

Chapter XXXIX

In which another old Friend encounters Smike, very opportunely and to some Purpose

The night, fraught with so much bitterness to one poor soul, had given place to a bright and cloudless summer morning, when a north-country mail-coach traversed, with cheerful noise, the yet silent streets of Islington, and, giving brisk note of its approach with the lively winding of the guard's horn, clattered onward to its halting-place hard by the Post Office.

The only outside passenger was a burly, honest-looking countryman on the box, who, with his eyes fixed upon the dome of St Paul's Cathedral, appeared so wrapt in admiring wonder, as to be quite insensible to all the bustle of getting out the bags and parcels, until one of the coach windows being let sharply down, he looked round, and encountered a pretty female face which was just then thrust out.

'See there, lass!' bawled the countryman, pointing towards the object of his admiration. 'There be Paul's Church. 'Ecod, he be a soizable 'un, he be.'

'Goodness, John! I shouldn't have thought it could have been half the size. What a monster!'

'Monsther! - Ye're aboot right theer, I reckon, Mrs Browdie,' said the countryman good-humouredly, as he came slowly down in his huge top-coat; 'and wa'at dost thee tak yon place to be noo - thot'un owor the wa'? Ye'd never coom near it 'gin you thried for twolve moonths. It's na' but a Poast Office! Ho! ho! They need to charge for dooble-latthers. A Poast Office! Wa'at dost thee think o' thot? 'Ecod, if thot's on'y a Poast Office, I'd loike to see where the Lord Mayor o' Lunnun lives.'

So saying, John Browdie - for he it was - opened the coach-door, and tapping Mrs Browdie, late Miss Price, on the cheek as he looked in, burst into a boisterous fit of laughter.

'Weel!' said John. 'Dang my bootuns if she bean't asleep agean!'

'She's been asleep all night, and was, all yesterday, except for a minute or two now and then,' replied John Browdie's choice, 'and I was very sorry when she woke, for she has been SO cross!'

The subject of these remarks was a slumbering figure, so muffled in shawl and cloak, that it would have been matter of impossibility to guess at its sex but for a brown beaver bonnet and green veil which

ornamented the head, and which, having been crushed and flattened, for two hundred and fifty miles, in that particular angle of the vehicle from which the lady's snores now proceeded, presented an appearance sufficiently ludicrous to have moved less risible muscles than those of John Browdie's ruddy face.

'Hollo!' cried John, twitching one end of the dragged veil. 'Coom, wakken oop, will 'ee?'

After several burrowings into the old corner, and many exclamations of impatience and fatigue, the figure struggled into a sitting posture; and there, under a mass of crumpled beaver, and surrounded by a semicircle of blue curl-papers, were the delicate features of Miss Fanny Squeers.

'Oh, 'Tilda!' cried Miss Squeers, 'how you have been kicking of me through this blessed night!'

'Well, I do like that,' replied her friend, laughing, 'when you have had nearly the whole coach to yourself.'

'Don't deny it, 'Tilda,' said Miss Squeers, impressively, 'because you have, and it's no use to go attempting to say you haven't. You mightn't have known it in your sleep, 'Tilda, but I haven't closed my eyes for a single wink, and so I THINK I am to be believed.'

With which reply, Miss Squeers adjusted the bonnet and veil, which nothing but supernatural interference and an utter suspension of nature's laws could have reduced to any shape or form; and evidently flattering herself that it looked uncommonly neat, brushed off the sandwich-crumbs and bits of biscuit which had accumulated in her lap, and availing herself of John Browdie's proffered arm, descended from the coach.

'Noo,' said John, when a hackney coach had been called, and the ladies and the luggage hurried in, 'gang to the Sarah's Head, mun.'

'To the VERE?' cried the coachman.

'Lawk, Mr Browdie!' interrupted Miss Squeers. 'The idea! Saracen's Head.'

'Sure-ly,' said John, 'I know'd it was something aboot Sarah's Son's Head. Dost thou know thot?'

'Oh, ah! I know that,' replied the coachman gruffly, as he banged the door.

"Tilda, dear, really," remonstrated Miss Squeers, 'we shall be taken for I don't know what.'

'Let them tak' us as they foind us,' said John Browdie; 'we dean't come to Lunnun to do nought but 'joy oursel, do we?'

'I hope not, Mr Browdie,' replied Miss Squeers, looking singularly dismal.

'Well, then,' said John, 'it's no matther. I've only been a married man fower days, 'account of poor old feyther deein, and puttin' it off. Here be a weddin' party - broide and broide's-maid, and the groom - if a mun dean't 'joy himsel noo, when ought he, hey? Drat it all, that's what I want to know.'

So, in order that he might begin to enjoy himself at once, and lose no time, Mr Browdie gave his wife a hearty kiss, and succeeded in wresting another from Miss Squeers, after a maidenly resistance of scratching and struggling on the part of that young lady, which was not quite over when they reached the Saracen's Head.

Here, the party straightway retired to rest; the refreshment of sleep being necessary after so long a journey; and here they met again about noon, to a substantial breakfast, spread by direction of Mr John Browdie, in a small private room upstairs commanding an uninterrupted view of the stables.

To have seen Miss Squeers now, divested of the brown beaver, the green veil, and the blue curl-papers, and arrayed in all the virgin splendour of a white frock and spencer, with a white muslin bonnet, and an imitative damask rose in full bloom on the inside thereof - her luxuriant crop of hair arranged in curls so tight that it was impossible they could come out by any accident, and her bonnet-cap trimmed with little damask roses, which might be supposed to be so many promising scions of the big rose - to have seen all this, and to have seen the broad damask belt, matching both the family rose and the little roses, which encircled her slender waist, and by a happy ingenuity took off from the shortness of the spencer behind, - to have beheld all this, and to have taken further into account the coral bracelets (rather short of beads, and with a very visible black string) which clasped her wrists, and the coral necklace which rested on her neck, supporting, outside her frock, a lonely cornelian heart, typical of her own disengaged affections - to have contemplated all these mute but expressive appeals to the purest feelings of our nature, might have thawed the frost of age, and added new and inextinguishable fuel to the fire of youth.

The waiter was touched. Waiter as he was, he had human passions and feelings, and he looked very hard at Miss Squeers as he handed the muffins.

'Is my pa in, do you know?' asked Miss Squeers with dignity.

'Beg your pardon, miss?'

'My pa,' repeated Miss Squeers; 'is he in?'

'In where, miss?'

'In here - in the house!' replied Miss Squeers. 'My pa - Mr Wackford Squeers - he's stopping here. Is he at home?'

'I didn't know there was any gen'l'man of that name in the house, miss' replied the waiter. 'There may be, in the coffee-room.'

MAY BE. Very pretty this, indeed! Here was Miss Squeers, who had been depending, all the way to London, upon showing her friends how much at home she would be, and how much respectful notice her name and connections would excite, told that her father MIGHT be there! 'As if he was a feller!' observed Miss Squeers, with emphatic indignation.

'Ye'd bettther inquire, mun,' said John Browdie. 'An' hond up another pigeon-pie, will 'ee? Dang the chap,' muttered John, looking into the empty dish as the waiter retired; 'does he ca' this a pie - three yoong pigeons and a troifling matther o' steak, and a crust so loight that you doant know when it's in your mooth and when it's gane? I wonder hoo many pies goes to a breakfast!'

After a short interval, which John Browdie employed upon the ham and a cold round of beef, the waiter returned with another pie, and the information that Mr Squeers was not stopping in the house, but that he came there every day and that directly he arrived, he should be shown upstairs. With this, he retired; and he had not retired two minutes, when he returned with Mr Squeers and his hopeful son.

'Why, who'd have thought of this?' said Mr Squeers, when he had saluted the party and received some private family intelligence from his daughter.

'Who, indeed, pa!' replied that young lady, spitefully. 'But you see 'Tilda IS married at last.'

'And I stond threat for a soight o' Lunnun, schoolmeasther,' said John, vigorously attacking the pie.

'One of them things that young men do when they get married,' returned Squeers; 'and as runs through with their money like nothing at all! How much better wouldn't it be now, to save it up for the eddication of any little boys, for instance! They come on you,' said Mr Squeers in a moralising way, 'before you're aware of it; mine did upon me.'

'Will 'ee pick a bit?' said John.

'I won't myself,' returned Squeers; 'but if you'll just let little Wackford tuck into something fat, I'll be obliged to you. Give it him in his fingers, else the waiter charges it on, and there's lot of profit on this sort of vittles without that. If you hear the waiter coming, sir, shove it in your pocket and look out of the window, d'ye hear?'

'I'm awake, father,' replied the dutiful Wackford.

'Well,' said Squeers, turning to his daughter, 'it's your turn to be married next. You must make haste.'

'Oh, I'm in no hurry,' said Miss Squeers, very sharply.

'No, Fanny?' cried her old friend with some archness.

'No, 'Tilda,' replied Miss Squeers, shaking her head vehemently. 'I can wait.'

'So can the young men, it seems, Fanny,' observed Mrs Browdie.

'They an't draw'd into it by ME, 'Tilda,' retorted Miss Squeers.

'No,' returned her friend; 'that's exceedingly true.'

The sarcastic tone of this reply might have provoked a rather acrimonious retort from Miss Squeers, who, besides being of a constitutionally vicious temper - aggravated, just now, by travel and recent jolting - was somewhat irritated by old recollections and the failure of her own designs upon Mr Browdie; and the acrimonious retort might have led to a great many other retorts, which might have led to Heaven knows what, if the subject of conversation had not been, at that precise moment, accidentally changed by Mr Squeers himself

'What do you think?' said that gentleman; 'who do you suppose we have laid hands on, Wackford and me?'

'Pa! not Mr - ?' Miss Squeers was unable to finish the sentence, but Mrs Browdie did it for her, and added, 'Nickleby?'

'No,' said Squeers. 'But next door to him though.'

'You can't mean Smike?' cried Miss Squeers, clapping her hands.

'Yes, I can though,' rejoined her father. 'I've got him, hard and fast.'

'Wa'at!' exclaimed John Browdie, pushing away his plate. 'Got that poor - dom'd scoondrel? Where?'

'Why, in the top back room, at my lodging,' replied Squeers, 'with him on one side, and the key on the other.'

'At thy loodgin'! Thee'st gotten him at thy loodgin'? Ho! ho! The schoolmeaster agin all England. Give us thee hond, mun; I'm darned but I must shak thee by the hond for thot. - Gotten him at thy loodgin?'

'Yes,' replied Squeers, staggering in his chair under the congratulatory blow on the chest which the stout Yorkshireman dealt him; 'thankee. Don't do it again. You mean it kindly, I know, but it hurts rather. Yes, there he is. That's not so bad, is it?'

'Ba'ad!' repeated John Browdie. 'It's eneaf to scare a mun to hear tell on.'

'I thought it would surprise you a bit,' said Squeers, rubbing his hands. 'It was pretty neatly done, and pretty quick too.'

'Hoo wor it?' inquired John, sitting down close to him. 'Tell us all about it, mun; coom, quick!'

Although he could not keep pace with John Browdie's impatience, Mr Squeers related the lucky chance by which Smike had fallen into his hands, as quickly as he could, and, except when he was interrupted by the admiring remarks of his auditors, paused not in the recital until he had brought it to an end.

'For fear he should give me the slip, by any chance,' observed Squeers, when he had finished, looking very cunning, 'I've taken three outsides for tomorrow morning - for Wackford and him and me - and have arranged to leave the accounts and the new boys to the agent, don't you see? So it's very lucky you come today, or you'd have missed us; and as it is, unless you could come and tea with me tonight, we shan't see anything more of you before we go away.'

'Dean't say anoother wurd,' returned the Yorkshireman, shaking him by the hand. 'We'd coom, if it was twonty mile.'

'No, would you though?' returned Mr Squeers, who had not expected quite such a ready acceptance of his invitation, or he would have considered twice before he gave it.

John Browdie's only reply was another squeeze of the hand, and an assurance that they would not begin to see London till tomorrow, so that they might be at Mr Snawley's at six o'clock without fail; and after some further conversation, Mr Squeers and his son departed.

During the remainder of the day, Mr Browdie was in a very odd and excitable state; bursting occasionally into an explosion of laughter, and then taking up his hat and running into the coach-yard to have it out by himself. He was very restless too, constantly walking in and out, and snapping his fingers, and dancing scraps of uncouth country dances, and, in short, conducting himself in such a very extraordinary manner, that Miss Squeers opined he was going mad, and, begging her dear 'Tilda not to distress herself, communicated her suspicions in so many words. Mrs Browdie, however, without discovering any great alarm, observed that she had seen him so once before, and that although he was almost sure to be ill after it, it would not be anything very serious, and therefore he was better left alone.

The result proved her to be perfectly correct for, while they were all sitting in Mr Snawley's parlour that night, and just as it was beginning to get dusk, John Browdie was taken so ill, and seized with such an alarming dizziness in the head, that the whole company were thrown into the utmost consternation. His good lady, indeed, was the only person present, who retained presence of mind enough to observe that if he were allowed to lie down on Mr Squeers's bed for an hour or so, and left entirely to himself, he would be sure to recover again almost as quickly as he had been taken ill. Nobody could refuse to try the effect of so reasonable a proposal, before sending for a surgeon. Accordingly, John was supported upstairs, with great difficulty; being a monstrous weight, and regularly tumbling down two steps every time they hoisted him up three; and, being laid on the bed, was left in charge of his wife, who, after a short interval, reappeared in the parlour, with the gratifying intelligence that he had fallen fast asleep.

Now, the fact was, that at that particular moment, John Browdie was sitting on the bed with the reddest face ever seen, cramming the corner of the pillow into his mouth, to prevent his roaring out loud with laughter. He had no sooner succeeded in suppressing this emotion, than he slipped off his shoes, and creeping to the adjoining room where the prisoner was confined, turned the key, which was on the outside, and darting in, covered Smike's mouth with his huge hand before he could utter a sound.

'Ods-bobs, dost thee not know me, mun?' whispered the Yorkshireman to the bewildered lad. 'Browdie. Chap as met thee efther schoolmeaster was banged?'

'Yes, yes,' cried Smike. 'Oh! help me.'

'Help thee!' replied John, stopping his mouth again, the instant he had said this much. 'Thee didn't need help, if thee warn't as silly yongster as ever draw'd breath. Wa'at did 'ee come here for, then?'

'He brought me; oh! he brought me,' cried Smike.

'Brout thee!' replied John. 'Why didn't 'ee punch his head, or lay theeself doon and kick, and squeal out for the pollis? I'd ha' licked a doozen such as him when I was yong as thee. But thee be'est a poor broken-doon chap,' said John, sadly, 'and God forgi' me for bragging ower yan o' his weakest creeturs!'

Smike opened his mouth to speak, but John Browdie stopped him.

'Stan' still,' said the Yorkshireman, 'and doant'ee speak a morsel o' talk till I tell'ee.'

With this caution, John Browdie shook his head significantly, and drawing a screwdriver from his pocket, took off the box of the lock in a very deliberate and workmanlike manner, and laid it, together with the implement, on the floor.

'See thot?' said John 'Thot be thy doin'. Noo, coot awa'!

Smike looked vacantly at him, as if unable to comprehend his meaning.

'I say, coot awa',' repeated John, hastily. 'Dost thee know where thee livest? Thee dost? Weel. Are yon thy clothes, or schoolmeaster's?' 'Mine,' replied Smike, as the Yorkshireman hurried him to the adjoining room, and pointed out a pair of shoes and a coat which were lying on a chair.

'On wi' 'em,' said John, forcing the wrong arm into the wrong sleeve, and winding the tails of the coat round the fugitive's neck. 'Noo, foller me, and when thee get'st outside door, turn to the right, and they wean't see thee pass.'

'But - but - he'll hear me shut the door,' replied Smike, trembling from head to foot.

'Then dean't shut it at all,' retorted John Browdie. 'Dang it, thee bean't afeard o' schoolmeaster's takkin cold, I hope?'

'N-no,' said Smike, his teeth chattering in his head. 'But he brought me back before, and will again. He will, he will indeed.'

'He wull, he wull!' replied John impatiently. 'He wean't, he wean't. Look'ee! I wont to do this neighbourly loike, and let them think thee's gotten awa' o' theeself, but if he cooms oot o' thot parlour awhile theer't clearing off, he mun' have mercy on his oun boans, for I wean't. If he foinds it oot, soon efther, I'll put 'un on a wrong scent, I warrant 'ee. But if thee keep'st a good hart, thee'lt be at whoam afore they know thee'st gotten off. Coom!'

Smike, who comprehended just enough of this to know it was intended as encouragement, prepared to follow with tottering steps, when John whispered in his ear.

'Thee'lt just tell yoong Measter that I'm sploticed to 'Tilly Price, and to be heerd on at the Saracen by latther, and that I bean't jealous of 'un - dang it, I'm loike to boost when I think o' that neight! 'Cod, I think I see 'un now, a powderin' awa' at the thin bread an' butther!'

It was rather a ticklish recollection for John just then, for he was within an ace of breaking out into a loud guffaw. Restraining himself, however, just in time, by a great effort, he glided downstairs, hauling Smike behind him; and placing himself close to the parlour door, to confront the first person that might come out, signed to him to make off.

Having got so far, Smike needed no second bidding. Opening the house-door gently, and casting a look of mingled gratitude and terror at his deliverer, he took the direction which had been indicated to him, and sped away like the wind.

The Yorkshireman remained on his post for a few minutes, but, finding that there was no pause in the conversation inside, crept back again unheard, and stood, listening over the stair-rail, for a full hour. Everything remaining perfectly quiet, he got into Mr Squeers's bed, once more, and drawing the clothes over his head, laughed till he was nearly smothered.

If there could only have been somebody by, to see how the bedclothes shook, and to see the Yorkshireman's great red face and round head appear above the sheets, every now and then, like some jovial monster coming to the surface to breathe, and once more dive down convulsed with the laughter which came bursting forth afresh - that somebody would have been scarcely less amused than John Browdie himself.