

## Chapter LXII

A faint light, twinkling from the window of the counting-house on Quilp's wharf, and looking inflamed and red through the night-fog, as though it suffered from it like an eye, forewarned Mr Sampson Brass, as he approached the wooden cabin with a cautious step, that the excellent proprietor, his esteemed client, was inside, and probably waiting with his accustomed patience and sweetness of temper the fulfilment of the appointment which now brought Mr Brass within his fair domain.

'A treacherous place to pick one's steps in, of a dark night,' muttered Sampson, as he stumbled for the twentieth time over some stray lumber, and limped in pain. 'I believe that boy strews the ground differently every day, on purpose to bruise and maim one; unless his master does it with his own hands, which is more than likely. I hate to come to this place without Sally. She's more protection than a dozen men.'

As he paid this compliment to the merit of the absent charmer, Mr Brass came to a halt; looking doubtfully towards the light, and over his shoulder.

'What's he about, I wonder?' murmured the lawyer, standing on tiptoe, and endeavouring to obtain a glimpse of what was passing inside, which at that distance was impossible - 'drinking, I suppose, - making himself more fiery and furious, and heating his malice and mischievousness till they boil. I'm always afraid to come here by myself, when his account's a pretty large one. I don't believe he'd mind throttling me, and dropping me softly into the river when the tide was at its strongest, any more than he'd mind killing a rat - indeed I don't know whether he wouldn't consider it a pleasant joke. Hark! Now he's singing!'

Mr Quilp was certainly entertaining himself with vocal exercise, but it was rather a kind of chant than a song; being a monotonous repetition of one sentence in a very rapid manner, with a long stress upon the last word, which he swelled into a dismal roar. Nor did the burden of this performance bear any reference to love, or war, or wine, or loyalty, or any other, the standard topics of song, but to a subject not often set to music or generally known in ballads; the words being these: - 'The worthy magistrate, after remarking that the prisoner would find some difficulty in persuading a jury to believe his tale, committed him to take his trial at the approaching sessions; and directed the customary recognisances to be entered into for the prosecution.'

Every time he came to this concluding word, and had exhausted all possible stress upon it, Quilp burst into a shriek of laughter, and began again.

'He's dreadfully imprudent,' muttered Brass, after he had listened to two or three repetitions of the chant. 'Horribly imprudent. I wish he was dumb. I wish he was deaf. I wish he was blind. Hang him,' cried Brass, as the chant began again. 'I wish he was dead!'

Giving utterance to these friendly aspirations in behalf of his client, Mr Sampson composed his face into its usual state of smoothness, and waiting until the shriek came again and was dying away, went up to the wooden house, and knocked at the door.

'Come in!' cried the dwarf.

'How do you do to-night sir?' said Sampson, peeping in. 'Ha ha ha! How do you do sir? Oh dear me, how very whimsical! Amazingly whimsical to be sure!'

'Come in, you fool!' returned the dwarf, 'and don't stand there shaking your head and showing your teeth. Come in, you false witness, you perjurer, you suborner of evidence, come in!'

'He has the richest humour!' cried Brass, shutting the door behind him; 'the most amazing vein of comicality! But isn't it rather injudicious, sir - ?'

'What?' demanded Quilp. 'What, Judas?'

'Judas!' cried Brass. 'He has such extraordinary spirits! His humour is so extremely playful! Judas! Oh yes - dear me, how very good! Ha ha ha!' All this time, Sampson was rubbing his hands, and staring, with ludicrous surprise and dismay, at a great, goggle-eyed, blunt-nosed figure-head of some old ship, which was reared up against the wall in a corner near the stove, looking like a goblin or hideous idol whom the dwarf worshipped. A mass of timber on its head, carved into the dim and distant semblance of a cocked hat, together with a representation of a star on the left breast and epaulettes on the shoulders, denoted that it was intended for the effigy of some famous admiral; but, without those helps, any observer might have supposed it the authentic portrait of a distinguished merman, or great sea-monster. Being originally much too large for the apartment which it was now employed to decorate, it had been sawn short off at the waist. Even in this state it reached from floor to ceiling; and thrusting itself forward, with that excessively wide-awake aspect, and air of somewhat obtrusive politeness, by which figure-heads are usually characterised, seemed to reduce everything else to mere pigmy proportions.

'Do you know it?' said the dwarf, watching Sampson's eyes. 'Do you see the likeness?'

'Eh?' said Brass, holding his head on one side, and throwing it a little back, as connoisseurs do. 'Now I look at it again, I fancy I see a - yes, there certainly is something in the smile that reminds me of - and yet upon my word I - '

Now, the fact was, that Sampson, having never seen anything in the smallest degree resembling this substantial phantom, was much perplexed; being uncertain whether Mr Quilp considered it like himself, and had therefore bought it for a family portrait; or whether he was pleased to consider it as the likeness of some enemy. He was not very long in doubt; for, while he was surveying it with that knowing look which people assume when they are contemplating for the first time portraits which they ought to recognise but don't, the dwarf threw down the newspaper from which he had been chanting the words already quoted, and seizing a rusty iron bar, which he used in lieu of poker, dealt the figure such a stroke on the nose that it rocked again.

'Is it like Kit - is it his picture, his image, his very self?' cried the dwarf, aiming a shower of blows at the insensible countenance, and covering it with deep dimples. 'Is it the exact model and counterpart of the dog - is it - is it - is it?' And with every repetition of the question, he battered the great image, until the perspiration streamed down his face with the violence of the exercise.

Although this might have been a very comical thing to look at from a secure gallery, as a bull-fight is found to be a comfortable spectacle by those who are not in the arena, and a house on fire is better than a play to people who don't live near it, there was something in the earnestness of Mr Quilp's manner which made his legal adviser feel that the counting-house was a little too small, and a deal too lonely, for the complete enjoyment of these humours. Therefore, he stood as far off as he could, while the dwarf was thus engaged; whimpering out but feeble applause; and when Quilp left off and sat down again from pure exhaustion, approached with more obsequiousness than ever.

'Excellent indeed!' cried Brass. 'He he! Oh, very good Sir. You know,' said Sampson, looking round as if in appeal to the bruised animal, 'he's quite a remarkable man - quite!'

'Sit down,' said the dwarf. 'I bought the dog yesterday. I've been screwing gimlets into him, and sticking forks in his eyes, and cutting my name on him. I mean to burn him at last.'

'Ha ha!' cried Brass. 'Extremely entertaining, indeed!'

'Come here,' said Quilp, beckoning him to draw near. 'What's injudicious, hey?'

'Nothing Sir - nothing. Scarcely worth mentioning Sir; but I thought that song - admirably humorous in itself you know - was perhaps rather - '

'Yes,' said Quilp, 'rather what?'

'Just bordering, or as one may say remotely verging, upon the confines of injudiciousness perhaps, Sir,' returned Brass, looking timidly at the dwarf's cunning eyes, which were turned towards the fire and reflected its red light.

'Why?' inquired Quilp, without looking up.

'Why, you know, sir,' returned Brass, venturing to be more familiar: ' - the fact is, sir, that any allusion to these little combinings together, of friends, for objects in themselves extremely laudable, but which the law terms conspiracies, are - you take me, sir? - best kept snug and among friends, you know.'

'Eh!' said Quilp, looking up with a perfectly vacant countenance. 'What do you mean?'

'Cautious, exceedingly cautious, very right and proper!' cried Brass, nodding his head. 'Mum, sir, even here - my meaning, sir, exactly.'

'YOUR meaning exactly, you brazen scarecrow, - what's your meaning?' retorted Quilp. 'Why do you talk to me of combining together? Do I combine? Do I know anything about your combinings?'

'No no, sir - certainly not; not by any means,' returned Brass.

'if you so wink and nod at me,' said the dwarf, looking about him as if for his poker, 'I'll spoil the expression of your monkey's face, I will.' 'Don't put yourself out of the way I beg, sir,' rejoined Brass, checking himself with great alacrity. 'You're quite right, sir, quite right. I shouldn't have mentioned the subject, sir. It's much better not to. You're quite right, sir. Let us change it, if you please. You were asking, sir, Sally told me, about our lodger. He has not returned, sir.'

'No?' said Quilp, heating some rum in a little saucepan, and watching it to prevent its boiling over. 'Why not?'

'Why, sir,' returned Brass, 'he - dear me, Mr Quilp, sir - '

'What's the matter?' said the dwarf, stopping his hand in the act of carrying the saucepan to his mouth.

'You have forgotten the water, sir,' said Brass. 'And - excuse me, sir - but it's burning hot.'

Deigning no other than a practical answer to this remonstrance, Mr Quilp raised the hot saucepan to his lips, and deliberately drank off all the spirit it contained, which might have been in quantity about half a pint, and had been but a moment before, when he took it off the fire, bubbling and hissing fiercely. Having swallowed this gentle stimulant, and shaken his fist at the admiral, he bade Mr Brass proceed.

'But first,' said Quilp, with his accustomed grin, 'have a drop yourself - a nice drop - a good, warm, fiery drop.'

'Why, sir,' replied Brass, 'if there was such a thing as a mouthful of water that could be got without trouble - '

'There's no such thing to be had here,' cried the dwarf. 'Water for lawyers! Melted lead and brimstone, you mean, nice hot blistering pitch and tar - that's the thing for them - eh, Brass, eh?'

'Ha ha ha!' laughed Mr Brass. 'Oh very biting! and yet it's like being tickled - there's a pleasure in it too, sir!'

'Drink that,' said the dwarf, who had by this time heated some more. 'Toss it off, don't leave any heeltap, scorch your throat and be happy!'

The wretched Sampson took a few short sips of the liquor, which immediately distilled itself into burning tears, and in that form came rolling down his cheeks into the pipkin again, turning the colour of his face and eyelids to a deep red, and giving rise to a violent fit of coughing, in the midst of which he was still heard to declare, with the constancy of a martyr, that it was 'beautiful indeed!' While he was yet in unspeakable agonies, the dwarf renewed their conversation.

'The lodger,' said Quilp, ' - what about him?' 'He is still, sir,' returned Brass, with intervals of coughing, 'stopping with the Garland family. He has only been home once, Sir, since the day of the examination of that culprit. He informed Mr Richard, sir, that he couldn't bear the house after what had taken place; that he was wretched in it; and that he looked upon himself as being in a certain kind of way the cause of the occurrence. - A very excellent lodger Sir. I hope we may not lose him.'

'Yah!' cried the dwarf. 'Never thinking of anybody but yourself - why don't you retrench then - scrape up, hoard, economise, eh?'

'Why, sir,' replied Brass, 'upon my word I think Sarah's as good an economiser as any going. I do indeed, Mr Quilp.'

'Moisten your clay, wet the other eye, drink, man!' cried the dwarf. 'You took a clerk to oblige me.'

'Delighted, sir, I am sure, at any time,' replied Sampson. 'Yes, Sir, I did.'

'Then now you may discharge him,' said Quilp. 'There's a means of retrenchment for you at once.'

'Discharge Mr Richard, sir?' cried Brass.

'Have you more than one clerk, you parrot, that you ask the question? Yes.'

'Upon my word, Sir,' said Brass, 'I wasn't prepared for this-'

'How could you be?' sneered the dwarf, 'when I wasn't? How often am I to tell you that I brought him to you that I might always have my eye on him and know where he was - and that I had a plot, a scheme, a little quiet piece of enjoyment afoot, of which the very cream and essence was, that this old man and grandchild (who have sunk underground I think) should be, while he and his precious friend believed them rich, in reality as poor as frozen rats?'

'I quite understood that, sir,' rejoined Brass. 'Thoroughly.'

'Well, Sir,' retorted Quilp, 'and do you understand now, that they're not poor - that they can't be, if they have such men as your lodger searching for them, and scouring the country far and wide?'

'Of course I do, Sir,' said Sampson.

'Of course you do,' retorted the dwarf, viciously snapping at his words. 'Of course do you understand then, that it's no matter what comes of this fellow? of course do you understand that for any other purpose he's no man for me, nor for you?'

'I have frequently said to Sarah, sir,' returned Brass, 'that he was of no use at all in the business. You can't put any confidence in him, sir. If you'll believe me I've found that fellow, in the commonest little matters of the office that have been trusted to him, blurting out the truth, though expressly cautioned. The aggravation of that chap sir,

has exceeded anything you can imagine, it has indeed. Nothing but the respect and obligation I owe to you, sir - '

As it was plain that Sampson was bent on a complimentary harangue, unless he received a timely interruption, Mr Quilp politely tapped him on the crown of his head with the little saucepan, and requested that he would be so obliging as to hold his peace.

'Practical, sir, practical,' said Brass, rubbing the place and smiling; 'but still extremely pleasant - immensely so!'

'Hearken to me, will you?' returned Quilp, 'or I'll be a little more pleasant, presently. There's no chance of his comrade and friend returning. The scamp has been obliged to fly, as I learn, for some knavery, and has found his way abroad. Let him rot there.'

'Certainly, sir. Quite proper. - Forcible!' cried Brass, glancing at the admiral again, as if he made a third in company. 'Extremely forcible!'

'I hate him,' said Quilp between his teeth, 'and have always hated him, for family reasons. Besides, he was an intractable ruffian; otherwise he would have been of use. This fellow is pigeon-hearted and light-headed. I don't want him any longer. Let him hang or drown - starve - go to the devil.'

'By all means, sir,' returned Brass. 'When would you wish him, sir, to - ha, ha! - to make that little excursion?'

'When this trial's over,' said Quilp. 'As soon as that's ended, send him about his business.'

'It shall be done, sir,' returned Brass; 'by all means. It will be rather a blow to Sarah, sir, but she has all her feelings under control. Ah, Mr Quilp, I often think, sir, if it had only pleased Providence to bring you and Sarah together, in earlier life, what blessed results would have flowed from such a union! You never saw our dear father, sir? - A charming gentleman. Sarah was his pride and joy, sir. He would have closed his eyes in bliss, would Foxey, Mr Quilp, if he could have found her such a partner. You esteem her, sir?'

'I love her,' croaked the dwarf.

'You're very good, Sir,' returned Brass, 'I am sure. Is there any other order, sir, that I can take a note of, besides this little matter of Mr Richard?'

'None,' replied the dwarf, seizing the saucepan. 'Let us drink the lovely Sarah.'

'If we could do it in something, sir, that wasn't quite boiling,' suggested Brass humbly, 'perhaps it would be better. I think it will be more agreeable to Sarah's feelings, when she comes to hear from me of the honour you have done her, if she learns it was in liquor rather cooler than the last, Sir.'

But to these remonstrances, Mr Quilp turned a deaf ear. Sampson Brass, who was, by this time, anything but sober, being compelled to take further draughts of the same strong bowl, found that, instead of at all contributing to his recovery, they had the novel effect of making the counting-house spin round and round with extreme velocity, and causing the floor and ceiling to heave in a very distressing manner. After a brief stupor, he awoke to a consciousness of being partly under the table and partly under the grate. This position not being the most comfortable one he could have chosen for himself, he managed to stagger to his feet, and, holding on by the admiral, looked round for his host.

Mr Brass's first impression was, that his host was gone and had left him there alone - perhaps locked him in for the night. A strong smell of tobacco, however, suggested a new train of ideas, he looked upward, and saw that the dwarf was smoking in his hammock.

'Good bye, Sir,' cried Brass faintly. 'Good bye, Sir.'

'Won't you stop all night?' said the dwarf, peeping out. 'Do stop all night!'

'I couldn't indeed, Sir,' replied Brass, who was almost dead from nausea and the closeness of the room. 'If you'd have the goodness to show me a light, so that I may see my way across the yard, sir - '

Quilp was out in an instant; not with his legs first, or his head first, or his arms first, but bodily - altogether.

'To be sure,' he said, taking up a lantern, which was now the only light in the place. 'Be careful how you go, my dear friend. Be sure to pick your way among the timber, for all the rusty nails are upwards. There's a dog in the lane. He bit a man last night, and a woman the night before, and last Tuesday he killed a child - but that was in play. Don't go too near him.'

'Which side of the road is he, sir?' asked Brass, in great dismay.

'He lives on the right hand,' said Quilp, 'but sometimes he hides on the left, ready for a spring. He's uncertain in that respect. Mind you take care of yourself. I'll never forgive you if you don't. There's the light out - never mind - you know the way - straight on!' Quilp had slyly



shaded the light by holding it against his breast, and now stood chuckling and shaking from head to foot in a rapture of delight, as he heard the lawyer stumbling up the yard, and now and then falling heavily down. At length, however, he got quit of the place, and was out of hearing.

The dwarf shut himself up again, and sprang once more into his hammock.