - especially outside the coach. Wheels come off, horses take fright, coachmen drive too fast, coaches overturn. I always go to chapel before I start on journeys. It's the last thing I do on such occasions, indeed.'

That Quilp lied most heartily in this speech, it needed no very great penetration to discover, although for anything that he suffered to appear in his face, voice, or manner, he might have been clinging to the truth with the quiet constancy of a martyr.

'In the name of all that's calculated to drive one crazy, man,' said the unfortunate single gentleman, 'have you not, for some reason of your own, taken upon yourself my errand? don't you know with what object I have come here, and if you do know, can you throw no light upon it?'

'You think I'm a conjuror, sir,' replied Quilp, shrugging up his shoulders. 'If I was, I should tell my own fortune - and make it.'

'Ah! we have said all we need say, I see,' returned the other, throwing himself impatiently upon a sofa. 'Pray leave us, if you please.'

'Willingly,' returned Quilp. 'Most willingly. Christopher's mother, my good soul, farewell. A pleasant journey - back, sir. Ahem!'

With these parting words, and with a grin upon his features altogether indescribable, but which seemed to be compounded of every monstrous grimace of which men or monkeys are capable, the dwarf slowly retreated and closed the door behind him.

'Oho!' he said when he had regained his own room, and sat himself down in a chair with his arms akimbo. 'Oho! Are you there, my friend? In-deed!'

Chuckling as though in very great glee, and recompensing himself for the restraint he had lately put upon his countenance by twisting it into all imaginable varieties of ugliness, Mr Quilp, rocking himself to and fro in his chair and nursing his left leg at the same time, fell into certain meditations, of which it may be necessary to relate the substance.

First, he reviewed the circumstances which had led to his repairing to that spot, which were briefly these. Dropping in at Mr Sampson Brass's office on the previous evening, in the absence of that gentleman and his learned sister, he had lighted upon Mr Swiveller, who chanced at the moment to be sprinkling a glass of warm gin and water on the dust of the law, and to be moistening his clay, as the phrase goes, rather copiously. But as clay in the abstract, when too much moistened, becomes of a weak and uncertain consistency, breaking down in unexpected places, retaining impressions but faintly, and preserving no strength or steadiness of character, so Mr Swiveller's clay, having imbibed a considerable quantity of moisture, was in a very loose and slippery state, insomuch that the various ideas impressed upon it were fast losing their distinctive character, and running into each other. It is not uncommon for human clay in this condition to value itself above all things upon its great prudence and sagacity; and Mr Swiveller, especially prizing himself upon these qualities, took occasion to remark that he had made strange discoveries in connection with the single gentleman who lodged above, which he had determined to keep within his own bosom, and which neither tortures nor cajolery should ever induce him to reveal. Of this determination Mr Quilp expressed his high approval, and setting himself in the same breath to goad Mr Swiveller on to further hints, soon made out that the single gentleman had been seen in communication with Kit, and that this was the secret which was never to be disclosed.

Possessed of this piece of information, Mr Quilp directly supposed that the single gentleman above stairs must be the same individual who had waited on him, and having assured himself by further inquiries that this surmise was correct, had no difficulty in arriving at the conclusion that the intent and object of his correspondence with Kit was the recovery of his old client and the child. Burning with curiosity to know what proceedings were afoot, he resolved to pounce upon Kit's mother as the person least able to resist his arts, and consequently the most likely to be entrapped into such revelations as he sought; so taking an abrupt leave of Mr Swiveller, he hurried to her house. The good woman being from home, he made inquiries of a neighbour, as Kit himself did soon afterwards, and being directed to the chapel he took himself there, in order to waylay her, at the conclusion of the service.

He had not sat in the chapel more than a quarter of an hour, and with his eyes piously fixed upon the ceiling was chuckling inwardly over the joke of his being there at all, when Kit himself appeared. Watchful as a lynx, one glance showed the dwarf that he had come on business. Absorbed in appearance, as we have seen, and feigning a profound abstraction, he noted every circumstance of his behaviour, and when he withdrew with his family, shot out after him. In fine, he traced

them to the notary's house; learnt the destination of the carriage from one of the postilions; and knowing that a fast night-coach started for the same place, at the very hour which was on the point of striking, from a street hard by, darted round to the coach-office without more ado, and took his seat upon the roof. After passing and repassing the carriage on the road, and being passed and repassed by it sundry times in the course of the night, according as their stoppages were longer or shorter; or their rate of travelling varied, they reached the town almost together. Quilp kept the chaise in sight, mingled with the crowd, learnt the single gentleman's errand, and its failure, and having possessed himself of all that it was material to know, hurried off, reached the inn before him, had the interview just now detailed, and shut himself up in the little room in which he hastily reviewed all these occurrences.

'You are there, are you, my friend?' he repeated, greedily biting his nails. 'I am suspected and thrown aside, and Kit's the confidential agent, is he? I shall have to dispose of him, I fear. If we had come up with them this morning,' he continued, after a thoughtful pause, 'I was ready to prove a pretty good claim. I could have made my profit. But for these canting hypocrites, the lad and his mother, I could get this fiery gentleman as comfortably into my net as our old friend - our mutual friend, ha! ha! - and chubby, rosy Nell. At the worst, it's a golden opportunity, not to be lost. Let us find them first, and I'll find means of draining you of some of your superfluous cash, sir, while there are prison bars, and bolts, and locks, to keep your friend or kinsman safely. I hate your virtuous people!' said the dwarf, throwing off a bumper of brandy, and smacking his lips, 'ah! I hate 'em every one!'

This was not a mere empty vaunt, but a deliberate avowal of his real sentiments; for Mr Quilp, who loved nobody, had by little and little come to hate everybody nearly or remotely connected with his ruined client: - the old man himself, because he had been able to deceive him and elude his vigilance - the child, because she was the object of Mrs Quilp's commiseration and constant self-reproach - the single gentleman, because of his unconcealed aversion to himself - Kit and his mother, most mortally, for the reasons shown. Above and beyond that general feeling of opposition to them, which would have been inseparable from his ravenous desire to enrich himself by these altered circumstances, Daniel Quilp hated them every one.

In this amiable mood, Mr Quilp enlivened himself and his hatreds with more brandy, and then, changing his quarters, withdrew to an obscure alehouse, under cover of which seclusion he instituted all possible inquiries that might lead to the discovery of the old man and his grandchild. But all was in vain. Not the slightest trace or clue could be obtained. They had left the town by night; no one had seen

them go; no one had met them on the road; the driver of no coach, cart, or waggon, had seen any travellers answering their description; nobody had fallen in with them, or heard of them. Convinced at last that for the present all such attempts were hopeless, he appointed two or three scouts, with promises of large rewards in case of their forwarding him any intelligence, and returned to London by next day's coach.

It was some gratification to Mr Quilp to find, as he took his place upon the roof, that Kit's mother was alone inside; from which circumstance he derived in the course of the journey much cheerfulness of spirit, inasmuch as her solitary condition enabled him to terrify her with many extraordinary annoyances; such as hanging over the side of the coach at the risk of his life, and staring in with his great goggle eyes, which seemed in hers the more horrible from his face being upside down; dodging her in this way from one window to another; getting nimbly down whenever they changed horses and thrusting his head in at the window with a dismal squint: which ingenious tortures had such an effect upon Mrs Nubbles, that she was quite unable for the time to resist the belief that Mr Quilp did in his own person represent and embody that Evil Power, who was so vigorously attacked at Little Bethel, and who, by reason of her backslidings in respect of Astley's and oysters, was now frolicsome and rampant.

Kit, having been apprised by letter of his mother's intended return, was waiting for her at the coach-office; and great was his surprise when he saw, leering over the coachman's shoulder like some familiar demon, invisible to all eyes but his, the well-known face of Quilp.

'How are you, Christopher?' croaked the dwarf from the coach-top. 'All right, Christopher. Mother's inside.'

'Why, how did he come here, mother?' whispered Kit.

'I don't know how he came or why, my dear,' rejoined Mrs Nubbles, dismounting with her son's assistance, 'but he has been a terrifying of me out of my seven senses all this blessed day.'

'He has?' cried Kit.

'You wouldn't believe it, that you wouldn't,' replied his mother, 'but don't say a word to him, for I really don't believe he's human. Hush! Don't turn round as if I was talking of him, but he's a squinting at me now in the full blaze of the coach-lamp, quite awful!'

In spite of his mother's injunction, Kit turned sharply round to look. Mr Quilp was serenely gazing at the stars, quite absorbed in celestial contemplation.

'Oh, he's the artfullest creetur!' cried Mrs Nubbles. 'But come away. Don't speak to him for the world.'

'Yes I will, mother. What nonsense. I say, sir - '

Mr Quilp affected to start, and looked smilingly round.

'You let my mother alone, will you?' said Kit. 'How dare you tease a poor lone woman like her, making her miserable and melancholy as if she hadn't got enough to make her so, without you. An't you ashamed of yourself, you little monster?'

'Monster!' said Quilp inwardly, with a smile. 'Ugliest dwarf that could be seen anywhere for a penny - monster - ah!'

'You show her any of your impudence again,' resumed Kit, shouldering the bandbox, 'and I tell you what, Mr Quilp, I won't bear with you any more. You have no right to do it; I'm sure we never interfered with you. This isn't the first time; and if ever you worry or frighten her again, you'll oblige me (though I should be very sorry to do it, on account of your size) to beat you.'

Quilp said not a word in reply, but walking so close to Kit as to bring his eyes within two or three inches of his face, looked fixedly at him, retreated a little distance without averting his gaze, approached again, again withdrew, and so on for half-a-dozen times, like a head in a phantasmagoria. Kit stood his ground as if in expectation of an immediate assault, but finding that nothing came of these gestures, snapped his fingers and walked away; his mother dragging him off as fast as she could, and, even in the midst of his news of little Jacob and the baby, looking anxiously over her shoulder to see if Quilp were following.