

Chapter LIX

When Kit, having discharged his errand, came down-stairs from the single gentleman's apartment after the lapse of a quarter of an hour or so, Mr Sampson Brass was alone in the office. He was not singing as usual, nor was he seated at his desk. The open door showed him standing before the fire with his back towards it, and looking so very strange that Kit supposed he must have been suddenly taken ill.

'Is anything the matter, sir?' said Kit.

'Matter!' cried Brass. 'No. Why anything the matter?'

'You are so very pale,' said Kit, 'that I should hardly have known you.'

'Pooh pooh! mere fancy,' cried Brass, stooping to throw up the cinders. 'Never better, Kit, never better in all my life. Merry too. Ha ha! How's our friend above-stairs, eh?'

'A great deal better,' said Kit.

'I'm glad to hear it,' rejoined Brass; 'thankful, I may say. An excellent gentleman - worthy, liberal, generous, gives very little trouble - an admirable lodger. Ha ha! Mr Garland - he's well I hope, Kit - and the pony - my friend, my particular friend you know. Ha ha!'

Kit gave a satisfactory account of all the little household at Abel Cottage. Mr Brass, who seemed remarkably inattentive and impatient, mounted on his stool, and beckoning him to come nearer, took him by the button-hole.

'I have been thinking, Kit,' said the lawyer, 'that I could throw some little emoluments in your mother's way - You have a mother, I think? If I recollect right, you told me - '

'Oh yes, Sir, yes certainly.'

'A widow, I think? an industrious widow?'

'A harder-working woman or a better mother never lived, Sir.'

'Ah!' cried Brass. 'That's affecting, truly affecting. A poor widow struggling to maintain her orphans in decency and comfort, is a delicious picture of human goodness. - Put down your hat, Kit.'

'Thank you Sir, I must be going directly.'

'Put it down while you stay, at any rate,' said Brass, taking it from him and making some confusion among the papers, in finding a place for it on the desk. 'I was thinking, Kit, that we have often houses to let for people we are concerned for, and matters of that sort. Now you know we're obliged to put people into those houses to take care of 'em - very often undeserving people that we can't depend upon. What's to prevent our having a person that we CAN depend upon, and enjoying the delight of doing a good action at the same time? I say, what's to prevent our employing this worthy woman, your mother? What with one job and another, there's lodging - and good lodging too - pretty well all the year round, rent free, and a weekly allowance besides, Kit, that would provide her with a great many comforts she don't at present enjoy. Now what do you think of that? Do you see any objection? My only desire is to serve you, Kit; therefore if you do, say so freely.'

As Brass spoke, he moved the hat twice or thrice, and shuffled among the papers again, as if in search of something.

'How can I see any objection to such a kind offer, sir?' replied Kit with his whole heart. 'I don't know how to thank you sir, I don't indeed.'

'Why then,' said Brass, suddenly turning upon him and thrusting his face close to Kit's with such a repulsive smile that the latter, even in the very height of his gratitude, drew back, quite startled. 'Why then, it's done.'

Kit looked at him in some confusion.

'Done, I say,' added Sampson, rubbing his hands and veiling himself again in his usual oily manner. 'Ha ha! and so you shall find Kit, so you shall find. But dear me,' said Brass, 'what a time Mr Richard is gone! A sad loiterer to be sure! Will you mind the office one minute, while I run up-stairs? Only one minute. I'll not detain you an instant longer, on any account, Kit.'

Talking as he went, Mr Brass bustled out of the office, and in a very short time returned. Mr Swiveller came back, almost at the same instant; and as Kit was leaving the room hastily, to make up for lost time, Miss Brass herself encountered him in the doorway.

'Oh!' sneered Sally, looking after him as she entered. 'There goes your pet, Sammy, eh?'

'Ah! There he goes,' replied Brass. 'My pet, if you please. An honest fellow, Mr Richard, sir - a worthy fellow indeed!'

'Hem!' coughed Miss Brass.

'I tell you, you aggravating vagabond,' said the angry Sampson, 'that I'd stake my life upon his honesty. Am I never to hear the last of this? Am I always to be baited, and beset, by your mean suspicions? Have you no regard for true merit, you malignant fellow? If you come to that, I'd sooner suspect your honesty than his.'

Miss Sally pulled out the tin snuff-box, and took a long, slow pinch, regarding her brother with a steady gaze all the time.

'She drives me wild, Mr Richard, sir,' said Brass, 'she exasperates me beyond all bearing. I am heated and excited, sir, I know I am. These are not business manners, sir, nor business looks, but she carries me out of myself.'

'Why don't you leave him alone?' said Dick.

'Because she can't, sir,' retorted Brass; 'because to chafe and vex me is a part of her nature, Sir, and she will and must do it, or I don't believe she'd have her health. But never mind,' said Brass, 'never mind. I've carried my point. I've shown my confidence in the lad. He has minded the office again. Ha ha! Ugh, you viper!'

The beautiful virgin took another pinch, and put the snuff-box in her pocket; still looking at her brother with perfect composure.

'He has minded the office again,' said Brass triumphantly; 'he has had my confidence, and he shall continue to have it; he - why, where's the -'

'What have you lost?' inquired Mr Swiveller.

'Dear me!' said Brass, slapping all his pockets, one after another, and looking into his desk, and under it, and upon it, and wildly tossing the papers about, 'the note, Mr Richard, sir, the five-pound note - what can have become of it? I laid it down here - God bless me!'

'What!' cried Miss Sally, starting up, clapping her hands, and scattering the papers on the floor. 'Gone! Now who's right? Now who's got it? Never mind five pounds - what's five pounds? He's honest, you know, quite honest. It would be mean to suspect him. Don't run after him. No, no, not for the world!'

'Is it really gone though?' said Dick, looking at Brass with a face as pale as his own.

'Upon my word, Mr Richard, Sir,' replied the lawyer, feeling in all his pockets with looks of the greatest agitation, 'I fear this is a black business. It's certainly gone, Sir. What's to be done?'

'Don't run after him,' said Miss Sally, taking more snuff. 'Don't run after him on any account. Give him time to get rid of it, you know. It would be cruel to find him out!'

Mr Swiveller and Sampson Brass looked from Miss Sally to each other, in a state of bewilderment, and then, as by one impulse, caught up their hats and rushed out into the street - darting along in the middle of the road, and dashing aside all obstructions, as though they were running for their lives.

It happened that Kit had been running too, though not so fast, and having the start of them by some few minutes, was a good distance ahead. As they were pretty certain of the road he must have taken, however, and kept on at a great pace, they came up with him, at the very moment when he had taken breath, and was breaking into a run again.

'Stop!' cried Sampson, laying his hand on one shoulder, while Mr Swiveller pounced upon the other. 'Not so fast sir. You're in a hurry?'

'Yes, I am,' said Kit, looking from one to the other in great surprise.

'I - I - can hardly believe it,' panted Sampson, 'but something of value is missing from the office. I hope you don't know what.'

'Know what! good Heaven, Mr Brass!' cried Kit, trembling from head to foot; 'you don't suppose -'

'No, no,' rejoined Brass quickly, 'I don't suppose anything. Don't say I said you did. You'll come back quietly, I hope?'

'Of course I will,' returned Kit. 'Why not?'

'To be sure!' said Brass. 'Why not? I hope there may turn out to be no why not. If you knew the trouble I've been in, this morning, through taking your part, Christopher, you'd be sorry for it.'

'And I am sure you'll be sorry for having suspected me sir,' replied Kit. 'Come. Let us make haste back.'

'Certainly!' cried Brass, 'the quicker, the better. Mr Richard - have the goodness, sir, to take that arm. I'll take this one. It's not easy walking three abreast, but under these circumstances it must be done, sir; there's no help for it.'

Kit did turn from white to red, and from red to white again, when they secured him thus, and for a moment seemed disposed to resist. But, quickly recollecting himself, and remembering that if he made any

struggle, he would perhaps be dragged by the collar through the public streets, he only repeated, with great earnestness and with the tears standing in his eyes, that they would be sorry for this - and suffered them to lead him off. While they were on the way back, Mr Swiveller, upon whom his present functions sat very irksomely, took an opportunity of whispering in his ear that if he would confess his guilt, even by so much as a nod, and promise not to do so any more, he would connive at his kicking Sampson Brass on the shins and escaping up a court; but Kit indignantly rejecting this proposal, Mr Richard had nothing for it, but to hold him tight until they reached Bevis Marks, and ushered him into the presence of the charming Sarah, who immediately took the precaution of locking the door.

'Now, you know,' said Brass, 'if this is a case of innocence, it is a case of that description, Christopher, where the fullest disclosure is the best satisfaction for everybody. Therefore if you'll consent to an examination,' he demonstrated what kind of examination he meant by turning back the cuffs of his coat, 'it will be a comfortable and pleasant thing for all parties.'

'Search me,' said Kit, proudly holding up his arms. 'But mind, sir - I know you'll be sorry for this, to the last day of your life.'

'It is certainly a very painful occurrence,' said Brass with a sigh, as he dived into one of Kit's pockets, and fished up a miscellaneous collection of small articles; 'very painful. Nothing here, Mr Richard, Sir, all perfectly satisfactory. Nor here, sir. Nor in the waistcoat, Mr Richard, nor in the coat tails. So far, I am rejoiced, I am sure.'

Richard Swiveller, holding Kit's hat in his hand, was watching the proceedings with great interest, and bore upon his face the slightest possible indication of a smile, as Brass, shutting one of his eyes, looked with the other up the inside of one of the poor fellow's sleeves as if it were a telescope - when Sampson turning hastily to him, bade him search the hat.

'Here's a handkerchief,' said Dick.

'No harm in that sir,' rejoined Brass, applying his eye to the other sleeve, and speaking in the voice of one who was contemplating an immense extent of prospect. 'No harm in a handkerchief Sir, whatever. The faculty don't consider it a healthy custom, I believe, Mr Richard, to carry one's handkerchief in one's hat - I have heard that it keeps the head too warm - but in every other point of view, its being there, is extremely satisfactory - extremely so.'

An exclamation, at once from Richard Swiveller, Miss Sally, and Kit himself, cut the lawyer short. He turned his head, and saw Dick standing with the bank-note in his hand.

'In the hat?' cried Brass in a sort of shriek.

'Under the handkerchief, and tucked beneath the lining,' said Dick, aghast at the discovery.

Mr Brass looked at him, at his sister, at the walls, at the ceiling, at the floor - everywhere but at Kit, who stood quite stupefied and motionless.

'And this,' cried Sampson, clasping his hands, 'is the world that turns upon its own axis, and has Lunar influences, and revolutions round Heavenly Bodies, and various games of that sort! This is human natur, is it! Oh natur, natur! This is the miscreant that I was going to benefit with all my little arts, and that, even now, I feel so much for, as to wish to let him go! But,' added Mr Brass with greater fortitude, 'I am myself a lawyer, and bound to set an example in carrying the laws of my happy country into effect. Sally my dear, forgive me, and catch hold of him on the other side. Mr Richard, sir, have the goodness to run and fetch a constable. The weakness is past and over sir, and moral strength returns. A constable, sir, if you please!'