

Chapter XXXVI

Private and confidential; relating to Family Matters. Showing how Mr Kenwigs underwent violent Agitation, and how Mrs Kenwigs was as well as could be expected

It might have been seven o'clock in the evening, and it was growing dark in the narrow streets near Golden Square, when Mr Kenwigs sent out for a pair of the cheapest white kid gloves - those at fourteen-pence - and selecting the strongest, which happened to be the right-hand one, walked downstairs with an air of pomp and much excitement, and proceeded to muffle the knob of the street-door knocker therein. Having executed this task with great nicety, Mr Kenwigs pulled the door to, after him, and just stepped across the road to try the effect from the opposite side of the street. Satisfied that nothing could possibly look better in its way, Mr Kenwigs then stepped back again, and calling through the keyhole to Morleena to open the door, vanished into the house, and was seen no longer.

Now, considered as an abstract circumstance, there was no more obvious cause or reason why Mr Kenwigs should take the trouble of muffling this particular knocker, than there would have been for his muffling the knocker of any nobleman or gentleman resident ten miles off; because, for the greater convenience of the numerous lodgers, the street-door always stood wide open, and the knocker was never used at all. The first floor, the second floor, and the third floor, had each a bell of its own. As to the attics, no one ever called on them; if anybody wanted the parlours, they were close at hand, and all he had to do was to walk straight into them; while the kitchen had a separate entrance down the area steps. As a question of mere necessity and usefulness, therefore, this muffling of the knocker was thoroughly incomprehensible.

But knockers may be muffled for other purposes than those of mere utilitarianism, as, in the present instance, was clearly shown. There are certain polite forms and ceremonies which must be observed in civilised life, or mankind relapse into their original barbarism. No genteel lady was ever yet confined - indeed, no genteel confinement can possibly take place - without the accompanying symbol of a muffled knocker. Mrs Kenwigs was a lady of some pretensions to gentility; Mrs Kenwigs was confined. And, therefore, Mr Kenwigs tied up the silent knocker on the premises in a white kid glove.

'I'm not quite certain neither,' said Mr Kenwigs, arranging his shirt-collar, and walking slowly upstairs, 'whether, as it's a boy, I won't have it in the papers.'

Pondering upon the advisability of this step, and the sensation it was likely to create in the neighbourhood, Mr Kenwigs betook himself to the sitting-room, where various extremely diminutive articles of clothing were airing on a horse before the fire, and Mr Lumbey, the doctor, was dandling the baby - that is, the old baby - not the new one.

'It's a fine boy, Mr Kenwigs,' said Mr Lumbey, the doctor.

'You consider him a fine boy, do you, sir?' returned Mr Kenwigs.

'It's the finest boy I ever saw in all my life,' said the doctor. 'I never saw such a baby.'

It is a pleasant thing to reflect upon, and furnishes a complete answer to those who contend for the gradual degeneration of the human species, that every baby born into the world is a finer one than the last.

'I ne - ver saw such a baby,' said Mr Lumbey, the doctor.

'Morleena was a fine baby,' remarked Mr Kenwigs; as if this were rather an attack, by implication, upon the family.

'They were all fine babies,' said Mr Lumbey. And Mr Lumbey went on nursing the baby with a thoughtful look. Whether he was considering under what head he could best charge the nursing in the bill, was best known to himself.

During this short conversation, Miss Morleena, as the eldest of the family, and natural representative of her mother during her indisposition, had been hustling and slapping the three younger Miss Kenwigses, without intermission; which considerate and affectionate conduct brought tears into the eyes of Mr Kenwigs, and caused him to declare that, in understanding and behaviour, that child was a woman.

'She will be a treasure to the man she marries, sir,' said Mr Kenwigs, half aside; 'I think she'll marry above her station, Mr Lumbey.'

'I shouldn't wonder at all,' replied the doctor.

'You never see her dance, sir, did you?' asked Mr Kenwigs.

The doctor shook his head.

'Ay!' said Mr Kenwigs, as though he pitied him from his heart, 'then you don't know what she's capable of.'

All this time there had been a great whisking in and out of the other room; the door had been opened and shut very softly about twenty times a minute (for it was necessary to keep Mrs Kenwigs quiet); and the baby had been exhibited to a score or two of deputations from a select body of female friends, who had assembled in the passage, and about the street-door, to discuss the event in all its bearings. Indeed, the excitement extended itself over the whole street, and groups of ladies might be seen standing at the doors, (some in the interesting condition in which Mrs Kenwigs had last appeared in public,) relating their experiences of similar occurrences. Some few acquired great credit from having prophesied, the day before yesterday, exactly when it would come to pass; others, again, related, how that they guessed what it was, directly they saw Mr Kenwigs turn pale and run up the street as hard as ever he could go. Some said one thing, and some another; but all talked together, and all agreed upon two points: first, that it was very meritorious and highly praiseworthy in Mrs Kenwigs to do as she had done: and secondly, that there never was such a skilful and scientific doctor as that Dr Lumbey.

In the midst of this general hubbub, Dr Lumbey sat in the first-floor front, as before related, nursing the deposed baby, and talking to Mr Kenwigs. He was a stout bluff-looking gentleman, with no shirt-collar to speak of, and a beard that had been growing since yesterday morning; for Dr Lumbey was popular, and the neighbourhood was prolific; and there had been no less than three other knockers muffled, one after the other within the last forty-eight hours.

'Well, Mr Kenwigs,' said Dr Lumbey, 'this makes six. You'll have a fine family in time, sir.'

'I think six is almost enough, sir,' returned Mr Kenwigs.

'Pooh! pooh!' said the doctor. 'Nonsense! not half enough.'

With this, the doctor laughed; but he didn't laugh half as much as a married friend of Mrs Kenwigs's, who had just come in from the sick chamber to report progress, and take a small sip of brandy-and-water: and who seemed to consider it one of the best jokes ever launched upon society.

'They're not altogether dependent upon good fortune, neither,' said Mr Kenwigs, taking his second daughter on his knee; 'they have expectations.'

'Oh, indeed!' said Mr Lumbey, the doctor.

'And very good ones too, I believe, haven't they?' asked the married lady.

'Why, ma'am,' said Mr Kenwigs, 'it's not exactly for me to say what they may be, or what they may not be. It's not for me to boast of any family with which I have the honour to be connected; at the same time, Mrs Kenwigs's is - I should say,' said Mr Kenwigs, abruptly, and raising his voice as he spoke, 'that my children might come into a matter of a hundred pound apiece, perhaps. Perhaps more, but certainly that.'

'And a very pretty little fortune,' said the married lady.

'There are some relations of Mrs Kenwigs's,' said Mr Kenwigs, taking a pinch of snuff from the doctor's box, and then sneezing very hard, for he wasn't used to it, 'that might leave their hundred pound apiece to ten people, and yet not go begging when they had done it.'

'Ah! I know who you mean,' observed the married lady, nodding her head.

'I made mention of no names, and I wish to make mention of no names,' said Mr Kenwigs, with a portentous look. 'Many of my friends have met a relation of Mrs Kenwigs's in this very room, as would do honour to any company; that's all.'

'I've met him,' said the married lady, with a glance towards Dr Lumbey.

'It's naterally very gratifying to my feelings as a father, to see such a man as that, a kissing and taking notice of my children,' pursued Mr Kenwigs. 'It's naterally very gratifying to my feelings as a man, to know that man. It will be naterally very gratifying to my feelings as a husband, to make that man acquainted with this ewent.'

Having delivered his sentiments in this form of words, Mr Kenwigs arranged his second daughter's flaxen tail, and bade her be a good girl and mind what her sister, Morleena, said.

'That girl grows more like her mother every day,' said Mr Lumbey, suddenly stricken with an enthusiastic admiration of Morleena.

'There!' rejoined the married lady. 'What I always say; what I always did say! She's the very picter of her.' Having thus directed the general attention to the young lady in question, the married lady embraced the opportunity of taking another sip of the brandy-and-water - and a pretty long sip too.

'Yes! there is a likeness,' said Mr Kenwigs, after some reflection. 'But such a woman as Mrs Kenwigs was, afore she was married! Good gracious, such a woman!'

Mr Lumbey shook his head with great solemnity, as though to imply that he supposed she must have been rather a dazzler.

'Talk of fairies!' cried Mr Kenwigs 'I never see anybody so light to be alive, never. Such manners too; so playful, and yet so sewerely proper! As for her figure! It isn't generally known,' said Mr Kenwigs, dropping his voice; 'but her figure was such, at that time, that the sign of the Britannia, over in the Holloway Road, was painted from it!'

'But only see what it is now,' urged the married lady. 'Does SHE look like the mother of six?'

'Quite ridiculous,' cried the doctor.

'She looks a deal more like her own daughter,' said the married lady.

'So she does,' assented Mr Lumbey. 'A great deal more.'

Mr Kenwigs was about to make some further observations, most probably in confirmation of this opinion, when another married lady, who had looked in to keep up Mrs Kenwigs's spirits, and help to clear off anything in the eating and drinking way that might be going about, put in her head to announce that she had just been down to answer the bell, and that there was a gentleman at the door who wanted to see Mr Kenwigs 'most particular.'

Shadowy visions of his distinguished relation flitted through the brain of Mr Kenwigs, as this message was delivered; and under their influence, he dispatched Morleena to show the gentleman up straightway.

'Why, I do declare,' said Mr Kenwigs, standing opposite the door so as to get the earliest glimpse of the visitor, as he came upstairs, 'it's Mr Johnson! How do you find yourself, sir?'

Nicholas shook hands, kissed his old pupils all round, intrusted a large parcel of toys to the guardianship of Morleena, bowed to the doctor and the married ladies, and inquired after Mrs Kenwigs in a tone of interest, which went to the very heart and soul of the nurse, who had come in to warm some mysterious compound, in a little saucepan over the fire.

'I ought to make a hundred apologies to you for calling at such a season,' said Nicholas, 'but I was not aware of it until I had rung the bell, and my time is so fully occupied now, that I feared it might be some days before I could possibly come again.'

'No time like the present, sir,' said Mr Kenwigs. 'The situation of Mrs Kenwigs, sir, is no obstacle to a little conversation between you and me, I hope?'

'You are very good,' said Nicholas.

At this juncture, proclamation was made by another married lady, that the baby had begun to eat like anything; whereupon the two married ladies, already mentioned, rushed tumultuously into the bedroom to behold him in the act.

'The fact is,' resumed Nicholas, 'that before I left the country, where I have been for some time past, I undertook to deliver a message to you.'

'Ay, ay?' said Mr Kenwigs.

'And I have been,' added Nicholas, 'already in town for some days, without having had an opportunity of doing so.'

'It's no matter, sir,' said Mr Kenwigs. 'I dare say it's none the worse for keeping cold. Message from the country!' said Mr Kenwigs, ruminating; 'that's curious. I don't know anybody in the country.'

'Miss Petowker,' suggested Nicholas.

'Oh! from her, is it?' said Mr Kenwigs. 'Oh dear, yes. Ah! Mrs Kenwigs will be glad to hear from her. Henrietta Petowker, eh? How odd things come about, now! That you should have met her in the country! Well!'

Hearing this mention of their old friend's name, the four Miss Kenwigses gathered round Nicholas, open eyed and mouthed, to hear more. Mr Kenwigs looked a little curious too, but quite comfortable and unsuspecting.

'The message relates to family matters,' said Nicholas, hesitating.

'Oh, never mind,' said Kenwigs, glancing at Mr Lumbey, who, having rashly taken charge of little Lillyvick, found nobody disposed to relieve him of his precious burden. 'All friends here.'

Nicholas hemmed once or twice, and seemed to have some difficulty in proceeding.

'At Portsmouth, Henrietta Petowker is,' observed Mr Kenwigs.

'Yes,' said Nicholas, 'Mr Lillyvick is there.'

Mr Kenwigs turned pale, but he recovered, and said, THAT was an odd coincidence also.

'The message is from him,' said Nicholas.

Mr Kenwigs appeared to revive. He knew that his niece was in a delicate state, and had, no doubt, sent word that they were to forward full particulars. Yes. That was very kind of him; so like him too!

'He desired me to give his kindest love,' said Nicholas.

'Very much obliged to him, I'm sure. Your great-uncle, Lillyvick, my dears!' interposed Mr Kenwigs, condescendingly explaining it to the children.

'His kindest love,' resumed Nicholas; 'and to say that he had no time to write, but that he was married to Miss Petowker.'

Mr Kenwigs started from his seat with a petrified stare, caught his second daughter by her flaxen tail, and covered his face with his pocket-handkerchief. Morleena fell, all stiff and rigid, into the baby's chair, as she had seen her mother fall when she fainted away, and the two remaining little Kenwigses shrieked in affright.

'My children, my defrauded, swindled infants!' cried Mr Kenwigs, pulling so hard, in his vehemence, at the flaxen tail of his second daughter, that he lifted her up on tiptoe, and kept her, for some seconds, in that attitude. 'Villain, ass, traitor!'

'Drat the man!' cried the nurse, looking angrily around. 'What does he mean by making that noise here?'

'Silence, woman!' said Mr Kenwigs, fiercely.

'I won't be silent,' returned the nurse. 'Be silent yourself, you wretch. Have you no regard for your baby?'

'No!' returned Mr Kenwigs.

'More shame for you,' retorted the nurse. 'Ugh! you unnatural monster.'

'Let him die,' cried Mr Kenwigs, in the torrent of his wrath. 'Let him die! He has no expectations, no property to come into. We want no babies here,' said Mr Kenwigs recklessly. 'Take 'em away, take 'em away to the Fondling!'

With these awful remarks, Mr Kenwigs sat himself down in a chair, and defied the nurse, who made the best of her way into the adjoining room, and returned with a stream of matrons: declaring that Mr Kenwigs had spoken blasphemy against his family, and must be raving mad.

Appearances were certainly not in Mr Kenwigs's favour, for the exertion of speaking with so much vehemence, and yet in such a tone as should prevent his lamentations reaching the ears of Mrs Kenwigs, had made him very black in the face; besides which, the excitement of the occasion, and an unwonted indulgence in various strong cordials to celebrate it, had swollen and dilated his features to a most unusual extent. But, Nicholas and the doctor - who had been passive at first, doubting very much whether Mr Kenwigs could be in earnest - interfering to explain the immediate cause of his condition, the indignation of the matrons was changed to pity, and they implored him, with much feeling, to go quietly to bed.

'The attention,' said Mr Kenwigs, looking around with a plaintive air, 'the attention that I've shown to that man! The hyseters he has eat, and the pints of ale he has drank, in this house - !'

'It's very trying, and very hard to bear, we know,' said one of the married ladies; 'but think of your dear darling wife.'

'Oh yes, and what she's been a undergoing of, only this day,' cried a great many voices. 'There's a good man, do.'

'The presents that have been made to him,' said Mr Kenwigs, reverting to his calamity, 'the pipes, the snuff-boxes - a pair of india-rubber goloshes, that cost six-and-six - '

'Ah! it won't bear thinking of, indeed,' cried the matrons generally; 'but it'll all come home to him, never fear.'

Mr Kenwigs looked darkly upon the ladies, as if he would prefer its all coming home to HIM, as there was nothing to be got by it; but he said nothing, and resting his head upon his hand, subsided into a kind of doze.

Then, the matrons again expatiated on the expediency of taking the good gentleman to bed; observing that he would be better tomorrow, and that they knew what was the wear and tear of some men's minds when their wives were taken as Mrs Kenwigs had been that day, and that it did him great credit, and there was nothing to be ashamed of in it; far from it; they liked to see it, they did, for it showed a good heart. And one lady observed, as a case bearing upon the present, that her husband was often quite light-headed from anxiety on similar

occasions, and that once, when her little Johnny was born, it was nearly a week before he came to himself again, during the whole of which time he did nothing but cry 'Is it a boy, is it a boy?' in a manner which went to the hearts of all his hearers.

At length, Morleena (who quite forgot she had fainted, when she found she was not noticed) announced that a chamber was ready for her afflicted parent; and Mr Kenwigs, having partially smothered his four daughters in the closeness of his embrace, accepted the doctor's arm on one side, and the support of Nicholas on the other, and was conducted upstairs to a bedroom which been secured for the occasion.

Having seen him sound asleep, and heard him snore most satisfactorily, and having further presided over the distribution of the toys, to the perfect contentment of all the little Kenwigses, Nicholas took his leave. The matrons dropped off one by one, with the exception of six or eight particular friends, who had determined to stop all night; the lights in the houses gradually disappeared; the last bulletin was issued that Mrs Kenwigs was as well as could be expected; and the whole family were left to their repose.