Chapter XLII - Mischief

I feel as if it were not for me to record, even though this manuscript is intended for no eyes but mine, how hard I worked at that tremendous short-hand, and all improvement appertaining to it, in my sense of responsibility to Dora and her aunts. I will only add, to what I have already written of my perseverance at this time of my life, and of a patient and continuous energy which then began to be matured within me, and which I know to be the strong part of my character, if it have any strength at all, that there, on looking back, I find the source of my success. I have been very fortunate in worldly matters; many men have worked much harder, and not succeeded half so well; but I never could have done what I have done, without the habits of punctuality, order, and diligence, without the determination to concentrate myself on one object at a time, no matter how quickly its successor should come upon its heels, which I then formed. Heaven knows I write this, in no spirit of self-laudation. The man who reviews his own life, as I do mine, in going on here, from page to page, had need to have been a good man indeed, if he would be spared the sharp consciousness of many talents neglected, many opportunities wasted, many erratic and perverted feelings constantly at war within his breast, and defeating him. I do not hold one natural gift, I dare say, that I have not abused. My meaning simply is, that whatever I have tried to do in life, I have tried with all my heart to do well; that whatever I have devoted myself to, I have devoted myself to completely; that in great aims and in small, I have always been thoroughly in earnest. I have never believed it possible that any natural or improved ability can claim immunity from the companionship of the steady, plain, hard-working qualities, and hope to gain its end. There is no such thing as such fulfilment on this earth. Some happy talent, and some fortunate opportunity, may form the two sides of the ladder on which some men mount, but the rounds of that ladder must be made of stuff to stand wear and tear; and there is no substitute for thorough-going, ardent, and sincere earnestness. Never to put one hand to anything, on which I could throw my whole self; and never to affect depreciation of my work, whatever it was; I find, now, to have been my golden rules.

How much of the practice I have just reduced to precept, I owe to Agnes, I will not repeat here. My narrative proceeds to Agnes, with a thankful love.

She came on a visit of a fortnight to the Doctor's. Mr Wickfield was the Doctor's old friend, and the Doctor wished to talk with him, and do him good. It had been matter of conversation with Agnes when she was last in town, and this visit was the result. She and her father came together. I was not much surprised to hear from her that she had engaged to find a lodging in the neighbourhood for Mrs Heep,

whose rheumatic complaint required change of air, and who would be charmed to have it in such company. Neither was I surprised when, on the very next day, Uriah, like a dutiful son, brought his worthy mother to take possession.

'You see, Master Copperfield,' said he, as he forced himself upon my company for a turn in the Doctor's garden, 'where a person loves, a person is a little jealous - leastways, anxious to keep an eye on the beloved one.'

'Of whom are you jealous, now?' said I.

'Thanks to you, Master Copperfield,' he returned, 'of no one in particular just at present - no male person, at least.'

'Do you mean that you are jealous of a female person?'

He gave me a sidelong glance out of his sinister red eyes, and laughed.

'Really, Master Copperfield,' he said, '- I should say Mister, but I know you'll excuse the abit I've got into - you're so insinuating, that you draw me like a corkscrew! Well, I don't mind telling you,' putting his fish-like hand on mine, 'I'm not a lady's man in general, sir, and I never was, with Mrs Strong.'

His eyes looked green now, as they watched mine with a rascally cunning.

'What do you mean?' said I.

'Why, though I am a lawyer, Master Copperfield,' he replied, with a dry grin, 'I mean, just at present, what I say.'

'And what do you mean by your look?' I retorted, quietly.

'By my look? Dear me, Copperfield, that's sharp practice! What do I mean by my look?'

'Yes,' said I. 'By your look.'

He seemed very much amused, and laughed as heartily as it was in his nature to laugh. After some scraping of his chin with his hand, he went on to say, with his eyes cast downward - still scraping, very slowly:

'When I was but an umble clerk, she always looked down upon me. She was for ever having my Agnes backwards and forwards at her

ouse, and she was for ever being a friend to you, Master Copperfield; but I was too far beneath her, myself, to be noticed.'

'Well?' said I; 'suppose you were!'

'- And beneath him too,' pursued Uriah, very distinctly, and in a meditative tone of voice, as he continued to scrape his chin.

'Don't you know the Doctor better,' said I, 'than to suppose him conscious of your existence, when you were not before him?'

He directed his eyes at me in that sidelong glance again, and he made his face very lantern-jawed, for the greater convenience of scraping, as he answered:

'Oh dear, I am not referring to the Doctor! Oh no, poor man! I mean Mr Maldon!'

My heart quite died within me. All my old doubts and apprehensions on that subject, all the Doctor's happiness and peace, all the mingled possibilities of innocence and compromise, that I could not unravel, I saw, in a moment, at the mercy of this fellow's twisting.

'He never could come into the office, without ordering and shoving me about,' said Uriah. 'One of your fine gentlemen he was! I was very meek and umble - and I am. But I didn't like that sort of thing - and I don't!'

He left off scraping his chin, and sucked in his cheeks until they seemed to meet inside; keeping his sidelong glance upon me all the while.

'She is one of your lovely women, she is,' he pursued, when he had slowly restored his face to its natural form; 'and ready to be no friend to such as me, I know. She's just the person as would put my Agnes up to higher sort of game. Now, I ain't one of your lady's men, Master Copperfield; but I've had eyes in my ed, a pretty long time back. We umble ones have got eyes, mostly speaking - and we look out of 'em.'

I endeavoured to appear unconscious and not disquieted, but, I saw in his face, with poor success.

'Now, I'm not a-going to let myself be run down, Copperfield,' he continued, raising that part of his countenance, where his red eyebrows would have been if he had had any, with malignant triumph, 'and I shall do what I can to put a stop to this friendship. I don't approve of it. I don't mind acknowledging to you that I've got rather a

grudging disposition, and want to keep off all intruders. I ain't a-going, if I know it, to run the risk of being plotted against.'

'You are always plotting, and delude yourself into the belief that everybody else is doing the like, I think,' said I.

'Perhaps so, Master Copperfield,' he replied. 'But I've got a motive, as my fellow-partner used to say; and I go at it tooth and nail. I mustn't be put upon, as a numble person, too much. I can't allow people in my way. Really they must come out of the cart, Master Copperfield!'

'I don't understand you,' said I.

'Don't you, though?' he returned, with one of his jerks. 'I'm astonished at that, Master Copperfield, you being usually so quick! I'll try to be plainer, another time. - Is that Mr Maldon a-norseback, ringing at the gate, sir?'

'It looks like him,' I replied, as carelessly as I could.

Uriah stopped short, put his hands between his great knobs of knees, and doubled himself up with laughter. With perfectly silent laughter. Not a sound escaped from him. I was so repelled by his odious behaviour, particularly by this concluding instance, that I turned away without any ceremony; and left him doubled up in the middle of the garden, like a scarecrow in want of support.

It was not on that evening; but, as I well remember, on the next evening but one, which was a Sunday; that I took Agnes to see Dora. I had arranged the visit, beforehand, with Miss Lavinia; and Agnes was expected to tea.

I was in a flutter of pride and anxiety; pride in my dear little betrothed, and anxiety that Agnes should like her. All the way to Putney, Agnes being inside the stage-coach, and I outside, I pictured Dora to myself in every one of the pretty looks I knew so well; now making up my mind that I should like her to look exactly as she looked at such a time, and then doubting whether I should not prefer her looking as she looked at such another time; and almost worrying myself into a fever about it.

I was troubled by no doubt of her being very pretty, in any case; but it fell out that I had never seen her look so well. She was not in the drawing-room when I presented Agnes to her little aunts, but was shyly keeping out of the way. I knew where to look for her, now; and sure enough I found her stopping her ears again, behind the same dull old door.

At first she wouldn't come at all; and then she pleaded for five minutes by my watch. When at length she put her arm through mine, to be taken to the drawing-room, her charming little face was flushed, and had never been so pretty. But, when we went into the room, and it turned pale, she was ten thousand times prettier yet.

Dora was afraid of Agnes. She had told me that she knew Agnes was 'too clever'. But when she saw her looking at once so cheerful and so earnest, and so thoughtful, and so good, she gave a faint little cry of pleased surprise, and just put her affectionate arms round Agnes's neck, and laid her innocent cheek against her face.

I never was so happy. I never was so pleased as when I saw those two sit down together, side by side. As when I saw my little darling looking up so naturally to those cordial eyes. As when I saw the tender, beautiful regard which Agnes cast upon her.

Miss Lavinia and Miss Clarissa partook, in their way, of my joy. It was the pleasantest tea-table in the world. Miss Clarissa presided. I cut and handed the sweet seed-cake - the little sisters had a bird-like fondness for picking up seeds and pecking at sugar; Miss Lavinia looked on with benignant patronage, as if our happy love were all her work; and we were perfectly contented with ourselves and one another.

The gentle cheerfulness of Agnes went to all their hearts. Her quiet interest in everything that interested Dora; her manner of making acquaintance with Jip (who responded instantly); her pleasant way, when Dora was ashamed to come over to her usual seat by me; her modest grace and ease, eliciting a crowd of blushing little marks of confidence from Dora; seemed to make our circle quite complete.

'I am so glad,' said Dora, after tea, 'that you like me. I didn't think you would; and I want, more than ever, to be liked, now Julia Mills is gone.'

I have omitted to mention it, by the by. Miss Mills had sailed, and Dora and I had gone aboard a great East Indiaman at Gravesend to see her; and we had had preserved ginger, and guava, and other delicacies of that sort for lunch; and we had left Miss Mills weeping on a camp-stool on the quarter-deck, with a large new diary under her arm, in which the original reflections awakened by the contemplation of Ocean were to be recorded under lock and key.

Agnes said she was afraid I must have given her an unpromising character; but Dora corrected that directly.

'Oh no!' she said, shaking her curls at me; 'it was all praise. He thinks so much of your opinion, that I was quite afraid of it.'

'My good opinion cannot strengthen his attachment to some people whom he knows,' said Agnes, with a smile; 'it is not worth their having.'

'But please let me have it,' said Dora, in her coaxing way, 'if you can!'

We made merry about Dora's wanting to be liked, and Dora said I was a goose, and she didn't like me at any rate, and the short evening flew away on gossamer-wings. The time was at hand when the coach was to call for us. I was standing alone before the fire, when Dora came stealing softly in, to give me that usual precious little kiss before I went.

'Don't you think, if I had had her for a friend a long time ago, Doady,' said Dora, her bright eyes shining very brightly, and her little right hand idly busying itself with one of the buttons of my coat, 'I might have been more clever perhaps?'

'My love!' said I, 'what nonsense!'

'Do you think it is nonsense?' returned Dora, without looking at me. 'Are you sure it is?'

'Of course I am!' 'I have forgotten,' said Dora, still turning the button round and round, 'what relation Agnes is to you, you dear bad boy.'

'No blood-relation,' I replied; 'but we were brought up together, like brother and sister.'

'I wonder why you ever fell in love with me?' said Dora, beginning on another button of my coat.

'Perhaps because I couldn't see you, and not love you, Dora!'

'Suppose you had never seen me at all,' said Dora, going to another button.

'Suppose we had never been born!' said I, gaily.

I wondered what she was thinking about, as I glanced in admiring silence at the little soft hand travelling up the row of buttons on my coat, and at the clustering hair that lay against my breast, and at the lashes of her downcast eyes, slightly rising as they followed her idle fingers. At length her eyes were lifted up to mine, and she stood on

tiptoe to give me, more thoughtfully than usual, that precious little kiss - once, twice, three times - and went out of the room.

They all came back together within five minutes afterwards, and Dora's unusual thoughtfulness was quite gone then. She was laughingly resolved to put Jip through the whole of his performances, before the coach came. They took some time (not so much on account of their variety, as Jip's reluctance), and were still unfinished when it was heard at the door. There was a hurried but affectionate parting between Agnes and herself; and Dora was to write to Agnes (who was not to mind her letters being foolish, she said), and Agnes was to write to Dora; and they had a second parting at the coach door, and a third when Dora, in spite of the remonstrances of Miss Lavinia, would come running out once more to remind Agnes at the coach window about writing, and to shake her curls at me on the box.

The stage-coach was to put us down near Covent Garden, where we were to take another stage-coach for Highgate. I was impatient for the short walk in the interval, that Agnes might praise Dora to me. Ah! what praise it was! How lovingly and fervently did it commend the pretty creature I had won, with all her artless graces best displayed, to my most gentle care! How thoughtfully remind me, yet with no pretence of doing so, of the trust in which I held the orphan child!

Never, never, had I loved Dora so deeply and truly, as I loved her that night. When we had again alighted, and were walking in the starlight along the quiet road that led to the Doctor's house, I told Agnes it was her doing.

'When you were sitting by her,' said I, 'you seemed to be no less her guardian angel than mine; and you seem so now, Agnes.'

'A poor angel,' she returned, 'but faithful.'

The clear tone of her voice, going straight to my heart, made it natural to me to say:

'The cheerfulness that belongs to you, Agnes (and to no one else that ever I have seen), is so restored, I have observed today, that I have begun to hope you are happier at home?'

'I am happier in myself,' she said; 'I am quite cheerful and light-hearted.'

I glanced at the serene face looking upward, and thought it was the stars that made it seem so noble.

'There has been no change at home,' said Agnes, after a few moments.

'No fresh reference,' said I, 'to - I wouldn't distress you, Agnes, but I cannot help asking - to what we spoke of, when we parted last?'

'No, none,' she answered.

'I have thought so much about it.'

'You must think less about it. Remember that I confide in simple love and truth at last. Have no apprehensions for me, Trotwood,' she added, after a moment; 'the step you dread my taking, I shall never take.'

Although I think I had never really feared it, in any season of cool reflection, it was an unspeakable relief to me to have this assurance from her own truthful lips. I told her so, earnestly.

'And when this visit is over,' said I, - 'for we may not be alone another time, - how long is it likely to be, my dear Agnes, before you come to London again?'

'Probably a long time,' she replied; 'I think it will be best - for papa's sake - to remain at home. We are not likely to meet often, for some time to come; but I shall be a good correspondent of Dora's, and we shall frequently hear of one another that way.'

We were now within the little courtyard of the Doctor's cottage. It was growing late. There was a light in the window of Mrs Strong's chamber, and Agnes, pointing to it, bade me good night.

'Do not be troubled,' she said, giving me her hand, 'by our misfortunes and anxieties. I can be happier in nothing than in your happiness. If you can ever give me help, rely upon it I will ask you for it. God bless you always!' In her beaming smile, and in these last tones of her cheerful voice, I seemed again to see and hear my little Dora in her company. I stood awhile, looking through the porch at the stars, with a heart full of love and gratitude, and then walked slowly forth. I had engaged a bed at a decent alehouse close by, and was going out at the gate, when, happening to turn my head, I saw a light in the Doctor's study. A half-reproachful fancy came into my mind, that he had been working at the Dictionary without my help. With the view of seeing if this were so, and, in any case, of bidding him good night, if he were yet sitting among his books, I turned back, and going softly across the hall, and gently opening the door, looked in.

The first person whom I saw, to my surprise, by the sober light of the shaded lamp, was Uriah. He was standing close beside it, with one of his skeleton hands over his mouth, and the other resting on the Doctor's table. The Doctor sat in his study chair, covering his face

with his hands. Mr Wickfield, sorely troubled and distressed, was leaning forward, irresolutely touching the Doctor's arm.

For an instant, I supposed that the Doctor was ill. I hastily advanced a step under that impression, when I met Uriah's eye, and saw what was the matter. I would have withdrawn, but the Doctor made a gesture to detain me, and I remained.

'At any rate,' observed Uriah, with a writhe of his ungainly person, 'we may keep the door shut. We needn't make it known to ALL the town.'

Saying which, he went on his toes to the door, which I had left open, and carefully closed it. He then came back, and took up his former position. There was an obtrusive show of compassionate zeal in his voice and manner, more intolerable - at least to me - than any demeanour he could have assumed.

'I have felt it incumbent upon me, Master Copperfield,' said Uriah, 'to point out to Doctor Strong what you and me have already talked about. You didn't exactly understand me, though?'

I gave him a look, but no other answer; and, going to my good old master, said a few words that I meant to be words of comfort and encouragement. He put his hand upon my shoulder, as it had been his custom to do when I was quite a little fellow, but did not lift his grey head.

'As you didn't understand me, Master Copperfield,' resumed Uriah in the same officious manner, 'I may take the liberty of umbly mentioning, being among friends, that I have called Doctor Strong's attention to the goings-on of Mrs Strong. It's much against the grain with me, I assure you, Copperfield, to be concerned in anything so unpleasant; but really, as it is, we're all mixing ourselves up with what oughtn't to be. That was what my meaning was, sir, when you didn't understand me.' I wonder now, when I recall his leer, that I did not collar him, and try to shake the breath out of his body.

'I dare say I didn't make myself very clear,' he went on, 'nor you neither. Naturally, we was both of us inclined to give such a subject a wide berth. Hows'ever, at last I have made up my mind to speak plain; and I have mentioned to Doctor Strong that - did you speak, sir?'

This was to the Doctor, who had moaned. The sound might have touched any heart, I thought, but it had no effect upon Uriah's.

'- mentioned to Doctor Strong,' he proceeded, 'that anyone may see that Mr Maldon, and the lovely and agreeable lady as is Doctor Strong's wife, are too sweet on one another. Really the time is come

(we being at present all mixing ourselves up with what oughtn't to be), when Doctor Strong must be told that this was full as plain to everybody as the sun, before Mr Maldon went to India; that Mr Maldon made excuses to come back, for nothing else; and that he's always here, for nothing else. When you come in, sir, I was just putting it to my fellow-partner,' towards whom he turned, 'to say to Doctor Strong upon his word and honour, whether he'd ever been of this opinion long ago, or not. Come, Mr Wickfield, sir! Would you be so good as tell us? Yes or no, sir? Come, partner!'

'For God's sake, my dear Doctor,' said Mr Wickfield again laying his irresolute hand upon the Doctor's arm, 'don't attach too much weight to any suspicions I may have entertained.'

'There!' cried Uriah, shaking his head. 'What a melancholy confirmation: ain't it? Him! Such an old friend! Bless your soul, when I was nothing but a clerk in his office, Copperfield, I've seen him twenty times, if I've seen him once, quite in a taking about it - quite put out, you know (and very proper in him as a father; I'm sure I can't blame him), to think that Miss Agnes was mixing herself up with what oughtn't to be.'

'My dear Strong,' said Mr Wickfield in a tremulous voice, 'my good friend, I needn't tell you that it has been my vice to look for some one master motive in everybody, and to try all actions by one narrow test. I may have fallen into such doubts as I have had, through this mistake.'

'You have had doubts, Wickfield,' said the Doctor, without lifting up his head. 'You have had doubts.'

'Speak up, fellow-partner,' urged Uriah.

'I had, at one time, certainly,' said Mr Wickfield. 'I - God forgive me - I thought YOU had.'

'No, no, no!' returned the Doctor, in a tone of most pathetic grief. 'I thought, at one time,' said Mr Wickfield, 'that you wished to send Maldon abroad to effect a desirable separation.'

'No, no, no!' returned the Doctor. 'To give Annie pleasure, by making some provision for the companion of her childhood. Nothing else.'

'So I found,' said Mr Wickfield. 'I couldn't doubt it, when you told me so. But I thought - I implore you to remember the narrow construction which has been my besetting sin - that, in a case where there was so much disparity in point of years -'

'That's the way to put it, you see, Master Copperfield!' observed Uriah, with fawning and offensive pity.

'- a lady of such youth, and such attractions, however real her respect for you, might have been influenced in marrying, by worldly considerations only. I make no allowance for innumerable feelings and circumstances that may have all tended to good. For Heaven's sake remember that!'

'How kind he puts it!' said Uriah, shaking his head.

'Always observing her from one point of view,' said Mr Wickfield; 'but by all that is dear to you, my old friend, I entreat you to consider what it was; I am forced to confess now, having no escape -'

'No! There's no way out of it, Mr Wickfield, sir,' observed Uriah, 'when it's got to this.'

'- that I did,' said Mr Wickfield, glancing helplessly and distractedly at his partner, 'that I did doubt her, and think her wanting in her duty to you; and that I did sometimes, if I must say all, feel averse to Agnes being in such a familiar relation towards her, as to see what I saw, or in my diseased theory fancied that I saw. I never mentioned this to anyone. I never meant it to be known to anyone. And though it is terrible to you to hear,' said Mr Wickfield, quite subdued, 'if you knew how terrible it is for me to tell, you would feel compassion for me!'

The Doctor, in the perfect goodness of his nature, put out his hand. Mr Wickfield held it for a little while in his, with his head bowed down.

'I am sure,' said Uriah, writhing himself into the silence like a Conger-eel, 'that this is a subject full of unpleasantness to everybody. But since we have got so far, I ought to take the liberty of mentioning that Copperfield has noticed it too.'

I turned upon him, and asked him how he dared refer to me!

'Oh! it's very kind of you, Copperfield,' returned Uriah, undulating all over, 'and we all know what an amiable character yours is; but you know that the moment I spoke to you the other night, you knew what I meant. You know you knew what I meant, Copperfield. Don't deny it! You deny it with the best intentions; but don't do it, Copperfield.'

I saw the mild eye of the good old Doctor turned upon me for a moment, and I felt that the confession of my old misgivings and remembrances was too plainly written in my face to be overlooked. It was of no use raging. I could not undo that. Say what I would, I could not unsay it.

We were silent again, and remained so, until the Doctor rose and walked twice or thrice across the room. Presently he returned to where his chair stood; and, leaning on the back of it, and occasionally putting his handkerchief to his eyes, with a simple honesty that did him more honour, to my thinking, than any disguise he could have effected, said:

'I have been much to blame. I believe I have been very much to blame. I have exposed one whom I hold in my heart, to trials and aspersions - I call them aspersions, even to have been conceived in anybody's inmost mind - of which she never, but for me, could have been the object.'

Uriah Heep gave a kind of snivel. I think to express sympathy.

'Of which my Annie,' said the Doctor, 'never, but for me, could have been the object. Gentlemen, I am old now, as you know; I do not feel, tonight, that I have much to live for. But my life - my Life - upon the truth and honour of the dear lady who has been the subject of this conversation!'

I do not think that the best embodiment of chivalry, the realization of the handsomest and most romantic figure ever imagined by painter, could have said this, with a more impressive and affecting dignity than the plain old Doctor did.

'But I am not prepared,' he went on, 'to deny - perhaps I may have been, without knowing it, in some degree prepared to admit - that I may have unwittingly ensnared that lady into an unhappy marriage. I am a man quite unaccustomed to observe; and I cannot but believe that the observation of several people, of different ages and positions, all too plainly tending in one direction (and that so natural), is better than mine.'

I had often admired, as I have elsewhere described, his benignant manner towards his youthful wife; but the respectful tenderness he manifested in every reference to her on this occasion, and the almost reverential manner in which he put away from him the lightest doubt of her integrity, exalted him, in my eyes, beyond description.

'I married that lady,' said the Doctor, 'when she was extremely young. I took her to myself when her character was scarcely formed. So far as it was developed, it had been my happiness to form it. I knew her father well. I knew her well. I had taught her what I could, for the love of all her beautiful and virtuous qualities. If I did her wrong; as I fear I did, in taking advantage (but I never meant it) of her gratitude and her affection; I ask pardon of that lady, in my heart!'

He walked across the room, and came back to the same place; holding the chair with a grasp that trembled, like his subdued voice, in its earnestness.

'I regarded myself as a refuge, for her, from the dangers and vicissitudes of life. I persuaded myself that, unequal though we were in years, she would live tranquilly and contentedly with me. I did not shut out of my consideration the time when I should leave her free, and still young and still beautiful, but with her judgement more matured - no, gentlemen - upon my truth!'

His homely figure seemed to be lightened up by his fidelity and generosity. Every word he uttered had a force that no other grace could have imparted to it.

'My life with this lady has been very happy. Until tonight, I have had uninterrupted occasion to bless the day on which I did her great injustice.'

His voice, more and more faltering in the utterance of these words, stopped for a few moments; then he went on:

'Once awakened from my dream - I have been a poor dreamer, in one way or other, all my life - I see how natural it is that she should have some regretful feeling towards her old companion and her equal. That she does regard him with some innocent regret, with some blameless thoughts of what might have been, but for me, is, I fear, too true. Much that I have seen, but not noted, has come back upon me with new meaning, during this last trying hour. But, beyond this, gentlemen, the dear lady's name never must be coupled with a word, a breath, of doubt.'

For a little while, his eye kindled and his voice was firm; for a little while he was again silent. Presently, he proceeded as before:

'It only remains for me, to bear the knowledge of the unhappiness I have occasioned, as submissively as I can. It is she who should reproach; not I. To save her from misconstruction, cruel misconstruction, that even my friends have not been able to avoid, becomes my duty. The more retired we live, the better I shall discharge it. And when the time comes - may it come soon, if it be His merciful pleasure! - when my death shall release her from constraint, I shall close my eyes upon her honoured face, with unbounded confidence and love; and leave her, with no sorrow then, to happier and brighter days.'

I could not see him for the tears which his earnestness and goodness, so adorned by, and so adorning, the perfect simplicity of his manner, brought into my eyes. He had moved to the door, when he added:

'Gentlemen, I have shown you my heart. I am sure you will respect it. What we have said tonight is never to be said more. Wickfield, give me an old friend's arm upstairs!'

Mr Wickfield hastened to him. Without interchanging a word they went slowly out of the room together, Uriah looking after them.

'Well, Master Copperfield!' said Uriah, meekly turning to me. 'The thing hasn't took quite the turn that might have been expected, for the old Scholar - what an excellent man! - is as blind as a brickbat; but this family's out of the cart, I think!'

I needed but the sound of his voice to be so madly enraged as I never was before, and never have been since.

'You villain,' said I, 'what do you mean by entrapping me into your schemes? How dare you appeal to me just now, you false rascal, as if we had been in discussion together?'

As we stood, front to front, I saw so plainly, in the stealthy exultation of his face, what I already so plainly knew; I mean that he forced his confidence upon me, expressly to make me miserable, and had set a deliberate trap for me in this very matter; that I couldn't bear it. The whole of his lank cheek was invitingly before me, and I struck it with my open hand with that force that my fingers tingled as if I had burnt them.

He caught the hand in his, and we stood in that connexion, looking at each other. We stood so, a long time; long enough for me to see the white marks of my fingers die out of the deep red of his cheek, and leave it a deeper red.

'Copperfield,' he said at length, in a breathless voice, 'have you taken leave of your senses?' 'I have taken leave of you,' said I, wresting my hand away. 'You dog, I'll know no more of you.'

'Won't you?' said he, constrained by the pain of his cheek to put his hand there. 'Perhaps you won't be able to help it. Isn't this ungrateful of you, now?'

'I have shown you often enough,' said I, 'that I despise you. I have shown you now, more plainly, that I do. Why should I dread your doing your worst to all about you? What else do you ever do?'

He perfectly understood this allusion to the considerations that had hitherto restrained me in my communications with him. I rather think that neither the blow, nor the allusion, would have escaped me, but for the assurance I had had from Agnes that night. It is no matter.

There was another long pause. His eyes, as he looked at me, seemed to take every shade of colour that could make eyes ugly.

'Copperfield,' he said, removing his hand from his cheek, 'you have always gone against me. I know you always used to be against me at Mr Wickfield's.'

'You may think what you like,' said I, still in a towering rage. 'If it is not true, so much the worthier you.'

'And yet I always liked you, Copperfield!' he rejoined.

I deigned to make him no reply; and, taking up my hat, was going out to bed, when he came between me and the door.

'Copperfield,' he said, 'there must be two parties to a quarrel. I won't be one.'

'You may go to the devil!' said I.

'Don't say that!' he replied. 'I know you'll be sorry afterwards. How can you make yourself so inferior to me, as to show such a bad spirit? But I forgive you.'

'You forgive me!' I repeated disdainfully.

'I do, and you can't help yourself,' replied Uriah. 'To think of your going and attacking me, that have always been a friend to you! But there can't be a quarrel without two parties, and I won't be one. I will be a friend to you, in spite of you. So now you know what you've got to expect.'

The necessity of carrying on this dialogue (his part in which was very slow; mine very quick) in a low tone, that the house might not be disturbed at an unseasonable hour, did not improve my temper; though my passion was cooling down. Merely telling him that I should expect from him what I always had expected, and had never yet been disappointed in, I opened the door upon him, as if he had been a great walnut put there to be cracked, and went out of the house. But he slept out of the house too, at his mother's lodging; and before I had gone many hundred yards, came up with me.

'You know, Copperfield,' he said, in my ear (I did not turn my head), 'you're in quite a wrong position'; which I felt to be true, and that made me chafe the more; 'you can't make this a brave thing, and you can't help being forgiven. I don't intend to mention it to mother, nor to any living soul. I'm determined to forgive you. But I do wonder that you should lift your hand against a person that you knew to be so umble!'

I felt only less mean than he. He knew me better than I knew myself. If he had retorted or openly exasperated me, it would have been a relief and a justification; but he had put me on a slow fire, on which I lay tormented half the night.

In the morning, when I came out, the early church-bell was ringing, and he was walking up and down with his mother. He addressed me as if nothing had happened, and I could do no less than reply. I had struck him hard enough to give him the toothache, I suppose. At all events his face was tied up in a black silk handkerchief, which, with his hat perched on the top of it, was far from improving his appearance. I heard that he went to a dentist's in London on the Monday morning, and had a tooth out. I hope it was a double one.

The Doctor gave out that he was not quite well; and remained alone, for a considerable part of every day, during the remainder of the visit. Agnes and her father had been gone a week, before we resumed our usual work. On the day preceding its resumption, the Doctor gave me with his own hands a folded note not sealed. It was addressed to myself; and laid an injunction on me, in a few affectionate words, never to refer to the subject of that evening. I had confided it to my aunt, but to no one else. It was not a subject I could discuss with Agnes, and Agnes certainly had not the least suspicion of what had passed.

Neither, I felt convinced, had Mrs Strong then. Several weeks elapsed before I saw the least change in her. It came on slowly, like a cloud when there is no wind. At first, she seemed to wonder at the gentle compassion with which the Doctor spoke to her, and at his wish that she should have her mother with her, to relieve the dull monotony of her life. Often, when we were at work, and she was sitting by, I would see her pausing and looking at him with that memorable face. Afterwards, I sometimes observed her rise, with her eyes full of tears, and go out of the room. Gradually, an unhappy shadow fell upon her beauty, and deepened every day. Mrs Markleham was a regular inmate of the cottage then; but she talked and talked, and saw nothing.

As this change stole on Annie, once like sunshine in the Doctor's house, the Doctor became older in appearance, and more grave; but

the sweetness of his temper, the placid kindness of his manner, and his benevolent solicitude for her, if they were capable of any increase, were increased. I saw him once, early on the morning of her birthday, when she came to sit in the window while we were at work (which she had always done, but now began to do with a timid and uncertain air that I thought very touching), take her forehead between his hands, kiss it, and go hurriedly away, too much moved to remain. I saw her stand where he had left her, like a statue; and then bend down her head, and clasp her hands, and weep, I cannot say how sorrowfully.

Sometimes, after that, I fancied that she tried to speak even to me, in intervals when we were left alone. But she never uttered a word. The Doctor always had some new project for her participating in amusements away from home, with her mother; and Mrs Markleham, who was very fond of amusements, and very easily dissatisfied with anything else, entered into them with great good-will, and was loud in her commendations. But Annie, in a spiritless unhappy way, only went whither she was led, and seemed to have no care for anything.

I did not know what to think. Neither did my aunt; who must have walked, at various times, a hundred miles in her uncertainty. What was strangest of all was, that the only real relief which seemed to make its way into the secret region of this domestic unhappiness, made its way there in the person of Mr Dick.

What his thoughts were on the subject, or what his observation was, I am as unable to explain, as I dare say he would have been to assist me in the task. But, as I have recorded in the narrative of my school days, his veneration for the Doctor was unbounded; and there is a subtlety of perception in real attachment, even when it is borne towards man by one of the lower animals, which leaves the highest intellect behind. To this mind of the heart, if I may call it so, in Mr Dick, some bright ray of the truth shot straight.

He had proudly resumed his privilege, in many of his spare hours, of walking up and down the garden with the Doctor; as he had been accustomed to pace up and down The Doctor's Walk at Canterbury. But matters were no sooner in this state, than he devoted all his spare time (and got up earlier to make it more) to these perambulations. If he had never been so happy as when the Doctor read that marvellous performance, the Dictionary, to him; he was now quite miserable unless the Doctor pulled it out of his pocket, and began. When the Doctor and I were engaged, he now fell into the custom of walking up and down with Mrs Strong, and helping her to trim her favourite flowers, or weed the beds. I dare say he rarely spoke a dozen words in an hour: but his quiet interest, and his wistful face, found immediate response in both their breasts; each knew that the other liked him,

and that he loved both; and he became what no one else could be - a link between them.

When I think of him, with his impenetrably wise face, walking up and down with the Doctor, delighted to be battered by the hard words in the Dictionary; when I think of him carrying huge watering-pots after Annie; kneeling down, in very paws of gloves, at patient microscopic work among the little leaves; expressing as no philosopher could have expressed, in everything he did, a delicate desire to be her friend; showering sympathy, trustfulness, and affection, out of every hole in the watering-pot; when I think of him never wandering in that better mind of his to which unhappiness addressed itself, never bringing the unfortunate King Charles into the garden, never wavering in his grateful service, never diverted from his knowledge that there was something wrong, or from his wish to set it right- I really feel almost ashamed of having known that he was not quite in his wits, taking account of the utmost I have done with mine.

'Nobody but myself, Trot, knows what that man is!' my aunt would proudly remark, when we conversed about it. 'Dick will distinguish himself yet!'

I must refer to one other topic before I close this chapter. While the visit at the Doctor's was still in progress, I observed that the postman brought two or three letters every morning for Uriah Heep, who remained at Highgate until the rest went back, it being a leisure time; and that these were always directed in a business-like manner by Mr Micawber, who now assumed a round legal hand. I was glad to infer, from these slight premises, that Mr Micawber was doing well; and consequently was much surprised to receive, about this time, the following letter from his amiable wife.

'CANTERBURY, Monday Evening.

'You will doubtless be surprised, my dear Mr Copperfield, to receive this communication. Still more so, by its contents. Still more so, by the stipulation of implicit confidence which I beg to impose. But my feelings as a wife and mother require relief; and as I do not wish to consult my family (already obnoxious to the feelings of Mr Micawber), I know no one of whom I can better ask advice than my friend and former lodger.

'You may be aware, my dear Mr Copperfield, that between myself and Mr Micawber (whom I will never desert), there has always been preserved a spirit of mutual confidence. Mr Micawber may have occasionally given a bill without consulting me, or he may have misled

me as to the period when that obligation would become due. This has actually happened. But, in general, Mr Micawber has had no secrets from the bosom of affection - I allude to his wife - and has invariably, on our retirement to rest, recalled the events of the day.

'You will picture to yourself, my dear Mr Copperfield, what the poignancy of my feelings must be, when I inform you that Mr Micawber is entirely changed. He is reserved. He is secret. His life is a mystery to the partner of his joys and sorrows - I again allude to his wife - and if I should assure you that beyond knowing that it is passed from morning to night at the office, I now know less of it than I do of the man in the south, connected with whose mouth the thoughtless children repeat an idle tale respecting cold plum porridge, I should adopt a popular fallacy to express an actual fact.

'But this is not all. Mr Micawber is morose. He is severe. He is estranged from our eldest son and daughter, he has no pride in his twins, he looks with an eye of coldness even on the unoffending stranger who last became a member of our circle. The pecuniary means of meeting our expenses, kept down to the utmost farthing, are obtained from him with great difficulty, and even under fearful threats that he will Settle himself (the exact expression); and he inexorably refuses to give any explanation whatever of this distracting policy.

'This is hard to bear. This is heart-breaking. If you will advise me, knowing my feeble powers such as they are, how you think it will be best to exert them in a dilemma so unwonted, you will add another friendly obligation to the many you have already rendered me. With loves from the children, and a smile from the happily-unconscious stranger, I remain, dear Mr Copperfield,

Your afflicted,

'EMMA MICAWBER.'

I did not feel justified in giving a wife of Mrs Micawber's experience any other recommendation, than that she should try to reclaim Mr Micawber by patience and kindness (as I knew she would in any case); but the letter set me thinking about him very much.