Chapter XXVIII - Mr Micawber's Gauntlet

Until the day arrived on which I was to entertain my newly-found old friends, I lived principally on Dora and coffee. In my love-lorn condition, my appetite languished; and I was glad of it, for I felt as though it would have been an act of perfidy towards Dora to have a natural relish for my dinner. The quantity of walking exercise I took, was not in this respect attended with its usual consequence, as the disappointment counteracted the fresh air. I have my doubts, too, founded on the acute experience acquired at this period of my life, whether a sound enjoyment of animal food can develop itself freely in any human subject who is always in torment from tight boots. I think the extremities require to be at peace before the stomach will conduct itself with vigour.

On the occasion of this domestic little party, I did not repeat my former extensive preparations. I merely provided a pair of soles, a small leg of mutton, and a pigeon-pie. Mrs Crupp broke out into rebellion on my first bashful hint in reference to the cooking of the fish and joint, and said, with a dignified sense of injury, 'No! No, sir! You will not ask me sich a thing, for you are better acquainted with me than to suppose me capable of doing what I cannot do with ampial satisfaction to my own feelings!' But, in the end, a compromise was effected; and Mrs Crupp consented to achieve this feat, on condition that I dined from home for a fortnight afterwards.

And here I may remark, that what I underwent from Mrs Crupp, in consequence of the tyranny she established over me, was dreadful. I never was so much afraid of anyone. We made a compromise of everything. If I hesitated, she was taken with that wonderful disorder which was always lying in ambush in her system, ready, at the shortest notice, to prey upon her vitals. If I rang the bell impatiently, after half-a-dozen unavailing modest pulls, and she appeared at last - which was not by any means to be relied upon - she would appear with a reproachful aspect, sink breathless on a chair near the door, lay her hand upon her nankeen bosom, and become so ill, that I was glad, at any sacrifice of brandy or anything else, to get rid of her. If I objected to having my bed made at five o'clock in the afternoon - which I do still think an uncomfortable arrangement - one motion of her hand towards the same nankeen region of wounded sensibility was enough to make me falter an apology. In short, I would have done anything in an honourable way rather than give Mrs Crupp offence; and she was the terror of my life.

I bought a second-hand dumb-waiter for this dinner-party, in preference to re-engaging the handy young man; against whom I had conceived a prejudice, in consequence of meeting him in the Strand, one Sunday morning, in a waistcoat remarkably like one of mine,

which had been missing since the former occasion. The 'young gal' was re-engaged; but on the stipulation that she should only bring in the dishes, and then withdraw to the landing-place, beyond the outer door; where a habit of sniffing she had contracted would be lost upon the guests, and where her retiring on the plates would be a physical impossibility.

Having laid in the materials for a bowl of punch, to be compounded by Mr Micawber; having provided a bottle of lavender-water, two wax-candles, a paper of mixed pins, and a pincushion, to assist Mrs Micawber in her toilette at my dressing-table; having also caused the fire in my bedroom to be lighted for Mrs Micawber's convenience; and having laid the cloth with my own hands, I awaited the result with composure.

At the appointed time, my three visitors arrived together. Mr Micawber with more shirt-collar than usual, and a new ribbon to his eye-glass; Mrs Micawber with her cap in a whitey-brown paper parcel; Traddles carrying the parcel, and supporting Mrs Micawber on his arm. They were all delighted with my residence. When I conducted Mrs Micawber to my dressing-table, and she saw the scale on which it was prepared for her, she was in such raptures, that she called Mr Micawber to come in and look.

'My dear Copperfield,' said Mr Micawber, 'this is luxurious. This is a way of life which reminds me of the period when I was myself in a state of celibacy, and Mrs Micawber had not yet been solicited to plight her faith at the Hymeneal altar.'

'He means, solicited by him, Mr Copperfield,' said Mrs Micawber, archly. 'He cannot answer for others.'

'My dear,' returned Mr Micawber with sudden seriousness, 'I have no desire to answer for others. I am too well aware that when, in the inscrutable decrees of Fate, you were reserved for me, it is possible you may have been reserved for one, destined, after a protracted struggle, at length to fall a victim to pecuniary involvements of a complicated nature. I understand your allusion, my love. I regret it, but I can bear it.'

'Micawber!' exclaimed Mrs Micawber, in tears. 'Have I deserved this! I, who never have deserted you; who never WILL desert you, Micawber!' 'My love,' said Mr Micawber, much affected, 'you will forgive, and our old and tried friend Copperfield will, I am sure, forgive, the momentary laceration of a wounded spirit, made sensitive by a recent collision with the Minion of Power - in other words, with a ribald Turncock attached to the water-works - and will pity, not condemn, its excesses.'

Mr Micawber then embraced Mrs Micawber, and pressed my hand; leaving me to infer from this broken allusion that his domestic supply of water had been cut off that afternoon, in consequence of default in the payment of the company's rates.

To divert his thoughts from this melancholy subject, I informed Mr Micawber that I relied upon him for a bowl of punch, and led him to the lemons. His recent despondency, not to say despair, was gone in a moment. I never saw a man so thoroughly enjoy himself amid the fragrance of lemon-peel and sugar, the odour of burning rum, and the steam of boiling water, as Mr Micawber did that afternoon. It was wonderful to see his face shining at us out of a thin cloud of these delicate fumes, as he stirred, and mixed, and tasted, and looked as if he were making, instead of punch, a fortune for his family down to the latest posterity. As to Mrs Micawber, I don't know whether it was the effect of the cap, or the lavender-water, or the pins, or the fire, or the wax-candles, but she came out of my room, comparatively speaking, lovely. And the lark was never gayer than that excellent woman.

I suppose - I never ventured to inquire, but I suppose - that Mrs Crupp, after frying the soles, was taken ill. Because we broke down at that point. The leg of mutton came up very red within, and very pale without: besides having a foreign substance of a gritty nature sprinkled over it, as if if had had a fall into the ashes of that remarkable kitchen fireplace. But we were not in condition to judge of this fact from the appearance of the gravy, forasmuch as the 'young gal' had dropped it all upon the stairs - where it remained, by the by, in a long train, until it was worn out. The pigeon-pie was not bad, but it was a delusive pie: the crust being like a disappointing head, phrenologically speaking: full of lumps and bumps, with nothing particular underneath. In short, the banquet was such a failure that I should have been quite unhappy - about the failure, I mean, for I was always unhappy about Dora - if I had not been relieved by the great good humour of my company, and by a bright suggestion from Mr Micawber.

'My dear friend Copperfield,' said Mr Micawber, 'accidents will occur in the best-regulated families; and in families not regulated by that pervading influence which sanctifies while it enhances the - a - I would say, in short, by the influence of Woman, in the lofty character of Wife, they may be expected with confidence, and must be borne with philosophy. If you will allow me to take the liberty of remarking that there are few comestibles better, in their way, than a Devil, and that I believe, with a little division of labour, we could accomplish a good one if the young person in attendance could produce a gridiron, I would put it to you, that this little misfortune may be easily repaired.'

There was a gridiron in the pantry, on which my morning rasher of bacon was cooked. We had it in, in a twinkling, and immediately applied ourselves to carrying Mr Micawber's idea into effect. The division of labour to which he had referred was this: - Traddles cut the mutton into slices; Mr Micawber (who could do anything of this sort to perfection) covered them with pepper, mustard, salt, and cayenne; I put them on the gridiron, turned them with a fork, and took them off, under Mr Micawber's direction; and Mrs Micawber heated, and continually stirred, some mushroom ketchup in a little saucepan. When we had slices enough done to begin upon, we fell-to, with our sleeves still tucked up at the wrist, more slices sputtering and blazing on the fire, and our attention divided between the mutton on our plates, and the mutton then preparing.

What with the novelty of this cookery, the excellence of it, the bustle of it, the frequent starting up to look after it, the frequent sitting down to dispose of it as the crisp slices came off the gridiron hot and hot, the being so busy, so flushed with the fire, so amused, and in the midst of such a tempting noise and savour, we reduced the leg of mutton to the bone. My own appetite came back miraculously. I am ashamed to record it, but I really believe I forgot Dora for a little while. I am satisfied that Mr and Mrs Micawber could not have enjoyed the feast more, if they had sold a bed to provide it. Traddles laughed as heartily, almost the whole time, as he ate and worked. Indeed we all did, all at once; and I dare say there was never a greater success.

We were at the height of our enjoyment, and were all busily engaged, in our several departments, endeavouring to bring the last batch of slices to a state of perfection that should crown the feast, when I was aware of a strange presence in the room, and my eyes encountered those of the staid Littimer, standing hat in hand before me.

'What's the matter?' I involuntarily asked.

'I beg your pardon, sir, I was directed to come in. Is my master not here, sir?'

'No.'

'Have you not seen him, sir?'

'No; don't you come from him?'

'Not immediately so, sir.'

'Did he tell you you would find him here?'

'Not exactly so, sir. But I should think he might be here tomorrow, as he has not been here today.' 'Is he coming up from Oxford?'

'I beg, sir,' he returned respectfully, 'that you will be seated, and allow me to do this.' With which he took the fork from my unresisting hand, and bent over the gridiron, as if his whole attention were concentrated on it.

We should not have been much discomposed, I dare say, by the appearance of Steerforth himself, but we became in a moment the meekest of the meek before his respectable serving-man. Mr Micawber, humming a tune, to show that he was quite at ease, subsided into his chair, with the handle of a hastily concealed fork sticking out of the bosom of his coat, as if he had stabbed himself. Mrs Micawber put on her brown gloves, and assumed a genteel languor. Traddles ran his greasy hands through his hair, and stood it bolt upright, and stared in confusion on the table-cloth. As for me, I was a mere infant at the head of my own table; and hardly ventured to glance at the respectable phenomenon, who had come from Heaven knows where, to put my establishment to rights.

Meanwhile he took the mutton off the gridiron, and gravely handed it round. We all took some, but our appreciation of it was gone, and we merely made a show of eating it. As we severally pushed away our plates, he noiselessly removed them, and set on the cheese. He took that off, too, when it was done with; cleared the table; piled everything on the dumb-waiter; gave us our wine-glasses; and, of his own accord, wheeled the dumb-waiter into the pantry. All this was done in a perfect manner, and he never raised his eyes from what he was about. Yet his very elbows, when he had his back towards me, seemed to teem with the expression of his fixed opinion that I was extremely young.

'Can I do anything more, sir?' I thanked him and said, No; but would he take no dinner himself?

'None, I am obliged to you, sir.'

'Is Mr Steerforth coming from Oxford?'

'I beg your pardon, sir?'

'Is Mr Steerforth coming from Oxford?'

'I should imagine that he might be here tomorrow, sir. I rather thought he might have been here today, sir. The mistake is mine, no doubt, sir.'

'If you should see him first -' said I.

'If you'll excuse me, sir, I don't think I shall see him first.'

'In case you do,' said I, 'pray say that I am sorry he was not here today, as an old schoolfellow of his was here.'

'Indeed, sir!' and he divided a bow between me and Traddles, with a glance at the latter.

He was moving softly to the door, when, in a forlorn hope of saying something naturally - which I never could, to this man - I said:

'Oh! Littimer!'

'Sir!'

'Did you remain long at Yarmouth, that time?'

'Not particularly so, sir.'

'You saw the boat completed?'

'Yes, sir. I remained behind on purpose to see the boat completed.'

'I know!' He raised his eyes to mine respectfully.

'Mr Steerforth has not seen it yet, I suppose?'

'I really can't say, sir. I think - but I really can't say, sir. I wish you good night, sir.'

He comprehended everybody present, in the respectful bow with which he followed these words, and disappeared. My visitors seemed to breathe more freely when he was gone; but my own relief was very great, for besides the constraint, arising from that extraordinary sense of being at a disadvantage which I always had in this man's presence, my conscience had embarrassed me with whispers that I had mistrusted his master, and I could not repress a vague uneasy dread that he might find it out. How was it, having so little in reality to conceal, that I always DID feel as if this man were finding me out?

Mr Micawber roused me from this reflection, which was blended with a certain remorseful apprehension of seeing Steerforth himself, by bestowing many encomiums on the absent Littimer as a most respectable fellow, and a thoroughly admirable servant. Mr Micawber, I may remark, had taken his full share of the general bow, and had received it with infinite condescension.

'But punch, my dear Copperfield,' said Mr Micawber, tasting it, 'like time and tide, waits for no man. Ah! it is at the present moment in high flavour. My love, will you give me your opinion?'

Mrs Micawber pronounced it excellent.

'Then I will drink,' said Mr Micawber, 'if my friend Copperfield will permit me to take that social liberty, to the days when my friend Copperfield and myself were younger, and fought our way in the world side by side. I may say, of myself and Copperfield, in words we have sung together before now, that

We twa hae run about the braes And pu'd the gowans' fine

- in a figurative point of view - on several occasions. I am not exactly aware,' said Mr Micawber, with the old roll in his voice, and the old indescribable air of saying something genteel, 'what gowans may be, but I have no doubt that Copperfield and myself would frequently have taken a pull at them, if it had been feasible.'

Mr Micawber, at the then present moment, took a pull at his punch. So we all did: Traddles evidently lost in wondering at what distant time Mr Micawber and I could have been comrades in the battle of the world.

'Ahem!' said Mr Micawber, clearing his throat, and warming with the punch and with the fire. 'My dear, another glass?'

Mrs Micawber said it must be very little; but we couldn't allow that, so it was a glassful.

'As we are quite confidential here, Mr Copperfield,' said Mrs Micawber, sipping her punch, 'Mr Traddles being a part of our domesticity, I should much like to have your opinion on Mr Micawber's prospects. For corn,' said Mrs Micawber argumentatively, 'as I have repeatedly said to Mr Micawber, may be gentlemanly, but it is not remunerative. Commission to the extent of two and ninepence in a fortnight cannot, however limited our ideas, be considered remunerative.'

We were all agreed upon that.

'Then,' said Mrs Micawber, who prided herself on taking a clear view of things, and keeping Mr Micawber straight by her woman's wisdom, when he might otherwise go a little crooked, 'then I ask myself this question. If corn is not to be relied upon, what is? Are coals to be relied upon? Not at all. We have turned our attention to that experiment, on the suggestion of my family, and we find it fallacious.'

Mr Micawber, leaning back in his chair with his hands in his pockets, eyed us aside, and nodded his head, as much as to say that the case was very clearly put.

'The articles of corn and coals,' said Mrs Micawber, still more argumentatively, 'being equally out of the question, Mr Copperfield, I naturally look round the world, and say, 'What is there in which a person of Mr Micawber's talent is likely to succeed?' And I exclude the doing anything on commission, because commission is not a certainty. What is best suited to a person of Mr Micawber's peculiar temperament is, I am convinced, a certainty.'

Traddles and I both expressed, by a feeling murmur, that this great discovery was no doubt true of Mr Micawber, and that it did him much credit.

'I will not conceal from you, my dear Mr Copperfield,' said Mrs Micawber, 'that I have long felt the Brewing business to be particularly adapted to Mr Micawber. Look at Barclay and Perkins! Look at Truman, Hanbury, and Buxton! It is on that extensive footing that Mr Micawber, I know from my own knowledge of him, is calculated to shine; and the profits, I am told, are e-NOR-MOUS! But if Mr Micawber cannot get into those firms - which decline to answer his letters, when he offers his services even in an inferior capacity - what is the use of dwelling upon that idea? None. I may have a conviction that Mr Micawber's manners -'

'Hem! Really, my dear,' interposed Mr Micawber.

'My love, be silent,' said Mrs Micawber, laying her brown glove on his hand. 'I may have a conviction, Mr Copperfield, that Mr Micawber's manners peculiarly qualify him for the Banking business. I may argue within myself, that if I had a deposit at a banking-house, the manners of Mr Micawber, as representing that banking-house, would inspire confidence, and must extend the connexion. But if the various banking-houses refuse to avail themselves of Mr Micawber's abilities, or receive the offer of them with contumely, what is the use of dwelling upon THAT idea? None. As to originating a banking-business, I may know that there are members of my family who, if they chose to place their money in Mr Micawber's hands, might found an establishment of that description. But if they do NOT choose to place their money in Mr Micawber's hands - which they don't - what is the use of that? Again I contend that we are no farther advanced than we were before.'

I shook my head, and said, 'Not a bit.' Traddles also shook his head, and said, 'Not a bit.'

'What do I deduce from this?' Mrs Micawber went on to say, still with the same air of putting a case lucidly. 'What is the conclusion, my dear Mr Copperfield, to which I am irresistibly brought? Am I wrong in saying, it is clear that we must live?'

I answered 'Not at all!' and Traddles answered 'Not at all!' and I found myself afterwards sagely adding, alone, that a person must either live or die.

'Just so,' returned Mrs Micawber, 'It is precisely that. And the fact is, my dear Mr Copperfield, that we can not live without something widely different from existing circumstances shortly turning up. Now I am convinced, myself, and this I have pointed out to Mr Micawber several times of late, that things cannot be expected to turn up of themselves. We must, in a measure, assist to turn them up. I may be wrong, but I have formed that opinion.'

Both Traddles and I applauded it highly.

'Very well,' said Mrs Micawber. 'Then what do I recommend? Here is Mr Micawber with a variety of qualifications - with great talent -'

'Really, my love,' said Mr Micawber.

'Pray, my dear, allow me to conclude. Here is Mr Micawber, with a variety of qualifications, with great talent - I should say, with genius, but that may be the partiality of a wife -'

Traddles and I both murmured 'No.'

'And here is Mr Micawber without any suitable position or employment. Where does that responsibility rest? Clearly on society. Then I would make a fact so disgraceful known, and boldly challenge society to set it right. It appears to me, my dear Mr Copperfield,' said Mrs Micawber, forcibly, 'that what Mr Micawber has to do, is to throw down the gauntlet to society, and say, in effect, ‘Show me who will take that up. Let the party immediately step forward."

I ventured to ask Mrs Micawber how this was to be done.

'By advertising,' said Mrs Micawber - 'in all the papers. It appears to me, that what Mr Micawber has to do, in justice to himself, in justice to his family, and I will even go so far as to say in justice to society, by which he has been hitherto overlooked, is to advertise in all the papers; to describe himself plainly as so-and-so, with such and such qualifications and to put it thus: ‘Now employ me, on remunerative terms, and address, post-paid, to W. M., Post Office, Camden Town."

'This idea of Mrs Micawber's, my dear Copperfield,' said Mr Micawber, making his shirt-collar meet in front of his chin, and glancing at me sideways, 'is, in fact, the Leap to which I alluded, when I last had the pleasure of seeing you.'

'Advertising is rather expensive,' I remarked, dubiously.

'Exactly so!' said Mrs Micawber, preserving the same logical air. 'Quite true, my dear Mr Copperfield! I have made the identical observation to Mr Micawber. It is for that reason especially, that I think Mr Micawber ought (as I have already said, in justice to himself, in justice to his family, and in justice to society) to raise a certain sum of money - on a bill.' Mr Micawber, leaning back in his chair, trifled with his eye-glass and cast his eyes up at the ceiling; but I thought him observant of Traddles, too, who was looking at the fire.

'If no member of my family,' said Mrs Micawber, 'is possessed of sufficient natural feeling to negotiate that bill - I believe there is a better business-term to express what I mean -'

Mr Micawber, with his eyes still cast up at the ceiling, suggested 'Discount.'

'To discount that bill,' said Mrs Micawber, 'then my opinion is, that Mr Micawber should go into the City, should take that bill into the Money Market, and should dispose of it for what he can get. If the individuals in the Money Market oblige Mr Micawber to sustain a great sacrifice, that is between themselves and their consciences. I view it, steadily, as an investment. I recommend Mr Micawber, my dear Mr Copperfield, to do the same; to regard it as an investment which is sure of return, and to make up his mind to any sacrifice.'

I felt, but I am sure I don't know why, that this was self-denying and devoted in Mrs Micawber, and I uttered a murmur to that effect. Traddles, who took his tone from me, did likewise, still looking at the fire.

'I will not,' said Mrs Micawber, finishing her punch, and gathering her scarf about her shoulders, preparatory to her withdrawal to my bedroom: 'I will not protract these remarks on the subject of Mr Micawber's pecuniary affairs. At your fireside, my dear Mr Copperfield, and in the presence of Mr Traddles, who, though not so old a friend, is quite one of ourselves, I could not refrain from making you acquainted with the course I advise Mr Micawber to take. I feel that the time is arrived when Mr Micawber should exert himself and - I will add - assert himself, and it appears to me that these are the means. I am aware that I am merely a female, and that a masculine judgement is usually considered more competent to the discussion of such

questions; still I must not forget that, when I lived at home with my papa and mama, my papa was in the habit of saying, 'Emma's form is fragile, but her grasp of a subject is inferior to none.' That my papa was too partial, I well know; but that he was an observer of character in some degree, my duty and my reason equally forbid me to doubt.'

With these words, and resisting our entreaties that she would grace the remaining circulation of the punch with her presence, Mrs Micawber retired to my bedroom. And really I felt that she was a noble woman - the sort of woman who might have been a Roman matron, and done all manner of heroic things, in times of public trouble.

In the fervour of this impression, I congratulated Mr Micawber on the treasure he possessed. So did Traddles. Mr Micawber extended his hand to each of us in succession, and then covered his face with his pocket-handkerchief, which I think had more snuff upon it than he was aware of. He then returned to the punch, in the highest state of exhilaration.

He was full of eloquence. He gave us to understand that in our children we lived again, and that, under the pressure of pecuniary difficulties, any accession to their number was doubly welcome. He said that Mrs Micawber had latterly had her doubts on this point, but that he had dispelled them, and reassured her. As to her family, they were totally unworthy of her, and their sentiments were utterly indifferent to him, and they might - I quote his own expression - go to the Devil.

Mr Micawber then delivered a warm eulogy on Traddles. He said Traddles's was a character, to the steady virtues of which he (Mr Micawber) could lay no claim, but which, he thanked Heaven, he could admire. He feelingly alluded to the young lady, unknown, whom Traddles had honoured with his affection, and who had reciprocated that affection by honouring and blessing Traddles with her affection. Mr Micawber pledged her. So did I. Traddles thanked us both, by saying, with a simplicity and honesty I had sense enough to be quite charmed with, 'I am very much obliged to you indeed. And I do assure you, she's the dearest girl! -'

Mr Micawber took an early opportunity, after that, of hinting, with the utmost delicacy and ceremony, at the state of MY affections. Nothing but the serious assurance of his friend Copperfield to the contrary, he observed, could deprive him of the impression that his friend Copperfield loved and was beloved. After feeling very hot and uncomfortable for some time, and after a good deal of blushing, stammering, and denying, I said, having my glass in my hand, 'Well! I would give them D.!' which so excited and gratified Mr Micawber, that he ran with a glass of punch into my bedroom, in order that Mrs

Micawber might drink D., who drank it with enthusiasm, crying from within, in a shrill voice, 'Hear, hear! My dear Mr Copperfield, I am delighted. Hear!' and tapping at the wall, by way of applause.

Our conversation, afterwards, took a more worldly turn; Mr Micawber telling us that he found Camden Town inconvenient, and that the first thing he contemplated doing, when the advertisement should have been the cause of something satisfactory turning up, was to move. He mentioned a terrace at the western end of Oxford Street, fronting Hyde Park, on which he had always had his eye, but which he did not expect to attain immediately, as it would require a large establishment. There would probably be an interval, he explained, in which he should content himself with the upper part of a house, over some respectable place of business - say in Piccadilly, - which would be a cheerful situation for Mrs Micawber; and where, by throwing out a bow-window, or carrying up the roof another story, or making some little alteration of that sort, they might live, comfortably and reputably, for a few years. Whatever was reserved for him, he expressly said, or wherever his abode might be, we might rely on this - there would always be a room for Traddles, and a knife and fork for me. We acknowledged his kindness; and he begged us to forgive his having launched into these practical and business-like details, and to excuse it as natural in one who was making entirely new arrangements in life.

Mrs Micawber, tapping at the wall again to know if tea were ready, broke up this particular phase of our friendly conversation. She made tea for us in a most agreeable manner; and, whenever I went near her, in handing about the tea-cups and bread-and-butter, asked me, in a whisper, whether D. was fair, or dark, or whether she was short, or tall: or something of that kind; which I think I liked. After tea, we discussed a variety of topics before the fire; and Mrs Micawber was good enough to sing us (in a small, thin, flat voice, which I remembered to have considered, when I first knew her, the very table-beer of acoustics) the favourite ballads of 'The Dashing White Sergeant', and 'Little Tafflin'. For both of these songs Mrs Micawber had been famous when she lived at home with her papa and mama. Mr Micawber told us, that when he heard her sing the first one, on the first occasion of his seeing her beneath the parental roof, she had attracted his attention in an extraordinary degree; but that when it came to Little Tafflin, he had resolved to win that woman or perish in the attempt.

It was between ten and eleven o'clock when Mrs Micawber rose to replace her cap in the whitey-brown paper parcel, and to put on her bonnet. Mr Micawber took the opportunity of Traddles putting on his great-coat, to slip a letter into my hand, with a whispered request that I would read it at my leisure. I also took the opportunity of my holding

a candle over the banisters to light them down, when Mr Micawber was going first, leading Mrs Micawber, and Traddles was following with the cap, to detain Traddles for a moment on the top of the stairs.

'Traddles,' said I, 'Mr Micawber don't mean any harm, poor fellow: but, if I were you, I wouldn't lend him anything.'

'My dear Copperfield,' returned Traddles, smiling, 'I haven't got anything to lend.'

'You have got a name, you know,' said I.

'Oh! You call THAT something to lend?' returned Traddles, with a thoughtful look.

'Certainly.'

'Oh!' said Traddles. 'Yes, to be sure! I am very much obliged to you, Copperfield; but - I am afraid I have lent him that already.'

'For the bill that is to be a certain investment?' I inquired.

'No,' said Traddles. 'Not for that one. This is the first I have heard of that one. I have been thinking that he will most likely propose that one, on the way home. Mine's another.'

'I hope there will be nothing wrong about it,' said I. 'I hope not,' said Traddles. 'I should think not, though, because he told me, only the other day, that it was provided for. That was Mr Micawber's expression, 'Provided for."

Mr Micawber looking up at this juncture to where we were standing, I had only time to repeat my caution. Traddles thanked me, and descended. But I was much afraid, when I observed the good-natured manner in which he went down with the cap in his hand, and gave Mrs Micawber his arm, that he would be carried into the Money Market neck and heels.

I returned to my fireside, and was musing, half gravely and half laughing, on the character of Mr Micawber and the old relations between us, when I heard a quick step ascending the stairs. At first, I thought it was Traddles coming back for something Mrs Micawber had left behind; but as the step approached, I knew it, and felt my heart beat high, and the blood rush to my face, for it was Steerforth's.

I was never unmindful of Agnes, and she never left that sanctuary in my thoughts - if I may call it so - where I had placed her from the first. But when he entered, and stood before me with his hand out, the

darkness that had fallen on him changed to light, and I felt confounded and ashamed of having doubted one I loved so heartily. I loved her none the less; I thought of her as the same benignant, gentle angel in my life; I reproached myself, not her, with having done him an injury; and I would have made him any atonement if I had known what to make, and how to make it.

'Why, Daisy, old boy, dumb-foundered!' laughed Steerforth, shaking my hand heartily, and throwing it gaily away. 'Have I detected you in another feast, you Sybarite! These Doctors' Commons fellows are the gayest men in town, I believe, and beat us sober Oxford people all to nothing!' His bright glance went merrily round the room, as he took the seat on the sofa opposite to me, which Mrs Micawber had recently vacated, and stirred the fire into a blaze.

'I was so surprised at first,' said I, giving him welcome with all the cordiality I felt, 'that I had hardly breath to greet you with, Steerforth.'

'Well, the sight of me is good for sore eyes, as the Scotch say,' replied Steerforth, 'and so is the sight of you, Daisy, in full bloom. How are you, my Bacchanal?'

'I am very well,' said I; 'and not at all Bacchanalian tonight, though I confess to another party of three.'

'All of whom I met in the street, talking loud in your praise,' returned Steerforth. 'Who's our friend in the tights?'

I gave him the best idea I could, in a few words, of Mr Micawber. He laughed heartily at my feeble portrait of that gentleman, and said he was a man to know, and he must know him. 'But who do you suppose our other friend is?' said I, in my turn.

'Heaven knows,' said Steerforth. 'Not a bore, I hope? I thought he looked a little like one.'

'Traddles!' I replied, triumphantly.

'Who's he?' asked Steerforth, in his careless way.

'Don't you remember Traddles? Traddles in our room at Salem House?'

'Oh! That fellow!' said Steerforth, beating a lump of coal on the top of the fire, with the poker. 'Is he as soft as ever? And where the deuce did you pick him up?'

I extolled Traddles in reply, as highly as I could; for I felt that Steerforth rather slighted him. Steerforth, dismissing the subject with a light nod, and a smile, and the remark that he would be glad to see the old fellow too, for he had always been an odd fish, inquired if I could give him anything to eat? During most of this short dialogue, when he had not been speaking in a wild vivacious manner, he had sat idly beating on the lump of coal with the poker. I observed that he did the same thing while I was getting out the remains of the pigeon-pie, and so forth.

'Why, Daisy, here's a supper for a king!' he exclaimed, starting out of his silence with a burst, and taking his seat at the table. 'I shall do it justice, for I have come from Yarmouth.'

'I thought you came from Oxford?' I returned.

'Not I,' said Steerforth. 'I have been seafaring - better employed.'

'Littimer was here today, to inquire for you,' I remarked, 'and I understood him that you were at Oxford; though, now I think of it, he certainly did not say so.'

'Littimer is a greater fool than I thought him, to have been inquiring for me at all,' said Steerforth, jovially pouring out a glass of wine, and drinking to me. 'As to understanding him, you are a cleverer fellow than most of us, Daisy, if you can do that.'

'That's true, indeed,' said I, moving my chair to the table. 'So you have been at Yarmouth, Steerforth!' interested to know all about it. 'Have you been there long?'

'No,' he returned. 'An escapade of a week or so.'

'And how are they all? Of course, little Emily is not married yet?'

'Not yet. Going to be, I believe - in so many weeks, or months, or something or other. I have not seen much of 'em. By the by'; he laid down his knife and fork, which he had been using with great diligence, and began feeling in his pockets; 'I have a letter for you.'

'From whom?'

'Why, from your old nurse,' he returned, taking some papers out of his breast pocket. "J. Steerforth, Esquire, debtor, to The Willing Mind'; that's not it. Patience, and we'll find it presently. Old what's-his-name's in a bad way, and it's about that, I believe.'

'Barkis, do you mean?'

'Yes!' still feeling in his pockets, and looking over their contents: 'it's all over with poor Barkis, I am afraid. I saw a little apothecary there - surgeon, or whatever he is - who brought your worship into the world. He was mighty learned about the case, to me; but the upshot of his opinion was, that the carrier was making his last journey rather fast. - Put your hand into the breast pocket of my great-coat on the chair yonder, and I think you'll find the letter. Is it there?'

'Here it is!' said I.

'That's right!'

It was from Peggotty; something less legible than usual, and brief. It informed me of her husband's hopeless state, and hinted at his being 'a little nearer' than heretofore, and consequently more difficult to manage for his own comfort. It said nothing of her weariness and watching, and praised him highly. It was written with a plain, unaffected, homely piety that I knew to be genuine, and ended with 'my duty to my ever darling' - meaning myself.

While I deciphered it, Steerforth continued to eat and drink.

'It's a bad job,' he said, when I had done; 'but the sun sets every day, and people die every minute, and we mustn't be scared by the common lot. If we failed to hold our own, because that equal foot at all men's doors was heard knocking somewhere, every object in this world would slip from us. No! Ride on! Rough-shod if need be, smooth-shod if that will do, but ride on! Ride on over all obstacles, and win the race!'

'And win what race?' said I.

'The race that one has started in,' said he. 'Ride on!'

I noticed, I remember, as he paused, looking at me with his handsome head a little thrown back, and his glass raised in his hand, that, though the freshness of the sea-wind was on his face, and it was ruddy, there were traces in it, made since I last saw it, as if he had applied himself to some habitual strain of the fervent energy which, when roused, was so passionately roused within him. I had it in my thoughts to remonstrate with him upon his desperate way of pursuing any fancy that he took - such as this buffeting of rough seas, and braving of hard weather, for example - when my mind glanced off to the immediate subject of our conversation again, and pursued that instead.

'I tell you what, Steerforth,' said I, 'if your high spirits will listen to me -'

'They are potent spirits, and will do whatever you like,' he answered, moving from the table to the fireside again.

'Then I tell you what, Steerforth. I think I will go down and see my old nurse. It is not that I can do her any good, or render her any real service; but she is so attached to me that my visit will have as much effect on her, as if I could do both. She will take it so kindly that it will be a comfort and support to her. It is no great effort to make, I am sure, for such a friend as she has been to me. Wouldn't you go a day's journey, if you were in my place?'

His face was thoughtful, and he sat considering a little before he answered, in a low voice, 'Well! Go. You can do no harm.'

'You have just come back,' said I, 'and it would be in vain to ask you to go with me?'

'Quite,' he returned. 'I am for Highgate tonight. I have not seen my mother this long time, and it lies upon my conscience, for it's something to be loved as she loves her prodigal son. - Bah! Nonsense! - You mean to go tomorrow, I suppose?' he said, holding me out at arm's length, with a hand on each of my shoulders.

'Yes, I think so.'

'Well, then, don't go till next day. I wanted you to come and stay a few days with us. Here I am, on purpose to bid you, and you fly off to Yarmouth!'

'You are a nice fellow to talk of flying off, Steerforth, who are always running wild on some unknown expedition or other!'

He looked at me for a moment without speaking, and then rejoined, still holding me as before, and giving me a shake:

'Come! Say the next day, and pass as much of tomorrow as you can with us! Who knows when we may meet again, else? Come! Say the next day! I want you to stand between Rosa Dartle and me, and keep us asunder.'

'Would you love each other too much, without me?'

'Yes; or hate,' laughed Steerforth; 'no matter which. Come! Say the next day!'

I said the next day; and he put on his great-coat and lighted his cigar, and set off to walk home. Finding him in this intention, I put on my own great-coat (but did not light my own cigar, having had enough of

that for one while) and walked with him as far as the open road: a dull road, then, at night. He was in great spirits all the way; and when we parted, and I looked after him going so gallantly and airily homeward, I thought of his saying, 'Ride on over all obstacles, and win the race!' and wished, for the first time, that he had some worthy race to run.

I was undressing in my own room, when Mr Micawber's letter tumbled on the floor. Thus reminded of it, I broke the seal and read as follows. It was dated an hour and a half before dinner. I am not sure whether I have mentioned that, when Mr Micawber was at any particularly desperate crisis, he used a sort of legal phraseology, which he seemed to think equivalent to winding up his affairs.

'SIR - for I dare not say my dear Copperfield, 'It is expedient that I should inform you that the undersigned is Crushed. Some flickering efforts to spare you the premature knowledge of his calamitous position, you may observe in him this day; but hope has sunk beneath the horizon, and the undersigned is Crushed.

'The present communication is penned within the personal range (I cannot call it the society) of an individual, in a state closely bordering on intoxication, employed by a broker. That individual is in legal possession of the premises, under a distress for rent. His inventory includes, not only the chattels and effects of every description belonging to the undersigned, as yearly tenant of this habitation, but also those appertaining to Mr Thomas Traddles, lodger, a member of the Honourable Society of the Inner Temple.

'If any drop of gloom were wanting in the overflowing cup, which is now ‘commended’ (in the language of an immortal Writer) to the lips of the undersigned, it would be found in the fact, that a friendly acceptance granted to the undersigned, by the before-mentioned Mr Thomas Traddles, for the sum Of 23l 4s 9 1/2d is over due, and is NOT provided for. Also, in the fact that the living responsibilities clinging to the undersigned will, in the course of nature, be increased by the sum of one more helpless victim; whose miserable appearance may be looked for - in round numbers - at the expiration of a period not exceeding six lunar months from the present date.

'After premising thus much, it would be a work of supererogation to add, that dust and ashes are for ever scattered

'On 'The 'Head 'Of 'WILKINS MICAWBER.'

Poor Traddles! I knew enough of Mr Micawber by this time, to foresee that he might be expected to recover the blow; but my night's rest was sorely distressed by thoughts of Traddles, and of the curate's daughter, who was one of ten, down in Devonshire, and who was such

a dear girl, and who would wait for Traddles (ominous praise!) until she was sixty, or any age that could be mentioned.