

Chapter L

Matrimonial differences are usually discussed by the parties concerned in the form of dialogue, in which the lady bears at least her full half share. Those of Mr and Mrs Quilp, however, were an exception to the general rule; the remarks which they occasioned being limited to a long soliloquy on the part of the gentleman, with perhaps a few deprecatory observations from the lady, not extending beyond a trembling monosyllable uttered at long intervals, and in a very submissive and humble tone. On the present occasion, Mrs Quilp did not for a long time venture even on this gentle defence, but when she had recovered from her fainting-fit, sat in a tearful silence, meekly listening to the reproaches of her lord and master.

Of these Mr Quilp delivered himself with the utmost animation and rapidity, and with so many distortions of limb and feature, that even his wife, although tolerably well accustomed to his proficiency in these respects, was well-nigh beside herself with alarm. But the Jamaica rum, and the joy of having occasioned a heavy disappointment, by degrees cooled Mr Quilp's wrath; which from being at savage heat, dropped slowly to the bantering or chuckling point, at which it steadily remained.

'So you thought I was dead and gone, did you?' said Quilp. 'You thought you were a widow, eh? Ha, ha, ha, you jade.'

'Indeed, Quilp,' returned his wife. 'I'm very sorry - '

'Who doubts it!' cried the dwarf. 'You very sorry! to be sure you are. Who doubts that you're VERY sorry!'

'I don't mean sorry that you have come home again alive and well,' said his wife, 'but sorry that I should have been led into such a belief. I am glad to see you, Quilp; indeed I am.'

In truth Mrs Quilp did seem a great deal more glad to behold her lord than might have been expected, and did evince a degree of interest in his safety which, all things considered, was rather unaccountable. Upon Quilp, however, this circumstance made no impression, farther than as it moved him to snap his fingers close to his wife's eyes, with divers grins of triumph and derision.

'How could you go away so long, without saying a word to me or letting me hear of you or know anything about you?' asked the poor little woman, sobbing. 'How could you be so cruel, Quilp?'

'How could I be so cruel! cruel!' cried the dwarf. 'Because I was in the humour. I'm in the humour now. I shall be cruel when I like. I'm going away again.'

'Not again!'

'Yes, again. I'm going away now. I'm off directly. I mean to go and live wherever the fancy seizes me - at the wharf - at the counting-house - and be a jolly bachelor. You were a widow in anticipation. Damme,' screamed the dwarf, 'I'll be a bachelor in earnest.'

'You can't be serious, Quilp,' sobbed his wife.

'I tell you,' said the dwarf, exulting in his project, 'that I'll be a bachelor, a devil-may-care bachelor; and I'll have my bachelor's hall at the counting-house, and at such times come near it if you dare. And mind too that I don't pounce in upon you at unseasonable hours again, for I'll be a spy upon you, and come and go like a mole or a weazel. Tom Scott - where's Tom Scott?'

'Here I am, master,' cried the voice of the boy, as Quilp threw up the window.

'Wait there, you dog,' returned the dwarf, 'to carry a bachelor's portmanteau. Pack it up, Mrs Quilp. Knock up the dear old lady to help; knock her up. Halloo there! Halloo!'

With these exclamations, Mr Quilp caught up the poker, and hurrying to the door of the good lady's sleeping-closet, beat upon it therewith until she awoke in inexpressible terror, thinking that her amiable son-in-law surely intended to murder her in justification of the legs she had slandered. Impressed with this idea, she was no sooner fairly awake than she screamed violently, and would have quickly precipitated herself out of the window and through a neighbouring skylight, if her daughter had not hastened in to undeceive her, and implore her assistance. Somewhat reassured by her account of the service she was required to render, Mrs Jiniwin made her appearance in a flannel dressing-gown; and both mother and daughter, trembling with terror and cold - for the night was now far advanced - obeyed Mr Quilp's directions in submissive silence. Prolonging his preparations as much as possible, for their greater comfort, that eccentric gentleman superintended the packing of his wardrobe, and having added to it with his own hands, a plate, knife and fork, spoon, teacup and saucer, and other small household matters of that nature, strapped up the portmanteau, took it on his shoulders, and actually marched off without another word, and with the case-bottle (which he had never once put down) still tightly clasped under his arm. Consigning his heavier burden to the care of Tom Scott when he

reached the street, taking a dram from the bottle for his own encouragement, and giving the boy a rap on the head with it as a small taste for himself, Quilp very deliberately led the way to the wharf, and reached it at between three and four o'clock in the morning.

'Snug!' said Quilp, when he had groped his way to the wooden counting-house, and opened the door with a key he carried about with him. 'Beautifully snug! Call me at eight, you dog.'

With no more formal leave-taking or explanation, he clutched the portmanteau, shut the door on his attendant, and climbing on the desk, and rolling himself up as round as a hedgehog, in an old boat-cloak, fell fast asleep.

Being roused in the morning at the appointed time, and roused with difficulty, after his late fatigues, Quilp instructed Tom Scott to make a fire in the yard of sundry pieces of old timber, and to prepare some coffee for breakfast; for the better furnishing of which repast he entrusted him with certain small moneys, to be expended in the purchase of hot rolls, butter, sugar, Yarmouth bloaters, and other articles of housekeeping; so that in a few minutes a savoury meal was smoking on the board. With this substantial comfort, the dwarf regaled himself to his heart's content; and being highly satisfied with this free and gipsy mode of life (which he had often meditated, as offering, whenever he chose to avail himself of it, an agreeable freedom from the restraints of matrimony, and a choice means of keeping Mrs Quilp and her mother in a state of incessant agitation and suspense), bestirred himself to improve his retreat, and render it more commodious and comfortable.

With this view, he issued forth to a place hard by, where sea-stores were sold, purchased a second-hand hammock, and had it slung in seamanlike fashion from the ceiling of the counting-house. He also caused to be erected, in the same mouldy cabin, an old ship's stove with a rusty funnel to carry the smoke through the roof; and these arrangements completed, surveyed them with ineffable delight.

'I've got a country-house like Robinson Crusoe,' said the dwarf, ogling the accommodations; 'a solitary, sequestered, desolate-island sort of spot, where I can be quite alone when I have business on hand, and be secure from all spies and listeners. Nobody near me here, but rats, and they are fine stealthy secret fellows. I shall be as merry as a grig among these gentry. I'll look out for one like Christopher, and poison him - ha, ha, ha! Business though - business - we must be mindful of business in the midst of pleasure, and the time has flown this morning, I declare.'

Enjoining Tom Scott to await his return, and not to stand upon his head, or throw a summerset, or so much as walk upon his hands meanwhile, on pain of lingering torments, the dwarf threw himself into a boat, and crossing to the other side of the river, and then speeding away on foot, reached Mr Swiveller's usual house of entertainment in Bevis Marks, just as that gentleman sat down alone to dinner in its dusky parlour.

'Dick'- said the dwarf, thrusting his head in at the door, 'my pet, my pupil, the apple of my eye, hey, hey!'

'Oh you're there, are you?' returned Mr Swiveller; 'how are you?'

'How's Dick?' retorted Quilp. 'How's the cream of clerkship, eh?'

'Why, rather sour, sir,' replied Mr Swiveller. 'Beginning to border upon cheesiness, in fact.'

'What's the matter?' said the dwarf, advancing. 'Has Sally proved unkind. 'Of all the girls that are so smart, there's none like - ' eh, Dick!'

'Certainly not,' replied Mr Swiveller, eating his dinner with great gravity, 'none like her. She's the sphynx of private life, is Sally B.'

'You're out of spirits,' said Quilp, drawing up a chair. 'What's the matter?'

'The law don't agree with me,' returned Dick. 'It isn't moist enough, and there's too much confinement. I have been thinking of running away.'

'Bah!' said the dwarf. 'Where would you run to, Dick?'

'I don't know' returned Mr Swiveller. 'Towards Highgate, I suppose. Perhaps the bells might strike up 'Turn again Swiveller, Lord Mayor of London.' Whittington's name was Dick. I wish cats were scarcer.'

Quilp looked at his companion with his eyes screwed up into a comical expression of curiosity, and patiently awaited his further explanation; upon which, however, Mr Swiveller appeared in no hurry to enter, as he ate a very long dinner in profound silence, finally pushed away his plate, threw himself back into his chair, folded his arms, and stared ruefully at the fire, in which some ends of cigars were smoking on their own account, and sending up a fragrant odour.

'Perhaps you'd like a bit of cake' - said Dick, at last turning to the dwarf. 'You're quite welcome to it. You ought to be, for it's of your making.'

'What do you mean?' said Quilp.

Mr Swiveller replied by taking from his pocket a small and very greasy parcel, slowly unfolding it, and displaying a little slab of plum-cake extremely indigestible in appearance, and bordered with a paste of white sugar an inch and a half deep.

'What should you say this was?' demanded Mr Swiveller.

'It looks like bride-cake,' replied the dwarf, grinning.

'And whose should you say it was?' inquired Mr Swiveller, rubbing the pastry against his nose with a dreadful calmness. 'Whose?'

'Not - '

'Yes,' said Dick, 'the same. You needn't mention her name. There's no such name now. Her name is Cheggs now, Sophy Cheggs. Yet loved I as man never loved that hadn't wooden legs, and my heart, my heart is breaking for the love of Sophy Cheggs.'

With this extemporary adaptation of a popular ballad to the distressing circumstances of his own case, Mr Swiveller folded up the parcel again, beat it very flat between the palms of his hands, thrust it into his breast, buttoned his coat over it, and folded his arms upon the whole.

'Now, I hope you're satisfied, sir,' said Dick; 'and I hope Fred's satisfied. You went partners in the mischief, and I hope you like it. This is the triumph I was to have, is it? It's like the old country-dance of that name, where there are two gentlemen to one lady, and one has her, and the other hasn't, but comes limping up behind to make out the figure. But it's Destiny, and mine's a crusher.'

Disguising his secret joy in Mr Swiveller's defeat, Daniel Quilp adopted the surest means of soothing him, by ringing the bell, and ordering in a supply of rosy wine (that is to say, of its usual representative), which he put about with great alacrity, calling upon Mr Swiveller to pledge him in various toasts derisive of Cheggs, and eulogistic of the happiness of single men. Such was their impression on Mr Swiveller, coupled with the reflection that no man could oppose his destiny, that in a very short space of time his spirits rose surprisingly, and he was enabled to give the dwarf an account of the receipt of the cake, which, it appeared, had been brought to Bevis Marks by the two surviving

Miss Wackleses in person, and delivered at the office door with much giggling and joyfulness.

'Ha!' said Quilp. 'It will be our turn to giggle soon. And that reminds me - you spoke of young Trent - where is he?'

Mr Swiveller explained that his respectable friend had recently accepted a responsible situation in a locomotive gaming-house, and was at that time absent on a professional tour among the adventurous spirits of Great Britain.

'That's unfortunate,' said the dwarf, 'for I came, in fact, to ask you about him. A thought has occurred to me, Dick; your friend over the way - '

'Which friend?'

'In the first floor.'

'Yes?'

'Your friend in the first floor, Dick, may know him.'

'No, he don't,' said Mr Swiveller, shaking his head.

'Don't! No, because he has never seen him,' rejoined Quilp; 'but if we were to bring them together, who knows, Dick, but Fred, properly introduced, would serve his turn almost as well as little Nell or her grandfather - who knows but it might make the young fellow's fortune, and, through him, yours, eh?'

'Why, the fact is, you see,' said Mr Swiveller, 'that they HAVE been brought together.'

'Have been!' cried the dwarf, looking suspiciously at his companion. 'Through whose means?' 'Through mine,' said Dick, slightly confused. 'Didn't I mention it to you the last time you called over yonder?'

'You know you didn't,' returned the dwarf.

'I believe you're right,' said Dick. 'No. I didn't, I recollect. Oh yes, I brought 'em together that very day. It was Fred's suggestion.'

'And what came of it?'

'Why, instead of my friend's bursting into tears when he knew who Fred was, embracing him kindly, and telling him that he was his grandfather, or his grandmother in disguise (which we fully expected),

he flew into a tremendous passion; called him all manner of names; said it was in a great measure his fault that little Nell and the old gentleman had ever been brought to poverty; didn't hint at our taking anything to drink; and - and in short rather turned us out of the room than otherwise.'

'That's strange,' said the dwarf, musing.

'So we remarked to each other at the time,' returned Dick coolly, 'but quite true.'

Quilp was plainly staggered by this intelligence, over which he brooded for some time in moody silence, often raising his eyes to Mr Swiveller's face, and sharply scanning its expression. As he could read in it, however, no additional information or anything to lead him to believe he had spoken falsely; and as Mr Swiveller, left to his own meditations, sighed deeply, and was evidently growing maudlin on the subject of Mrs Cheggs; the dwarf soon broke up the conference and took his departure, leaving the bereaved one to his melancholy ruminations.

'Have been brought together, eh?' said the dwarf as he walked the streets alone. 'My friend has stolen a march upon me. It led him to nothing, and therefore is no great matter, save in the intention. I'm glad he has lost his mistress. Ha ha! The blockhead mustn't leave the law at present. I'm sure of him where he is, whenever I want him for my own purposes, and, besides, he's a good unconscious spy on Brass, and tells, in his cups, all that he sees and hears. You're useful to me, Dick, and cost nothing but a little treating now and then. I am not sure that it may not be worth while, before long, to take credit with the stranger, Dick, by discovering your designs upon the child; but for the present we'll remain the best friends in the world, with your good leave.'

Pursuing these thoughts, and gasping as he went along, after his own peculiar fashion, Mr Quilp once more crossed the Thames, and shut himself up in his Bachelor's Hall, which, by reason of its newly-erected chimney depositing the smoke inside the room and carrying none of it off, was not quite so agreeable as more fastidious people might have desired. Such inconveniences, however, instead of disgusting the dwarf with his new abode, rather suited his humour; so, after dining luxuriously from the public-house, he lighted his pipe, and smoked against the chimney until nothing of him was visible through the mist but a pair of red and highly inflamed eyes, with sometimes a dim vision of his head and face, as, in a violent fit of coughing, he slightly stirred the smoke and scattered the heavy wreaths by which they were obscured. In the midst of this atmosphere, which must infallibly have smothered any other man, Mr

Quilp passed the evening with great cheerfulness; solacing himself all the time with the pipe and the case-bottle; and occasionally entertaining himself with a melodious howl, intended for a song, but bearing not the faintest resemblance to any scrap of any piece of music, vocal or instrumental, ever invented by man. Thus he amused himself until nearly midnight, when he turned into his hammock with the utmost satisfaction.

The first sound that met his ears in the morning - as he half opened his eyes, and, finding himself so unusually near the ceiling, entertained a drowsy idea that he must have been transformed into a fly or blue-bottle in the course of the night, - was that of a stifled sobbing and weeping in the room. Peeping cautiously over the side of his hammock, he descried Mrs Quilp, to whom, after contemplating her for some time in silence, he communicated a violent start by suddenly yelling out - 'Halloa!'

'Oh, Quilp!' cried his poor little wife, looking up. 'How you frightened me!'

'I meant to, you jade,' returned the dwarf. 'What do you want here? I'm dead, an't I?'

'Oh, please come home, do come home,' said Mrs Quilp, sobbing; 'we'll never do so any more, Quilp, and after all it was only a mistake that grew out of our anxiety.'

'Out of your anxiety,' grinned the dwarf. 'Yes, I know that - out of your anxiety for my death. I shall come home when I please, I tell you. I shall come home when I please, and go when I please. I'll be a Will o' the Wisp, now here, now there, dancing about you always, starting up when you least expect me, and keeping you in a constant state of restlessness and irritation. Will you begone?'

Mrs Quilp durst only make a gesture of entreaty.

'I tell you no,' cried the dwarf. 'No. If you dare to come here again unless you're sent for, I'll keep watch-dogs in the yard that'll growl and bite - I'll have man-traps, cunningly altered and improved for catching women - I'll have spring guns, that shall explode when you tread upon the wires, and blow you into little pieces. Will you begone?'

'Do forgive me. Do come back,' said his wife, earnestly.

'No-o-o-o-o!' roared Quilp. 'Not till my own good time, and then I'll return again as often as I choose, and be accountable to nobody for my goings or comings. You see the door there. Will you go?'

Mr Quilp delivered this last command in such a very energetic voice, and moreover accompanied it with such a sudden gesture, indicative of an intention to spring out of his hammock, and, night-capped as he was, bear his wife home again through the public streets, that she sped away like an arrow. Her worthy lord stretched his neck and eyes until she had crossed the yard, and then, not at all sorry to have had this opportunity of carrying his point, and asserting the sanctity of his castle, fell into an immoderate fit of laughter, and laid himself down to sleep again.