

Chapter LX

Kit stood as one entranced, with his eyes opened wide and fixed upon the ground, regardless alike of the tremulous hold which Mr Brass maintained on one side of his cravat, and of the firmer grasp of Miss Sally upon the other; although this latter detention was in itself no small inconvenience, as that fascinating woman, besides screwing her knuckles inconveniently into his throat from time to time, had fastened upon him in the first instance with so tight a grip that even in the disorder and distraction of his thoughts he could not divest himself of an uneasy sense of choking. Between the brother and sister he remained in this posture, quite unresisting and passive, until Mr Swiveller returned, with a police constable at his heels.

This functionary, being, of course, well used to such scenes; looking upon all kinds of robbery, from petty larceny up to housebreaking or ventures on the highway, as matters in the regular course of business; and regarding the perpetrators in the light of so many customers coming to be served at the wholesale and retail shop of criminal law where he stood behind the counter; received Mr Brass's statement of facts with about as much interest and surprise, as an undertaker might evince if required to listen to a circumstantial account of the last illness of a person whom he was called in to wait upon professionally; and took Kit into custody with a decent indifference.

'We had better,' said this subordinate minister of justice, 'get to the office while there's a magistrate sitting. I shall want you to come along with us, Mr Brass, and the - ' he looked at Miss Sally as if in some doubt whether she might not be a griffin or other fabulous monster.

'The lady, eh?' said Sampson.

'Ah!' replied the constable. 'Yes - the lady. Likewise the young man that found the property.'

'Mr Richard, Sir,' said Brass in a mournful voice. 'A sad necessity. But the altar of our country sir - '

'You'll have a hackney-coach, I suppose?' interrupted the constable, holding Kit (whom his other captors had released) carelessly by the arm, a little above the elbow. 'Be so good as send for one, will you?'

'But, hear me speak a word,' cried Kit, raising his eyes and looking imploringly about him. 'Hear me speak a word. I am no more guilty than any one of you. Upon my soul I am not. I a thief! Oh, Mr Brass, you know me better. I am sure you know me better. This is not right of you, indeed.'

'I give you my word, constable - ' said Brass. But here the constable interposed with the constitutional principle 'words be blowed;' observing that words were but spoon-meat for babes and sucklings, and that oaths were the food for strong men.

'Quite true, constable,' assented Brass in the same mournful tone. 'Strictly correct. I give you my oath, constable, that down to a few minutes ago, when this fatal discovery was made, I had such confidence in that lad, that I'd have trusted him with - a hackney-coach, Mr Richard, sir; you're very slow, Sir.'

'Who is there that knows me,' cried Kit, 'that would not trust me - that does not? ask anybody whether they have ever doubted me; whether I have ever wronged them of a farthing. Was I ever once dishonest when I was poor and hungry, and is it likely I would begin now! Oh consider what you do. How can I meet the kindest friends that ever human creature had, with this dreadful charge upon me!'

Mr Brass rejoined that it would have been well for the prisoner if he had thought of that, before, and was about to make some other gloomy observations when the voice of the single gentleman was heard, demanding from above-stairs what was the matter, and what was the cause of all that noise and hurry. Kit made an involuntary start towards the door in his anxiety to answer for himself, but being speedily detained by the constable, had the agony of seeing Sampson Brass run out alone to tell the story in his own way.

'And he can hardly believe it, either,' said Sampson, when he returned, 'nor nobody will. I wish I could doubt the evidence of my senses, but their depositions are unimpeachable. It's of no use cross-examining my eyes,' cried Sampson, winking and rubbing them, 'they stick to their first account, and will. Now, Sarah, I hear the coach in the Marks; get on your bonnet, and we'll be off. A sad errand! a moral funeral, quite!'

'Mr Brass,' said Kit. 'do me one favour. Take me to Mr Witherden's first.'

Sampson shook his head irresolutely.

'Do,' said Kit. 'My master's there. For Heaven's sake, take me there, first.'

'Well, I don't know,' stammered Brass, who perhaps had his reasons for wishing to show as fair as possible in the eyes of the notary. 'How do we stand in point of time, constable, eh?'

The constable, who had been chewing a straw all this while with great philosophy, replied that if they went away at once they would have time enough, but that if they stood shilly-shallying there, any longer, they must go straight to the Mansion House; and finally expressed his opinion that that was where it was, and that was all about it.

Mr Richard Swiveller having arrived inside the coach, and still remaining immoveable in the most commodious corner with his face to the horses, Mr Brass instructed the officer to remove his prisoner, and declared himself quite ready. Therefore, the constable, still holding Kit in the same manner, and pushing him on a little before him, so as to keep him at about three-quarters of an arm's length in advance (which is the professional mode), thrust him into the vehicle and followed himself. Miss Sally entered next; and there being now four inside, Sampson Brass got upon the box, and made the coachman drive on.

Still completely stunned by the sudden and terrible change which had taken place in his affairs, Kit sat gazing out of the coach window, almost hoping to see some monstrous phenomenon in the streets which might give him reason to believe he was in a dream. Alas! Everything was too real and familiar: the same succession of turnings, the same houses, the same streams of people running side by side in different directions upon the pavement, the same bustle of carts and carriages in the road, the same well-remembered objects in the shop windows: a regularity in the very noise and hurry which no dream ever mirrored. Dream-like as the story was, it was true. He stood charged with robbery; the note had been found upon him, though he was innocent in thought and deed; and they were carrying him back, a prisoner.

Absorbed in these painful ruminations, thinking with a drooping heart of his mother and little Jacob, feeling as though even the consciousness of innocence would be insufficient to support him in the presence of his friends if they believed him guilty, and sinking in hope and courage more and more as they drew nearer to the notary's, poor Kit was looking earnestly out of the window, observant of nothing, - when all at once, as though it had been conjured up by magic, he became aware of the face of Quilp.

And what a leer there was upon the face! It was from the open window of a tavern that it looked out; and the dwarf had so spread himself over it, with his elbows on the window-sill and his head resting on both his hands, that what between this attitude and his being swoln with suppressed laughter, he looked puffed and bloated into twice his usual breadth. Mr Brass, on recognising him, immediately stopped the coach. As it came to a halt directly opposite to where he stood, the dwarf pulled off his hat, and saluted the party with a hideous and

grotesque politeness. 'Aha!' he cried. 'Where now, Brass? where now? Sally with you too? Sweet Sally! And Dick? Pleasant Dick! And Kit! Honest Kit!'

'He's extremely cheerful!' said Brass to the coachman. 'Very much so! Ah, sir - a sad business! Never believe in honesty any more, sir.'

'Why not?' returned the dwarf. 'Why not, you rogue of a lawyer, why not?'

'Bank-note lost in our office sir,' said Brass, shaking his head. 'Found in his hat sir - he previously left alone there - no mistake at all sir - chain of evidence complete - not a link wanting.'

'What!' cried the dwarf, leaning half his body out of window. 'Kit a thief! Kit a thief! Ha ha ha! Why, he's an uglier-looking thief than can be seen anywhere for a penny. Eh, Kit - eh? Ha ha ha! Have you taken Kit into custody before he had time and opportunity to beat me! Eh, Kit, eh?' And with that, he burst into a yell of laughter, manifestly to the great terror of the coachman, and pointed to a dyer's pole hard by, where a dangling suit of clothes bore some resemblance to a man upon a gibbet.

'Is it coming to that, Kit!' cried the dwarf, rubbing his hands violently. 'Ha ha ha ha! What a disappointment for little Jacob, and for his darling mother! Let him have the Bethel minister to comfort and console him, Brass. Eh, Kit, eh? Drive on coachey, drive on. Bye bye, Kit; all good go with you; keep up your spirits; my love to the Garlands - the dear old lady and gentleman. Say I inquired after 'em, will you? Blessings on 'em, on you, and on everybody, Kit. Blessings on all the world!'

With such good wishes and farewells, poured out in a rapid torrent until they were out of hearing, Quilp suffered them to depart; and when he could see the coach no longer, drew in his head, and rolled upon the ground in an ecstasy of enjoyment.

When they reached the notary's, which they were not long in doing, for they had encountered the dwarf in a bye street at a very little distance from the house, Mr Brass dismounted; and opening the coach door with a melancholy visage, requested his sister to accompany him into the office, with the view of preparing the good people within, for the mournful intelligence that awaited them. Miss Sally complying, he desired Mr Swiveller to accompany them. So, into the office they went; Mr Sampson and his sister arm-in-arm; and Mr Swiveller following, alone.

The notary was standing before the fire in the outer office, talking to Mr Abel and the elder Mr Garland, while Mr Chuckster sat writing at the desk, picking up such crumbs of their conversation as happened to fall in his way. This posture of affairs Mr Brass observed through the glass-door as he was turning the handle, and seeing that the notary recognised him, he began to shake his head and sigh deeply while that partition yet divided them.

'Sir,' said Sampson, taking off his hat, and kissing the two fore-fingers of his right hand beaver glove, 'my name is Brass - Brass of Bevis Marks, Sir. I have had the honour and pleasure, Sir, of being concerned against you in some little testamentary matters. How do you do, sir?'

'My clerk will attend to any business you may have come upon, Mr Brass,' said the notary, turning away.

'Thank you Sir,' said Brass, 'thank you, I am sure. Allow me, Sir, to introduce my sister - quite one of us Sir, although of the weaker sex - of great use in my business Sir, I assure you. Mr Richard, sir, have the goodness to come forward if you please - No really,' said Brass, stepping between the notary and his private office (towards which he had begun to retreat), and speaking in the tone of an injured man, 'really Sir, I must, under favour, request a word or two with you, indeed.'

'Mr Brass,' said the other, in a decided tone, 'I am engaged. You see that I am occupied with these gentlemen. If you will communicate your business to Mr Chuckster yonder, you will receive every attention.'

'Gentlemen,' said Brass, laying his right hand on his waistcoat, and looking towards the father and son with a smooth smile - 'Gentlemen, I appeal to you - really, gentlemen - consider, I beg of you. I am of the law. I am styled 'gentleman' by Act of Parliament. I maintain the title by the annual payment of twelve pound sterling for a certificate. I am not one of your players of music, stage actors, writers of books, or painters of pictures, who assume a station that the laws of their country don't recognise. I am none of your strollers or vagabonds. If any man brings his action against me, he must describe me as a gentleman, or his action is null and void. I appeal to you - is this quite respectful? Really gentlemen - '

'Well, will you have the goodness to state your business then, Mr Brass?' said the notary.

'Sir,' rejoined Brass, 'I will. Ah Mr Witherden! you little know the - but I will not be tempted to travel from the point, sir, I believe the name of one of these gentlemen is Garland.'

'Of both,' said the notary.

'In-deed!' rejoined Brass, cringing excessively. 'But I might have known that, from the uncommon likeness. Extremely happy, I am sure, to have the honour of an introduction to two such gentlemen, although the occasion is a most painful one. One of you gentlemen has a servant called Kit?'

'Both,' replied the notary. 'Two Kits?' said Brass smiling. 'Dear me!'

'One Kit, sir,' returned Mr Witherden angrily, 'who is employed by both gentlemen. What of him?'

'This of him, sir,' rejoined Brass, dropping his voice impressively. 'That young man, sir, that I have felt unbounded and unlimited confidence in, and always behaved to as if he was my equal - that young man has this morning committed a robbery in my office, and been taken almost in the fact.'

'This must be some falsehood!' cried the notary.

'It is not possible,' said Mr Abel.

'I'll not believe one word of it,' exclaimed the old gentleman.

Mr Brass looked mildly round upon them, and rejoined,

'Mr Witherden, sir, YOUR words are actionable, and if I was a man of low and mean standing, who couldn't afford to be slandered, I should proceed for damages. Hows'ever, sir, being what I am, I merely scorn such expressions. The honest warmth of the other gentleman I respect, and I'm truly sorry to be the messenger of such unpleasant news. I shouldn't have put myself in this painful position, I assure you, but that the lad himself desired to be brought here in the first instance, and I yielded to his prayers. Mr Chuckster, sir, will you have the goodness to tap at the window for the constable that's waiting in the coach?'

The three gentlemen looked at each other with blank faces when these words were uttered, and Mr Chuckster, doing as he was desired, and leaping off his stool with something of the excitement of an inspired prophet whose foretellings had in the fulness of time been realised, held the door open for the entrance of the wretched captive.

Such a scene as there was, when Kit came in, and bursting into the rude eloquence with which Truth at length inspired him, called Heaven to witness that he was innocent, and that how the property came to be found upon him he knew not! Such a confusion of tongues, before the circumstances were related, and the proofs disclosed! Such a dead silence when all was told, and his three friends exchanged looks of doubt and amazement!

'Is it not possible,' said Mr Witherden, after a long pause, 'that this note may have found its way into the hat by some accident, - such as the removal of papers on the desk, for instance?'

But this was clearly shown to be quite impossible. Mr Swiveller, though an unwilling witness, could not help proving to demonstration, from the position in which it was found, that it must have been designedly secreted.

'It's very distressing,' said Brass, 'immensely distressing, I am sure. When he comes to be tried, I shall be very happy to recommend him to mercy on account of his previous good character. I did lose money before, certainly, but it doesn't quite follow that he took it. The presumption's against him - strongly against him - but we're Christians, I hope?'

'I suppose,' said the constable, looking round, 'that no gentleman here can give evidence as to whether he's been flush of money of late, Do you happen to know, Sir?'

'He has had money from time to time, certainly,' returned Mr Garland, to whom the man had put the question. 'But that, as he always told me, was given him by Mr Brass himself.'

'Yes to be sure,' said Kit eagerly. 'You can bear me out in that, Sir?'

'Eh?' cried Brass, looking from face to face with an expression of stupid amazement.

'The money you know, the half-crowns, that you gave me - from the lodger,' said Kit.

'Oh dear me!' cried Brass, shaking his head and frowning heavily. 'This is a bad case, I find; a very bad case indeed.'

'What! Did you give him no money on account of anybody, Sir?' asked Mr Garland, with great anxiety.

'I give him money, Sir!' returned Sampson. 'Oh, come you know, this is too barefaced. Constable, my good fellow, we had better be going.'

'What!' shrieked Kit. 'Does he deny that he did? ask him, somebody, pray. Ask him to tell you whether he did or not!'

'Did you, sir?' asked the notary.

'I tell you what, gentlemen,' replied Brass, in a very grave manner, 'he'll not serve his case this way, and really, if you feel any interest in him, you had better advise him to go upon some other tack. Did I, sir? Of course I never did.'

'Gentlemen,' cried Kit, on whom a light broke suddenly, 'Master, Mr Abel, Mr Witherden, every one of you - he did it! What I have done to offend him, I don't know, but this is a plot to ruin me. Mind, gentlemen, it's a plot, and whatever comes of it, I will say with my dying breath that he put that note in my hat himself! Look at him, gentlemen! see how he changes colour. Which of us looks the guilty person - he, or I?'

'You hear him, gentlemen?' said Brass, smiling, 'you hear him. Now, does this case strike you as assuming rather a black complexion, or does it not? Is it at all a treacherous case, do you think, or is it one of mere ordinary guilt? Perhaps, gentlemen, if he had not said this in your presence and I had reported it, you'd have held this to be impossible likewise, eh?'

With such pacific and bantering remarks did Mr Brass refute the foul aspersion on his character; but the virtuous Sarah, moved by stronger feelings, and having at heart, perhaps, a more jealous regard for the honour of her family, flew from her brother's side, without any previous intimation of her design, and darted at the prisoner with the utmost fury. It would undoubtedly have gone hard with Kit's face, but that the wary constable, foreseeing her design, drew him aside at the critical moment, and thus placed Mr Chuckster in circumstances of some jeopardy; for that gentleman happening to be next the object of Miss Brass's wrath; and rage being, like love and fortune, blind; was pounced upon by the fair enslaver, and had a false collar plucked up by the roots, and his hair very much dishevelled, before the exertions of the company could make her sensible of her mistake.

The constable, taking warning by this desperate attack, and thinking perhaps that it would be more satisfactory to the ends of justice if the prisoner were taken before a magistrate, whole, rather than in small pieces, led him back to the hackney-coach without more ado, and moreover insisted on Miss Brass becoming an outside passenger; to which proposal the charming creature, after a little angry discussion, yielded her consent; and so took her brother Sampson's place upon the box: Mr Brass with some reluctance agreeing to occupy her seat inside. These arrangements perfected, they drove to the justice-room

with all speed, followed by the notary and his two friends in another coach. Mr Chuckster alone was left behind - greatly to his indignation; for he held the evidence he could have given, relative to Kit's returning to work out the shilling, to be so very material as bearing upon his hypocritical and designing character, that he considered its suppression little better than a compromise of felony.

At the justice-room, they found the single gentleman, who had gone straight there, and was expecting them with desperate impatience. But not fifty single gentlemen rolled into one could have helped poor Kit, who in half an hour afterwards was committed for trial, and was assured by a friendly officer on his way to prison that there was no occasion to be cast down, for the sessions would soon be on, and he would, in all likelihood, get his little affair disposed of, and be comfortably transported, in less than a fortnight.