

Chapter LXIV

Tossing to and fro upon his hot, uneasy bed; tormented by a fierce thirst which nothing could appease; unable to find, in any change of posture, a moment's peace or ease; and rambling, ever, through deserts of thought where there was no resting-place, no sight or sound suggestive of refreshment or repose, nothing but a dull eternal weariness, with no change but the restless shiftings of his miserable body, and the weary wandering of his mind, constant still to one ever-present anxiety - to a sense of something left undone, of some fearful obstacle to be surmounted, of some carking care that would not be driven away, and which haunted the distempered brain, now in this form, now in that, always shadowy and dim, but recognisable for the same phantom in every shape it took: darkening every vision like an evil conscience, and making slumber horrible - in these slow tortures of his dread disease, the unfortunate Richard lay wasting and consuming inch by inch, until, at last, when he seemed to fight and struggle to rise up, and to be held down by devils, he sank into a deep sleep, and dreamed no more.

He awoke. With a sensation of most blissful rest, better than sleep itself, he began gradually to remember something of these sufferings, and to think what a long night it had been, and whether he had not been delirious twice or thrice. Happening, in the midst of these cogitations, to raise his hand, he was astonished to find how heavy it seemed, and yet how thin and light it really was. Still, he felt indifferent and happy; and having no curiosity to pursue the subject, remained in the same waking slumber until his attention was attracted by a cough. This made him doubt whether he had locked his door last night, and feel a little surprised at having a companion in the room. Still, he lacked energy to follow up this train of thought; and unconsciously fell, in a luxury of repose, to staring at some green stripes on the bed-furniture, and associating them strangely with patches of fresh turf, while the yellow ground between made gravel-walks, and so helped out a long perspective of trim gardens.

He was rambling in imagination on these terraces, and had quite lost himself among them indeed, when he heard the cough once more. The walks shrunk into stripes again at the sound, and raising himself a little in the bed, and holding the curtain open with one hand, he looked out.

The same room certainly, and still by candlelight; but with what unbounded astonishment did he see all those bottles, and basins, and articles of linen airing by the fire, and such-like furniture of a sick chamber - all very clean and neat, but all quite different from anything he had left there, when he went to bed! The atmosphere, too, filled

with a cool smell of herbs and vinegar; the floor newly sprinkled; the - the what? The Marchioness?

Yes; playing cribbage with herself at the table. There she sat, intent upon her game, coughing now and then in a subdued manner as if she feared to disturb him - shuffling the cards, cutting, dealing, playing, counting, pegging - going through all the mysteries of cribbage as if she had been in full practice from her cradle! Mr Swiveller contemplated these things for a short time, and suffering the curtain to fall into its former position, laid his head on the pillow again.

'I'm dreaming,' thought Richard, 'that's clear. When I went to bed, my hands were not made of egg-shells; and now I can almost see through 'em. If this is not a dream, I have woke up, by mistake, in an Arabian Night, instead of a London one. But I have no doubt I'm asleep. Not the least.'

Here the small servant had another cough.

'Very remarkable!' thought Mr Swiveller. 'I never dreamt such a real cough as that before. I don't know, indeed, that I ever dreamt either a cough or a sneeze. Perhaps it's part of the philosophy of dreams that one never does. There's another - and another - I say! - I'm dreaming rather fast!'

For the purpose of testing his real condition, Mr Swiveller, after some reflection, pinched himself in the arm.

'Queerer still!' he thought. 'I came to bed rather plump than otherwise, and now there's nothing to lay hold of. I'll take another survey.'

The result of this additional inspection was, to convince Mr Swiveller that the objects by which he was surrounded were real, and that he saw them, beyond all question, with his waking eyes.

'It's an Arabian Night; that's what it is,' said Richard. 'I'm in Damascus or Grand Cairo. The Marchioness is a Genie, and having had a wager with another Genie about who is the handsomest young man alive, and the worthiest to be the husband of the Princess of China, has brought me away, room and all, to compare us together. Perhaps,' said Mr Swiveller, turning languidly round on his pillow, and looking on that side of his bed which was next the wall, 'the Princess may be still - No, she's gone.'

Not feeling quite satisfied with this explanation, as, even taking it to be the correct one, it still involved a little mystery and doubt, Mr

Swiveller raised the curtain again, determined to take the first favourable opportunity of addressing his companion. An occasion presented itself. The Marchioness dealt, turned up a knave, and omitted to take the usual advantage; upon which Mr Swiveller called out as loud as he could - 'Two for his heels!'

The Marchioness jumped up quickly and clapped her hands. 'Arabian Night, certainly,' thought Mr Swiveller; 'they always clap their hands instead of ringing the bell. Now for the two thousand black slaves, with jars of jewels on their heads!'

It appeared, however, that she had only clapped her hands for joy; for directly afterward she began to laugh, and then to cry; declaring, not in choice Arabic but in familiar English, that she was 'so glad, she didn't know what to do.'

'Marchioness,' said Mr Swiveller, thoughtfully, 'be pleased to draw nearer. First of all, will you have the goodness to inform me where I shall find my voice; and secondly, what has become of my flesh?'

The Marchioness only shook her head mournfully, and cried again; whereupon Mr Swiveller (being very weak) felt his own eyes affected likewise.

'I begin to infer, from your manner, and these appearances, Marchioness,' said Richard after a pause, and smiling with a trembling lip, 'that I have been ill.'

'You just have!' replied the small servant, wiping her eyes. 'And haven't you been a talking nonsense!'

'Oh!' said Dick. 'Very ill, Marchioness, have I been?'

'Dead, all but,' replied the small servant. 'I never thought you'd get better. Thank Heaven you have!'

Mr Swiveller was silent for a long while. By and bye, he began to talk again, inquiring how long he had been there.

'Three weeks to-morrow,' replied the servant.

'Three what?' said Dick.

'Weeks,' returned the Marchioness emphatically; 'three long, slow weeks.'

The bare thought of having been in such extremity, caused Richard to fall into another silence, and to lie flat down again, at his full length.

The Marchioness, having arranged the bed-clothes more comfortably, and felt that his hands and forehead were quite cool - a discovery that filled her with delight - cried a little more, and then applied herself to getting tea ready, and making some thin dry toast.

While she was thus engaged, Mr Swiveller looked on with a grateful heart, very much astonished to see how thoroughly at home she made herself, and attributing this attention, in its origin, to Sally Brass, whom, in his own mind, he could not thank enough. When the Marchioness had finished her toasting, she spread a clean cloth on a tray, and brought him some crisp slices and a great basin of weak tea, with which (she said) the doctor had left word he might refresh himself when he awoke. She propped him up with pillows, if not as skilfully as if she had been a professional nurse all her life, at least as tenderly; and looked on with unutterable satisfaction while the patient - stopping every now and then to shake her by the hand - took his poor meal with an appetite and relish, which the greatest dainties of the earth, under any other circumstances, would have failed to provoke. Having cleared away, and disposed everything comfortably about him again, she sat down at the table to take her own tea.

'Marchioness,' said Mr Swiveller, 'how's Sally?'

The small servant screwed her face into an expression of the very uttermost entanglement of slyness, and shook her head.

'What, haven't you seen her lately?' said Dick.

'Seen her!' cried the small servant. 'Bless you, I've run away!'

Mr Swiveller immediately laid himself down again quite flat, and so remained for about five minutes. By slow degrees he resumed his sitting posture after that lapse of time, and inquired:

'And where do you live, Marchioness?'

'Live!' cried the small servant. 'Here!'

'Oh!' said Mr Swiveller.

And with that he fell down flat again, as suddenly as if he had been shot. Thus he remained, motionless and bereft of speech, until she had finished her meal, put everything in its place, and swept the hearth; when he motioned her to bring a chair to the bedside, and, being propped up again, opened a farther conversation.

'And so,' said Dick, 'you have run away?'

'Yes,' said the Marchioness, 'and they've been a tizing of me.'

'Been - I beg your pardon,' said Dick - 'what have they been doing?'

'Been a tizing of me - tizing you know - in the newspapers,' rejoined the Marchioness.

'Aye, aye,' said Dick, 'advertising?'

The small servant nodded, and winked. Her eyes were so red with waking and crying, that the Tragic Muse might have winked with greater consistency. And so Dick felt.

'Tell me,' said he, 'how it was that you thought of coming here.'

'Why, you see,' returned the Marchioness, 'when you was gone, I hadn't any friend at all, because the lodger he never come back, and I didn't know where either him or you was to be found, you know. But one morning, when I was -'

'Was near a keyhole?' suggested Mr Swiveller, observing that she faltered.

'Well then,' said the small servant, nodding; 'when I was near the office keyhole - as you see me through, you know - I heard somebody saying that she lived here, and was the lady whose house you lodged at, and that you was took very bad, and wouldn't nobody come and take care of you. Mr Brass, he says, 'It's no business of mine,' he says; and Miss Sally, she says, 'He's a funny chap, but it's no business of mine;' and the lady went away, and slammed the door to, when she went out, I can tell you. So I run away that night, and come here, and told 'em you was my brother, and they believed me, and I've been here ever since.'

'This poor little Marchioness has been wearing herself to death!' cried Dick.

'No I haven't,' she returned, 'not a bit of it. Don't you mind about me. I like sitting up, and I've often had a sleep, bless you, in one of them chairs. But if you could have seen how you tried to jump out o' winder, and if you could have heard how you used to keep on singing and making speeches, you wouldn't have believed it - I'm so glad you're better, Mr Liverer.'

'Liverer indeed!' said Dick thoughtfully. 'It's well I am a liverer. I strongly suspect I should have died, Marchioness, but for you.'

At this point, Mr Swiveller took the small servant's hand in his again, and being, as we have seen, but poorly, might in struggling to express his thanks have made his eyes as red as hers, but that she quickly changed the theme by making him lie down, and urging him to keep very quiet.

'The doctor,' she told him, 'said you was to be kept quite still, and there was to be no noise nor nothing. Now, take a rest, and then we'll talk again. I'll sit by you, you know. If you shut your eyes, perhaps you'll go to sleep. You'll be all the better for it, if you do.'

The Marchioness, in saying these words, brought a little table to the bedside, took her seat at it, and began to work away at the concoction of some cooling drink, with the address of a score of chemists. Richard Swiveller being indeed fatigued, fell into a slumber, and waking in about half an hour, inquired what time it was.

'Just gone half after six,' replied his small friend, helping him to sit up again.

'Marchioness,' said Richard, passing his hand over his forehead and turning suddenly round, as though the subject but that moment flashed upon him, 'what has become of Kit?'

He had been sentenced to transportation for a great many years, she said.

'Has he gone?' asked Dick - 'his mother - how is she, - what has become of her?'

His nurse shook her head, and answered that she knew nothing about them. 'But, if I thought,' said she, very slowly, 'that you'd keep quiet, and not put yourself into another fever, I could tell you - but I won't now.'

'Yes, do,' said Dick. 'It will amuse me.'

'Oh! would it though!' rejoined the small servant, with a horrified look. 'I know better than that. Wait till you're better and then I'll tell you.'

Dick looked very earnestly at his little friend: and his eyes, being large and hollow from illness, assisted the expression so much, that she was quite frightened, and besought him not to think any more about it. What had already fallen from her, however, had not only piqued his curiosity, but seriously alarmed him, wherefore he urged her to tell him the worst at once.

'Oh there's no worst in it,' said the small servant. 'It hasn't anything to do with you.'

'Has it anything to do with - is it anything you heard through chinks or keyholes - and that you were not intended to hear?' asked Dick, in a breathless state.

'Yes,' replied the small servant.

'In - in Bevis Marks?' pursued Dick hastily. 'Conversations between Brass and Sally?'

'Yes,' cried the small servant again.

Richard Swiveller thrust his lank arm out of bed, and, gripping her by the wrist and drawing her close to him, bade her out with it, and freely too, or he would not answer for the consequences; being wholly unable to endure the state of excitement and expectation. She, seeing that he was greatly agitated, and that the effects of postponing her revelation might be much more injurious than any that were likely to ensue from its being made at once, promised compliance, on condition that the patient kept himself perfectly quiet, and abstained from starting up or tossing about.

'But if you begin to do that,' said the small servant, 'I'll leave off. And so I tell you.'

'You can't leave off, till you have gone on,' said Dick. 'And do go on, there's a darling. Speak, sister, speak. Pretty Polly say. Oh tell me when, and tell me where, pray Marchioness, I beseech you!'

Unable to resist these fervent adjurations, which Richard Swiveller poured out as passionately as if they had been of the most solemn and tremendous nature, his companion spoke thus:

'Well! Before I run away, I used to sleep in the kitchen - where we played cards, you know. Miss Sally used to keep the key of the kitchen door in her pocket, and she always come down at night to take away the candle and rake out the fire. When she had done that, she left me to go to bed in the dark, locked the door on the outside, put the key in her pocket again, and kept me locked up till she come down in the morning - very early I can tell you - and let me out. I was terrible afraid of being kept like this, because if there was a fire, I thought they might forget me and only take care of themselves you know. So, whenever I see an old rusty key anywhere, I picked it up and tried if it would fit the door, and at last I found in the dust cellar a key that did fit it.'

Here, Mr Swiveller made a violent demonstration with his legs. But the small servant immediately pausing in her talk, he subsided again, and pleading a momentary forgetfulness of their compact, entreated her to proceed.

'They kept me very short,' said the small servant. 'Oh! you can't think how short they kept me! So I used to come out at night after they'd gone to bed, and feel about in the dark for bits of biscuit, or sangwitches that you'd left in the office, or even pieces of orange peel to put into cold water and make believe it was wine. Did you ever taste orange peel and water?'

Mr Swiveller replied that he had never tasted that ardent liquor; and once more urged his friend to resume the thread of her narrative.

'If you make believe very much, it's quite nice,' said the small servant, 'but if you don't, you know, it seems as if it would bear a little more seasoning, certainly. Well, sometimes I used to come out after they'd gone to bed, and sometimes before, you know; and one or two nights before there was all that precious noise in the office - when the young man was took, I mean - I come upstairs while Mr Brass and Miss Sally was a-sittin' at the office fire; and I tell you the truth, that I come to listen again, about the key of the safe.'

Mr Swiveller gathered up his knees so as to make a great cone of the bedclothes, and conveyed into his countenance an expression of the utmost concern. But the small servant pausing, and holding up her finger, the cone gently disappeared, though the look of concern did not.

'There was him and her,' said the small servant, 'a-sittin' by the fire, and talking softly together. Mr Brass says to Miss Sally, 'Upon my word,' he says 'it's a dangerous thing, and it might get us into a world of trouble, and I don't half like it.' She says - you know her way - she says, 'You're the chickenest-hearted, feeblest, faintest man I ever see, and I think,' she says, 'that I ought to have been the brother, and you the sister. Isn't Quilp,' she says, 'our principal support?' 'He certainly is,' says Mr Brass, 'And an't we,' she says, 'constantly ruining somebody or other in the way of business?' 'We certainly are,' says Mr Brass. 'Then does it signify,' she says, 'about ruining this Kit when Quilp desires it?' 'It certainly does not signify,' says Mr Brass. Then they whispered and laughed for a long time about there being no danger if it was well done, and then Mr Brass pulls out his pocket-book, and says, 'Well,' he says, 'here it is - Quilp's own five-pound note. We'll agree that way, then,' he says. 'Kit's coming to-morrow morning, I know. While he's up-stairs, you'll get out of the way, and I'll clear off Mr Richard. Having Kit alone, I'll hold him in conversation, and put this property in his hat. I'll manage so, besides,' he says, 'that

Mr Richard shall find it there, and be the evidence. And if that don't get Christopher out of Mr Quilp's way, and satisfy Mr Quilp's grudges,' he says, 'the Devil's in it.' Miss Sally laughed, and said that was the plan, and as they seemed to be moving away, and I was afraid to stop any longer, I went down-stairs again. - There!

The small servant had gradually worked herself into as much agitation as Mr Swiveller, and therefore made no effort to restrain him when he sat up in bed and hastily demanded whether this story had been told to anybody.

'How could it be?' replied his nurse. 'I was almost afraid to think about it, and hoped the young man would be let off. When I heard 'em say they had found him guilty of what he didn't do, you was gone, and so was the lodger - though I think I should have been frightened to tell him, even if he'd been there. Ever since I come here, you've been out of your senses, and what would have been the good of telling you then?'

'Marchioness,' said Mr Swiveller, plucking off his nightcap and flinging it to the other end of the room; 'if you'll do me the favour to retire for a few minutes and see what sort of a night it is, I'll get up.'

'You mustn't think of such a thing,' cried his nurse.

'I must indeed,' said the patient, looking round the room. 'Whereabouts are my clothes?'

'Oh, I'm so glad - you haven't got any,' replied the Marchioness.

'Ma'am!' said Mr Swiveller, in great astonishment.

'I've been obliged to sell them, every one, to get the things that was ordered for you. But don't take on about that,' urged the Marchioness, as Dick fell back upon his pillow. 'You're too weak to stand, indeed.'

'I am afraid,' said Richard dolefully, 'that you're right. What ought I to do! what is to be done!'

It naturally occurred to him on very little reflection, that the first step to take would be to communicate with one of the Mr Garlands instantly. It was very possible that Mr Abel had not yet left the office. In as little time as it takes to tell it, the small servant had the address in pencil on a piece of paper; a verbal description of father and son, which would enable her to recognise either, without difficulty; and a special caution to be shy of Mr Chuckster, in consequence of that gentleman's known antipathy to Kit. Armed with these slender

powers, she hurried away, commissioned to bring either old Mr Garland or Mr Abel, bodily, to that apartment.

'I suppose,' said Dick, as she closed the door slowly, and peeped into the room again, to make sure that he was comfortable, 'I suppose there's nothing left - not so much as a waistcoat even?'

'No, nothing.'

'It's embarrassing,' said Mr Swiveller, 'in case of fire - even an umbrella would be something - but you did quite right, dear Marchioness. I should have died without you!'