

## Chapter XLIX

Kit's mother might have spared herself the trouble of looking back so often, for nothing was further from Mr Quilp's thoughts than any intention of pursuing her and her son, or renewing the quarrel with which they had parted. He went his way, whistling from time to time some fragments of a tune; and with a face quite tranquil and composed, jogged pleasantly towards home; entertaining himself as he went with visions of the fears and terrors of Mrs Quilp, who, having received no intelligence of him for three whole days and two nights, and having had no previous notice of his absence, was doubtless by that time in a state of distraction, and constantly fainting away with anxiety and grief.

This facetious probability was so congenial to the dwarf's humour, and so exquisitely amusing to him, that he laughed as he went along until the tears ran down his cheeks; and more than once, when he found himself in a bye-street, vented his delight in a shrill scream, which greatly terrifying any lonely passenger, who happened to be walking on before him expecting nothing so little, increased his mirth, and made him remarkably cheerful and light-hearted.

In this happy flow of spirits, Mr Quilp reached Tower Hill, when, gazing up at the window of his own sitting-room, he thought he descried more light than is usual in a house of mourning. Drawing nearer, and listening attentively, he could hear several voices in earnest conversation, among which he could distinguish, not only those of his wife and mother-in-law, but the tongues of men.

'Ha!' cried the jealous dwarf, 'What's this! Do they entertain visitors while I'm away!'

A smothered cough from above, was the reply. He felt in his pockets for his latch-key, but had forgotten it. There was no resource but to knock at the door.

'A light in the passage,' said Quilp, peeping through the keyhole. 'A very soft knock; and, by your leave, my lady, I may yet steal upon you unawares. Soho!'

A very low and gentle rap received no answer from within. But after a second application to the knocker, no louder than the first, the door was softly opened by the boy from the wharf, whom Quilp instantly gagged with one hand, and dragged into the street with the other.

'You'll throttle me, master,' whispered the boy. 'Let go, will you.'

'Who's up stairs, you dog?' retorted Quilp in the same tone. 'Tell me. And don't speak above your breath, or I'll choke you in good earnest.'

The boy could only point to the window, and reply with a stifled giggle, expressive of such intense enjoyment, that Quilp clutched him by the throat and might have carried his threat into execution, or at least have made very good progress towards that end, but for the boy's nimbly extricating himself from his grasp, and fortifying himself behind the nearest post, at which, after some fruitless attempts to catch him by the hair of the head, his master was obliged to come to a parley.

'Will you answer me?' said Quilp. 'What's going on, above?'

'You won't let one speak,' replied the boy. 'They - ha, ha, ha! - they think you're - you're dead. Ha ha ha!'

'Dead!' cried Quilp, relaxing into a grim laugh himself. 'No. Do they? Do they really, you dog?'

'They think you're - you're drowned,' replied the boy, who in his malicious nature had a strong infusion of his master. 'You was last seen on the brink of the wharf, and they think you tumbled over. Ha ha!'

The prospect of playing the spy under such delicious circumstances, and of disappointing them all by walking in alive, gave more delight to Quilp than the greatest stroke of good fortune could possibly have inspired him with. He was no less tickled than his hopeful assistant, and they both stood for some seconds, grinning and gasping and wagging their heads at each other, on either side of the post, like an unmatchable pair of Chinese idols.

'Not a word,' said Quilp, making towards the door on tiptoe. 'Not a sound, not so much as a creaking board, or a stumble against a cobweb. Drowned, eh, Mrs Quilp! Drowned!'

So saying, he blew out the candle, kicked off his shoes, and groped his way up stairs; leaving his delighted young friend in an ecstasy of summersets on the pavement.

The bedroom-door on the staircase being unlocked, Mr Quilp slipped in, and planted himself behind the door of communication between that chamber and the sitting-room, which standing ajar to render both more airy, and having a very convenient chink (of which he had often availed himself for purposes of espial, and had indeed enlarged with his pocket-knife), enabled him not only to hear, but to see distinctly, what was passing.

Applying his eye to this convenient place, he descried Mr Brass seated at the table with pen, ink, and paper, and the case-bottle of rum - his own case-bottle, and his own particular Jamaica - convenient to his hand; with hot water, fragrant lemons, white lump sugar, and all things fitting; from which choice materials, Sampson, by no means insensible to their claims upon his attention, had compounded a mighty glass of punch reeking hot; which he was at that very moment stirring up with a teaspoon, and contemplating with looks in which a faint assumption of sentimental regret, struggled but weakly with a bland and comfortable joy. At the same table, with both her elbows upon it, was Mrs Jiniwin; no longer sipping other people's punch feloniously with teaspoons, but taking deep draughts from a jorum of her own; while her daughter - not exactly with ashes on her head, or sackcloth on her back, but preserving a very decent and becoming appearance of sorrow nevertheless - was reclining in an easy chair, and soothing her grief with a smaller allowance of the same glib liquid. There were also present, a couple of water-side men, bearing between them certain machines called drags; even these fellows were accommodated with a stiff glass a-piece; and as they drank with a great relish, and were naturally of a red-nosed, pimple-faced, convivial look, their presence rather increased than detracted from that decided appearance of comfort, which was the great characteristic of the party.

'If I could poison that dear old lady's rum and water,' murmured Quilp, 'I'd die happy.'

'Ah!' said Mr Brass, breaking the silence, and raising his eyes to the ceiling with a sigh, 'Who knows but he may be looking down upon us now! Who knows but he may be surveying of us from - from somewheres or another, and contemplating us with a watchful eye! Oh Lor!'

Here Mr Brass stopped to drink half his punch, and then resumed; looking at the other half, as he spoke, with a dejected smile.

'I can almost fancy,' said the lawyer shaking his head, 'that I see his eye glistening down at the very bottom of my liquor. When shall we look upon his like again? Never, never!' One minute we are here' - holding his tumbler before his eyes - 'the next we are there' - gulping down its contents, and striking himself emphatically a little below the chest - 'in the silent tomb. To think that I should be drinking his very rum! It seems like a dream.'

With the view, no doubt, of testing the reality of his position, Mr Brass pushed his tumbler as he spoke towards Mrs Jiniwin for the purpose of being replenished; and turned towards the attendant mariners.

'The search has been quite unsuccessful then?'

'Quite, master. But I should say that if he turns up anywhere, he'll come ashore somewhere about Grinidge to-morrow, at ebb tide, eh, mate?'

The other gentleman assented, observing that he was expected at the Hospital, and that several pensioners would be ready to receive him whenever he arrived.

'Then we have nothing for it but resignation,' said Mr Brass; 'nothing but resignation and expectation. It would be a comfort to have his body; it would be a dreary comfort.'

'Oh, beyond a doubt,' assented Mrs Jiniwin hastily; 'if we once had that, we should be quite sure.'

'With regard to the descriptive advertisement,' said Sampson Brass, taking up his pen. 'It is a melancholy pleasure to recall his traits. Respecting his legs now - ?'

'Crooked, certainly,' said Mrs Jiniwin. 'Do you think they WERE crooked?' said Brass, in an insinuating tone. 'I think I see them now coming up the street very wide apart, in nankeen' pantaloons a little shrunk and without straps. Ah! what a vale of tears we live in. Do we say crooked?'

'I think they were a little so,' observed Mrs Quilp with a sob.

'Legs crooked,' said Brass, writing as he spoke. 'Large head, short body, legs crooked - '

Very crooked,' suggested Mrs Jiniwin.

'We'll not say very crooked, ma'am,' said Brass piously. 'Let us not bear hard upon the weaknesses of the deceased. He is gone, ma'am, to where his legs will never come in question. - We will content ourselves with crooked, Mrs Jiniwin.'

'I thought you wanted the truth,' said the old lady. 'That's all.'

'Bless your eyes, how I love you,' muttered Quilp. 'There she goes again. Nothing but punch!'

'This is an occupation,' said the lawyer, laying down his pen and emptying his glass, 'which seems to bring him before my eyes like the Ghost of Hamlet's father, in the very clothes that he wore on work-a-days. His coat, his waistcoat, his shoes and stockings, his trousers, his hat, his wit and humour, his pathos and his umbrella, all come before me like visions of my youth. His linen!' said Mr Brass smiling

fondly at the wall, 'his linen which was always of a particular colour, for such was his whim and fancy - how plain I see his linen now!'

'You had better go on, sir,' said Mrs Jiniwin impatiently.

'True, ma'am, true,' cried Mr Brass. 'Our faculties must not freeze with grief. I'll trouble you for a little more of that, ma'am. A question now arises, with relation to his nose.'

'Flat,' said Mrs Jiniwin.

'Aquiline!' cried Quilp, thrusting in his head, and striking the feature with his fist. 'Aquiline, you hag. Do you see it? Do you call this flat? Do you? Eh?'

'Oh capital, capital!' shouted Brass, from the mere force of habit. 'Excellent! How very good he is! He's a most remarkable man - so extremely whimsical! Such an amazing power of taking people by surprise!'

Quilp paid no regard whatever to these compliments, nor to the dubious and frightened look into which the lawyer gradually subsided, nor to the shrieks of his wife and mother-in-law, nor to the latter's running from the room, nor to the former's fainting away. Keeping his eye fixed on Sampson Brass, he walked up to the table, and beginning with his glass, drank off the contents, and went regularly round until he had emptied the other two, when he seized the case-bottle, and hugging it under his arm, surveyed him with a most extraordinary leer.

'Not yet, Sampson,' said Quilp. 'Not just yet!'

'Oh very good indeed!' cried Brass, recovering his spirits a little. 'Ha ha ha! Oh exceedingly good! There's not another man alive who could carry it off like that. A most difficult position to carry off. But he has such a flow of good-humour, such an amazing flow!'

'Good night,' said the dwarf, nodding expressively.

'Good night, sir, good night,' cried the lawyer, retreating backwards towards the door. 'This is a joyful occasion indeed, extremely joyful. Ha ha ha! oh very rich, very rich indeed, remarkably so!'

Waiting until Mr Brass's ejaculations died away in the distance (for he continued to pour them out, all the way down stairs), Quilp advanced towards the two men, who yet lingered in a kind of stupid amazement.

'Have you been dragging the river all day, gentlemen?' said the dwarf, holding the door open with great politeness.

'And yesterday too, master.'

'Dear me, you've had a deal of trouble. Pray consider everything yours that you find upon the - upon the body. Good night!'

The men looked at each other, but had evidently no inclination to argue the point just then, and shuffled out of the room. The speedy clearance effected, Quilp locked the doors; and still embracing the case-bottle with shrugged-up shoulders and folded arms, stood looking at his insensible wife like a dismounted nightmare.