

Chapter LI

The bland and open-hearted proprietor of Bachelor's Hall slept on amidst the congenial accompaniments of rain, mud, dirt, damp, fog, and rats, until late in the day; when, summoning his valet Tom Scott to assist him to rise, and to prepare breakfast, he quitted his couch, and made his toilet. This duty performed, and his repast ended, he again betook himself to Bevis Marks.

This visit was not intended for Mr Swiveller, but for his friend and employer Mr Sampson Brass. Both gentlemen however were from home, nor was the life and light of law, Miss Sally, at her post either. The fact of their joint desertion of the office was made known to all comers by a scrap of paper in the hand-writing of Mr Swiveller, which was attached to the bell-handle, and which, giving the reader no clue to the time of day when it was first posted, furnished him with the rather vague and unsatisfactory information that that gentleman would 'return in an hour.'

'There's a servant, I suppose,' said the dwarf, knocking at the house-door. 'She'll do.'

After a sufficiently long interval, the door was opened, and a small voice immediately accosted him with, 'Oh please will you leave a card or message?'

'Eh?' said the dwarf, looking down, (it was something quite new to him) upon the small servant.

To this, the child, conducting her conversation as upon the occasion of her first interview with Mr Swiveller, again replied, 'Oh please will you leave a card or message?'

'I'll write a note,' said the dwarf, pushing past her into the office; 'and mind your master has it directly he comes home.' So Mr Quilp climbed up to the top of a tall stool to write the note, and the small servant, carefully tutored for such emergencies, looked on with her eyes wide open, ready, if he so much as abstracted a wafer, to rush into the street and give the alarm to the police.

As Mr Quilp folded his note (which was soon written: being a very short one) he encountered the gaze of the small servant. He looked at her, long and earnestly.

'How are you?' said the dwarf, moistening a wafer with horrible grimaces.

The small servant, perhaps frightened by his looks, returned no audible reply; but it appeared from the motion of her lips that she was inwardly repeating the same form of expression concerning the note or message.

'Do they use you ill here? is your mistress a Tartar?' said Quilp with a chuckle.

In reply to the last interrogation, the small servant, with a look of infinite cunning mingled with fear, screwed up her mouth very tight and round, and nodded violently. Whether there was anything in the peculiar slyness of her action which fascinated Mr Quilp, or anything in the expression of her features at the moment which attracted his attention for some other reason; or whether it merely occurred to him as a pleasant whim to stare the small servant out of countenance; certain it is, that he planted his elbows square and firmly on the desk, and squeezing up his cheeks with his hands, looked at her fixedly.

'Where do you come from?' he said after a long pause, stroking his chin.

'I don't know.'

'What's your name?'

'Nothing.'

'Nonsense!' retorted Quilp. 'What does your mistress call you when she wants you?'

'A little devil,' said the child.

She added in the same breath, as if fearful of any further questioning, 'But please will you leave a card or message?'

These unusual answers might naturally have provoked some more inquiries. Quilp, however, without uttering another word, withdrew his eyes from the small servant, stroked his chin more thoughtfully than before, and then, bending over the note as if to direct it with scrupulous and hair-breadth nicety, looked at her, covertly but very narrowly, from under his bushy eyebrows. The result of this secret survey was, that he shaded his face with his hands, and laughed slyly and noiselessly, until every vein in it was swollen almost to bursting. Pulling his hat over his brow to conceal his mirth and its effects, he tossed the letter to the child, and hastily withdrew.

Once in the street, moved by some secret impulse, he laughed, and held his sides, and laughed again, and tried to peer through the dusty

area railings as if to catch another glimpse of the child, until he was quite tired out. At last, he travelled back to the Wilderness, which was within rifle-shot of his bachelor retreat, and ordered tea in the wooden summer-house that afternoon for three persons; an invitation to Miss Sally Brass and her brother to partake of that entertainment at that place, having been the object both of his journey and his note.

It was not precisely the kind of weather in which people usually take tea in summer-houses, far less in summer-houses in an advanced state of decay, and overlooking the slimy banks of a great river at low water. Nevertheless, it was in this choice retreat that Mr Quilp ordered a cold collation to be prepared, and it was beneath its cracked and leaky roof that he, in due course of time, received Mr Sampson and his sister Sally.

'You're fond of the beauties of nature,' said Quilp with a grin. 'Is this charming, Brass? Is it unusual, unsophisticated, primitive?'

'It's delightful indeed, sir,' replied the lawyer.

'Cool?' said Quilp.

'N-not particularly so, I think, sir,' rejoined Brass, with his teeth chattering in his head.

'Perhaps a little damp and ague-ish?' said Quilp.

'Just damp enough to be cheerful, sir,' rejoined Brass. 'Nothing more, sir, nothing more.'

'And Sally?' said the delighted dwarf. 'Does she like it?'

'She'll like it better,' returned that strong-minded lady, 'when she has tea; so let us have it, and don't bother.'

'Sweet Sally!' cried Quilp, extending his arms as if about to embrace her. 'Gentle, charming, overwhelming Sally.'

'He's a very remarkable man indeed!' soliloquised Mr Brass. 'He's quite a Troubadour, you know; quite a Troubadour!'

These complimentary expressions were uttered in a somewhat absent and distracted manner; for the unfortunate lawyer, besides having a bad cold in his head, had got wet in coming, and would have willingly borne some pecuniary sacrifice if he could have shifted his present raw quarters to a warm room, and dried himself at a fire. Quilp, however - who, beyond the gratification of his demon whims, owed Sampson some acknowledgment of the part he had played in the

mourning scene of which he had been a hidden witness, marked these symptoms of uneasiness with a delight past all expression, and derived from them a secret joy which the costliest banquet could never have afforded him.

It is worthy of remark, too, as illustrating a little feature in the character of Miss Sally Brass, that, although on her own account she would have borne the discomforts of the Wilderness with a very ill grace, and would probably, indeed, have walked off before the tea appeared, she no sooner beheld the latent uneasiness and misery of her brother than she developed a grim satisfaction, and began to enjoy herself after her own manner. Though the wet came stealing through the roof and trickling down upon their heads, Miss Brass uttered no complaint, but presided over the tea equipage with imperturbable composure. While Mr Quilp, in his uproarious hospitality, seated himself upon an empty beer-barrel, vaunted the place as the most beautiful and comfortable in the three kingdoms, and elevating his glass, drank to their next merry-meeting in that jovial spot; and Mr Brass, with the rain plashing down into his tea-cup, made a dismal attempt to pluck up his spirits and appear at his ease; and Tom Scott, who was in waiting at the door under an old umbrella, exulted in his agonies, and bade fair to split his sides with laughing; while all this was passing, Miss Sally Brass, unmindful of the wet which dripped down upon her own feminine person and fair apparel, sat placidly behind the tea-board, erect and grizzly, contemplating the unhappiness of her brother with a mind at ease, and content, in her amiable disregard of self, to sit there all night, witnessing the torments which his avaricious and grovelling nature compelled him to endure and forbade him to resent. And this, it must be observed, or the illustration would be incomplete, although in a business point of view she had the strongest sympathy with Mr Sampson, and would have been beyond measure indignant if he had thwarted their client in any one respect.

In the height of his boisterous merriment, Mr Quilp, having on some pretence dismissed his attendant sprite for the moment, resumed his usual manner all at once, dismounted from his cask, and laid his hand upon the lawyer's sleeve.

'A word,' said the dwarf, 'before we go farther. Sally, hark'ee for a minute.'

Miss Sally drew closer, as if accustomed to business conferences with their host which were the better for not having air.

'Business,' said the dwarf, glancing from brother to sister. 'Very private business. Lay your heads together when you're by yourselves.'

'Certainly, sir,' returned Brass, taking out his pocket-book and pencil. 'I'll take down the heads if you please, sir. Remarkable documents,' added the lawyer, raising his eyes to the ceiling, 'most remarkable documents. He states his points so clearly that it's a treat to have 'em! I don't know any act of parliament that's equal to him in clearness.'

'I shall deprive you of a treat,' said Quilp. 'Put up your book. We don't want any documents. So. There's a lad named Kit - '

Miss Sally nodded, implying that she knew of him.

'Kit!' said Mr Sampson. - 'Kit! Ha! I've heard the name before, but I don't exactly call to mind - I don't exactly - '

'You're as slow as a tortoise, and more thick-headed than a rhinoceros,' returned his obliging client with an impatient gesture.

'He's extremely pleasant!' cried the obsequious Sampson. 'His acquaintance with Natural History too is surprising. Quite a Buffon, quite!'

There is no doubt that Mr Brass intended some compliment or other; and it has been argued with show of reason that he would have said Buffon, but made use of a superfluous vowel. Be this as it may, Quilp gave him no time for correction, as he performed that office himself by more than tapping him on the head with the handle of his umbrella.

'Don't let's have any wrangling,' said Miss Sally, staying his hand. 'I've showed you that I know him, and that's enough.'

'She's always foremost!' said the dwarf, patting her on the back and looking contemptuously at Sampson. 'I don't like Kit, Sally.'

'Nor I,' rejoined Miss Brass.

'Nor I,' said Sampson.

'Why, that's right!' cried Quilp. 'Half our work is done already. This Kit is one of your honest people; one of your fair characters; a prowling prying hound; a hypocrite; a double-faced, white-livered, sneaking spy; a crouching cur to those that feed and coax him, and a barking yelping dog to all besides.'

'Fearfully eloquent!' cried Brass with a sneeze. 'Quite appalling!'

'Come to the point,' said Miss Sally, 'and don't talk so much.'

'Right again!' exclaimed Quilp, with another contemptuous look at Sampson, 'always foremost! I say, Sally, he is a yelping, insolent dog to all besides, and most of all, to me. In short, I owe him a grudge.' 'That's enough, sir,' said Sampson.

'No, it's not enough, sir,' sneered Quilp; 'will you hear me out? Besides that I owe him a grudge on that account, he thwarts me at this minute, and stands between me and an end which might otherwise prove a golden one to us all. Apart from that, I repeat that he crosses my humour, and I hate him. Now, you know the lad, and can guess the rest. Devise your own means of putting him out of my way, and execute them. Shall it be done?'

'It shall, sir,' said Sampson.

'Then give me your hand,' retorted Quilp. 'Sally, girl, yours. I rely as much, or more, on you than him. Tom Scott comes back. Lantern, pipes, more grog, and a jolly night of it!'

No other word was spoken, no other look exchanged, which had the slightest reference to this, the real occasion of their meeting. The trio were well accustomed to act together, and were linked to each other by ties of mutual interest and advantage, and nothing more was needed. Resuming his boisterous manner with the same ease with which he had thrown it off, Quilp was in an instant the same uproarious, reckless little savage he had been a few seconds before. It was ten o'clock at night before the amiable Sally supported her beloved and loving brother from the Wilderness, by which time he needed the utmost support her tender frame could render; his walk being from some unknown reason anything but steady, and his legs constantly doubling up in unexpected places.

Overpowered, notwithstanding his late prolonged slumbers, by the fatigues of the last few days, the dwarf lost no time in creeping to his dainty house, and was soon dreaming in his hammock. Leaving him to visions, in which perhaps the quiet figures we quitted in the old church porch were not without their share, be it our task to rejoin them as they sat and watched.