

Chapter VI - I Enlarge My Circle Of Acquaintance

I HAD led this life about a month, when the man with the wooden leg began to stomp about with a mop and a bucket of water, from which I inferred that preparations were making to receive Mr Creakle and the boys. I was not mistaken; for the mop came into the schoolroom before long, and turned out Mr Mell and me, who lived where we could, and got on how we could, for some days, during which we were always in the way of two or three young women, who had rarely shown themselves before, and were so continually in the midst of dust that I sneezed almost as much as if Salem House had been a great snuff-box.

One day I was informed by Mr Mell that Mr Creakle would be home that evening. In the evening, after tea, I heard that he was come. Before bedtime, I was fetched by the man with the wooden leg to appear before him.

Mr Creakle's part of the house was a good deal more comfortable than ours, and he had a snug bit of garden that looked pleasant after the dusty playground, which was such a desert in miniature, that I thought no one but a camel, or a dromedary, could have felt at home in it. It seemed to me a bold thing even to take notice that the passage looked comfortable, as I went on my way, trembling, to Mr Creakle's presence: which so abashed me, when I was ushered into it, that I hardly saw Mrs Creakle or Miss Creakle (who were both there, in the parlour), or anything but Mr Creakle, a stout gentleman with a bunch of watch-chain and seals, in an arm-chair, with a tumbler and bottle beside him.

'So!' said Mr Creakle. 'This is the young gentleman whose teeth are to be filed! Turn him round.'

The wooden-legged man turned me about so as to exhibit the placard; and having afforded time for a full survey of it, turned me about again, with my face to Mr Creakle, and posted himself at Mr Creakle's side. Mr Creakle's face was fiery, and his eyes were small, and deep in his head; he had thick veins in his forehead, a little nose, and a large chin. He was bald on the top of his head; and had some thin wet-looking hair that was just turning grey, brushed across each temple, so that the two sides interlaced on his forehead. But the circumstance about him which impressed me most, was, that he had no voice, but spoke in a whisper. The exertion this cost him, or the consciousness of talking in that feeble way, made his angry face so much more angry, and his thick veins so much thicker, when he spoke, that I am not surprised, on looking back, at this peculiarity striking me as his chief one. 'Now,' said Mr Creakle. 'What's the report of this boy?'

'There's nothing against him yet,' returned the man with the wooden leg. 'There has been no opportunity.'

I thought Mr Creakle was disappointed. I thought Mrs and Miss Creakle (at whom I now glanced for the first time, and who were, both, thin and quiet) were not disappointed.

'Come here, sir!' said Mr Creakle, beckoning to me.

'Come here!' said the man with the wooden leg, repeating the gesture.

'I have the happiness of knowing your father-in-law,' whispered Mr Creakle, taking me by the ear; 'and a worthy man he is, and a man of a strong character. He knows me, and I know him. Do YOU know me? Hey?' said Mr Creakle, pinching my ear with ferocious playfulness.

'Not yet, sir,' I said, flinching with the pain.

'Not yet? Hey?' repeated Mr Creakle. 'But you will soon. Hey?'

'You will soon. Hey?' repeated the man with the wooden leg. I afterwards found that he generally acted, with his strong voice, as Mr Creakle's interpreter to the boys.

I was very much frightened, and said, I hoped so, if he pleased. I felt, all this while, as if my ear were blazing; he pinched it so hard.

'I'll tell you what I am,' whispered Mr Creakle, letting it go at last, with a screw at parting that brought the water into my eyes. 'I'm a Tartar.'

'A Tartar,' said the man with the wooden leg.

'When I say I'll do a thing, I do it,' said Mr Creakle; 'and when I say I will have a thing done, I will have it done.'

'- Will have a thing done, I will have it done,' repeated the man with the wooden leg.

'I am a determined character,' said Mr Creakle. 'That's what I am. I do my duty. That's what I do. My flesh and blood' - he looked at Mrs Creakle as he said this - 'when it rises against me, is not my flesh and blood. I discard it. Has that fellow' - to the man with the wooden leg - 'been here again?'

'No,' was the answer.

'No,' said Mr Creakle. 'He knows better. He knows me. Let him keep away. I say let him keep away,' said Mr Creakle, striking his hand

upon the table, and looking at Mrs Creakle, 'for he knows me. Now you have begun to know me too, my young friend, and you may go. Take him away.'

I was very glad to be ordered away, for Mrs and Miss Creakle were both wiping their eyes, and I felt as uncomfortable for them as I did for myself. But I had a petition on my mind which concerned me so nearly, that I couldn't help saying, though I wondered at my own courage:

'If you please, sir -'

Mr Creakle whispered, 'Hah! What's this?' and bent his eyes upon me, as if he would have burnt me up with them.

'If you please, sir,' I faltered, 'if I might be allowed (I am very sorry indeed, sir, for what I did) to take this writing off, before the boys come back -'

Whether Mr Creakle was in earnest, or whether he only did it to frighten me, I don't know, but he made a burst out of his chair, before which I precipitately retreated, without waiting for the escort Of the man with the wooden leg, and never once stopped until I reached my own bedroom, where, finding I was not pursued, I went to bed, as it was time, and lay quaking, for a couple of hours.

Next morning Mr Sharp came back. Mr Sharp was the first master, and superior to Mr Mell. Mr Mell took his meals with the boys, but Mr Sharp dined and supped at Mr Creakle's table. He was a limp, delicate-looking gentleman, I thought, with a good deal of nose, and a way of carrying his head on one side, as if it were a little too heavy for him. His hair was very smooth and wavy; but I was informed by the very first boy who came back that it was a wig (a second-hand one HE said), and that Mr Sharp went out every Saturday afternoon to get it curled.

It was no other than Tommy Traddles who gave me this piece of intelligence. He was the first boy who returned. He introduced himself by informing me that I should find his name on the right-hand corner of the gate, over the top-bolt; upon that I said, 'Traddles?' to which he replied, 'The same,' and then he asked me for a full account of myself and family.

It was a happy circumstance for me that Traddles came back first. He enjoyed my placard so much, that he saved me from the embarrassment of either disclosure or concealment, by presenting me to every other boy who came back, great or small, immediately on his arrival, in this form of introduction, 'Look here! Here's a game!'

Happily, too, the greater part of the boys came back low-spirited, and were not so boisterous at my expense as I had expected. Some of them certainly did dance about me like wild Indians, and the greater part could not resist the temptation of pretending that I was a dog, and patting and soothing me, lest I should bite, and saying, 'Lie down, sir!' and calling me Towzer. This was naturally confusing, among so many strangers, and cost me some tears, but on the whole it was much better than I had anticipated.

I was not considered as being formally received into the school, however, until J. Steerforth arrived. Before this boy, who was reputed to be a great scholar, and was very good-looking, and at least half-a-dozen years my senior, I was carried as before a magistrate. He inquired, under a shed in the playground, into the particulars of my punishment, and was pleased to express his opinion that it was 'a jolly shame'; for which I became bound to him ever afterwards.

'What money have you got, Copperfield?' he said, walking aside with me when he had disposed of my affair in these terms. I told him seven shillings.

'You had better give it to me to take care of,' he said. 'At least, you can if you like. You needn't if you don't like.'

I hastened to comply with his friendly suggestion, and opening Peggotty's purse, turned it upside down into his hand.

'Do you want to spend anything now?' he asked me.

'No thank you,' I replied.

'You can, if you like, you know,' said Steerforth. 'Say the word.'

'No, thank you, sir,' I repeated.

'Perhaps you'd like to spend a couple of shillings or so, in a bottle of currant wine by and by, up in the bedroom?' said Steerforth. 'You belong to my bedroom, I find.'

It certainly had not occurred to me before, but I said, Yes, I should like that.

'Very good,' said Steerforth. 'You'll be glad to spend another shilling or so, in almond cakes, I dare say?'

I said, Yes, I should like that, too.

'And another shilling or so in biscuits, and another in fruit, eh?' said Steerforth. 'I say, young Copperfield, you're going it!'

I smiled because he smiled, but I was a little troubled in my mind, too.

'Well!' said Steerforth. 'We must make it stretch as far as we can; that's all. I'll do the best in my power for you. I can go out when I like, and I'll smuggle the prog in.' With these words he put the money in his pocket, and kindly told me not to make myself uneasy; he would take care it should be all right. He was as good as his word, if that were all right which I had a secret misgiving was nearly all wrong - for I feared it was a waste of my mother's two half-crowns - though I had preserved the piece of paper they were wrapped in: which was a precious saving. When we went upstairs to bed, he produced the whole seven shillings' worth, and laid it out on my bed in the moonlight, saying:

'There you are, young Copperfield, and a royal spread you've got.'

I couldn't think of doing the honours of the feast, at my time of life, while he was by; my hand shook at the very thought of it. I begged him to do me the favour of presiding; and my request being seconded by the other boys who were in that room, he acceded to it, and sat upon my pillow, handing round the viands - with perfect fairness, I must say - and dispensing the currant wine in a little glass without a foot, which was his own property. As to me, I sat on his left hand, and the rest were grouped about us, on the nearest beds and on the floor.

How well I recollect our sitting there, talking in whispers; or their talking, and my respectfully listening, I ought rather to say; the moonlight falling a little way into the room, through the window, painting a pale window on the floor, and the greater part of us in shadow, except when Steerforth dipped a match into a phosphorus-box, when he wanted to look for anything on the board, and shed a blue glare over us that was gone directly! A certain mysterious feeling, consequent on the darkness, the secrecy of the revel, and the whisper in which everything was said, steals over me again, and I listen to all they tell me with a vague feeling of solemnity and awe, which makes me glad that they are all so near, and frightens me (though I feign to laugh) when Traddles pretends to see a ghost in the corner.

I heard all kinds of things about the school and all belonging to it. I heard that Mr Creakle had not preferred his claim to being a Tartar without reason; that he was the sternest and most severe of masters; that he laid about him, right and left, every day of his life, charging in among the boys like a trooper, and slashing away, unmercifully. That he knew nothing himself, but the art of slashing, being more ignorant (J. Steerforth said) than the lowest boy in the school; that he had

been, a good many years ago, a small hop-dealer in the Borough, and had taken to the schooling business after being bankrupt in hops, and making away with Mrs Creakle's money. With a good deal more of that sort, which I wondered how they knew.

I heard that the man with the wooden leg, whose name was Tungay, was an obstinate barbarian who had formerly assisted in the hop business, but had come into the scholastic line with Mr Creakle, in consequence, as was supposed among the boys, of his having broken his leg in Mr Creakle's service, and having done a deal of dishonest work for him, and knowing his secrets. I heard that with the single exception of Mr Creakle, Tungay considered the whole establishment, masters and boys, as his natural enemies, and that the only delight of his life was to be sour and malicious. I heard that Mr Creakle had a son, who had not been Tungay's friend, and who, assisting in the school, had once held some remonstrance with his father on an occasion when its discipline was very cruelly exercised, and was supposed, besides, to have protested against his father's usage of his mother. I heard that Mr Creakle had turned him out of doors, in consequence; and that Mrs and Miss Creakle had been in a sad way, ever since.

But the greatest wonder that I heard of Mr Creakle was, there being one boy in the school on whom he never ventured to lay a hand, and that boy being J. Steerforth. Steerforth himself confirmed this when it was stated, and said that he should like to begin to see him do it. On being asked by a mild boy (not me) how he would proceed if he did begin to see him do it, he dipped a match into his phosphorus-box on purpose to shed a glare over his reply, and said he would commence by knocking him down with a blow on the forehead from the seven-and-sixpenny ink-bottle that was always on the mantelpiece. We sat in the dark for some time, breathless.

I heard that Mr Sharp and Mr Mell were both supposed to be wretchedly paid; and that when there was hot and cold meat for dinner at Mr Creakle's table, Mr Sharp was always expected to say he preferred cold; which was again corroborated by J. Steerforth, the only parlour-boarder. I heard that Mr Sharp's wig didn't fit him; and that he needn't be so 'bounceable' - somebody else said 'bumptious' - about it, because his own red hair was very plainly to be seen behind.

I heard that one boy, who was a coal-merchant's son, came as a set-off against the coal-bill, and was called, on that account, 'Exchange or Barter' - a name selected from the arithmetic book as expressing this arrangement. I heard that the table beer was a robbery of parents, and the pudding an imposition. I heard that Miss Creakle was regarded by the school in general as being in love with Steerforth; and I am sure, as I sat in the dark, thinking of his nice voice, and his fine

face, and his easy manner, and his curling hair, I thought it very likely. I heard that Mr Mell was not a bad sort of fellow, but hadn't a sixpence to bless himself with; and that there was no doubt that old Mrs Mell, his mother, was as poor as job. I thought of my breakfast then, and what had sounded like 'My Charley!' but I was, I am glad to remember, as mute as a mouse about it.

The hearing of all this, and a good deal more, outlasted the banquet some time. The greater part of the guests had gone to bed as soon as the eating and drinking were over; and we, who had remained whispering and listening half-undressed, at last betook ourselves to bed, too.

'Good night, young Copperfield,' said Steerforth. 'I'll take care of you.'
'You're very kind,' I gratefully returned. 'I am very much obliged to you.'

'You haven't got a sister, have you?' said Steerforth, yawning.

'No,' I answered.

'That's a pity,' said Steerforth. 'If you had had one, I should think she would have been a pretty, timid, little, bright-eyed sort of girl. I should have liked to know her. Good night, young Copperfield.'

'Good night, sir,' I replied.

I thought of him very much after I went to bed, and raised myself, I recollect, to look at him where he lay in the moonlight, with his handsome face turned up, and his head reclining easily on his arm. He was a person of great power in my eyes; that was, of course, the reason of my mind running on him. No veiled future dimly glanced upon him in the moonbeams. There was no shadowy picture of his footsteps, in the garden that I dreamed of walking in all night.