

Chapter II

Wherein Certain Persons Are Presented To The Reader, With Whom He May, If He Please, Become Better Acquainted

It was pretty late in the autumn of the year, when the declining sun struggling through the mist which had obscured it all day, looked brightly down upon a little Wiltshire village, within an easy journey of the fair old town of Salisbury.

Like a sudden flash of memory or spirit kindling up the mind of an old man, it shed a glory upon the scene, in which its departed youth and freshness seemed to live again. The wet grass sparkled in the light; the scanty patches of verdure in the hedges - where a few green twigs yet stood together bravely, resisting to the last the tyranny of nipping winds and early frosts - took heart and brightened up; the stream which had been dull and sullen all day long, broke out into a cheerful smile; the birds began to chirp and twitter on the naked boughs, as though the hopeful creatures half believed that winter had gone by, and spring had come already. The vane upon the tapering spire of the old church glistened from its lofty station in sympathy with the general gladness; and from the ivy-shaded windows such gleams of light shone back upon the glowing sky, that it seemed as if the quiet buildings were the hoarding-place of twenty summers, and all their ruddiness and warmth were stored within.

Even those tokens of the season which emphatically whispered of the coming winter, graced the landscape, and, for the moment, tinged its livelier features with no oppressive air of sadness. The fallen leaves, with which the ground was strewn, gave forth a pleasant fragrance, and subduing all harsh sounds of distant feet and wheels created a repose in gentle unison with the light scattering of seed hither and thither by the distant husbandman, and with the noiseless passage of the plough as it turned up the rich brown earth, and wrought a graceful pattern in the stubbled fields. On the motionless branches of some trees, autumn berries hung like clusters of coral beads, as in those fabled orchards where the fruits were jewels; others stripped of all their garniture, stood, each the centre of its little heap of bright red leaves, watching their slow decay; others again, still wearing theirs, had them all crunched and crackled up, as though they had been burnt; about the stems of some were piled, in ruddy mounds, the apples they had borne that year; while others (hardy evergreens this class) showed somewhat stern and gloomy in their vigour, as charged by nature with the admonition that it is not to her more sensitive and joyous favourites she grants the longest term of life. Still athwart their darker boughs, the sunbeams struck out paths of deeper gold; and the red light, mantling in among their swarthy branches, used them as foils to set its brightness off, and aid the lustre of the dying day.

A moment, and its glory was no more. The sun went down beneath the long dark lines of hill and cloud which piled up in the west an airy city, wall heaped on wall, and battlement on battlement; the light was all withdrawn; the shining church turned cold and dark; the stream forgot to smile; the birds were silent; and the gloom of winter dwelt on everything.

An evening wind uprose too, and the slighter branches cracked and rattled as they moved, in skeleton dances, to its moaning music. The withering leaves no longer quiet, hurried to and fro in search of shelter from its chill pursuit; the labourer unyoked his horses, and with head bent down, trudged briskly home beside them; and from the cottage windows lights began to glance and wink upon the darkening fields.

Then the village forge came out in all its bright importance. The lusty bellows roared Ha ha! to the clear fire, which roared in turn, and bade the shining sparks dance gayly to the merry clinking of the hammers on the anvil. The gleaming iron, in its emulation, sparkled too, and shed its red-hot gems around profusely. The strong smith and his men dealt such strokes upon their work, as made even the melancholy night rejoice, and brought a glow into its dark face as it hovered about the door and windows, peeping curiously in above the shoulders of a dozen loungers. As to this idle company, there they stood, spellbound by the place, and, casting now and then a glance upon the darkness in their rear, settled their lazy elbows more at ease upon the sill, and leaned a little further in: no more disposed to tear themselves away than if they had been born to cluster round the blazing hearth like so many crickets.

Out upon the angry wind! how from sighing, it began to bluster round the merry forge, banging at the wicket, and grumbling in the chimney, as if it bullied the jolly bellows for doing anything to order. And what an impotent swaggerer it was too, for all its noise; for if it had any influence on that hoarse companion, it was but to make him roar his cheerful song the louder, and by consequence to make the fire burn the brighter, and the sparks to dance more gayly yet; at length, they whizzed so madly round and round, that it was too much for such a surly wind to bear; so off it flew with a howl giving the old sign before the ale-house door such a cuff as it went, that the Blue Dragon was more rampant than usual ever afterwards, and indeed, before Christmas, reared clean out of its crazy frame.

It was small tyranny for a respectable wind to go wreaking its vengeance on such poor creatures as the fallen leaves, but this wind happening to come up with a great heap of them just after venting its humour on the insulted Dragon, did so disperse and scatter them that they fled away, pell-mell, some here, some there, rolling over each other, whirling round and round upon their thin edges, taking frantic

flights into the air, and playing all manner of extraordinary gambols in the extremity of their distress. Nor was this enough for its malicious fury; for not content with driving them abroad, it charged small parties of them and hunted them into the wheel wright's saw-pit, and below the planks and timbers in the yard, and, scattering the sawdust in the air, it looked for them underneath, and when it did meet with any, whew! how it drove them on and followed at their heels!

The scared leaves only flew the faster for all this, and a giddy chase it was; for they got into unfrequented places, where there was no outlet, and where their pursuer kept them eddying round and round at his pleasure; and they crept under the eaves of houses, and clung tightly to the sides of hay-ricks, like bats; and tore in at open chamber windows, and cowered close to hedges; and, in short, went anywhere for safety. But the oddest feat they achieved was, to take advantage of the sudden opening of Mr Pecksniff's front-door, to dash wildly into his passage; whither the wind following close upon them, and finding the back-door open, incontinently blew out the lighted candle held by Miss Pecksniff, and slammed the front-door against Mr Pecksniff who was at that moment entering, with such violence, that in the twinkling of an eye he lay on his back at the bottom of the steps. Being by this time weary of such trifling performances, the boisterous rover hurried away rejoicing, roaring over moor and meadow, hill and flat, until it got out to sea, where it met with other winds similarly disposed, and made a night of it.

In the meantime Mr Pecksniff, having received from a sharp angle in the bottom step but one, that sort of knock on the head which lights up, for the patient's entertainment, an imaginary general illumination of very bright short-sixes, lay placidly staring at his own street door. And it would seem to have been more suggestive in its aspect than street doors usually are; for he continued to lie there, rather a lengthy and unreasonable time, without so much as wondering whether he was hurt or no; neither, when Miss Pecksniff inquired through the key-hole in a shrill voice, which might have belonged to a wind in its teens, 'Who's there' did he make any reply; nor, when Miss Pecksniff opened the door again, and shading the candle with her hand, peered out, and looked provokingly round him, and about him, and over him, and everywhere but at him, did he offer any remark, or indicate in any manner the least hint of a desire to be picked up.

'I see you,' cried Miss Pecksniff, to the ideal inflicter of a runaway knock. 'You'll catch it, sir!'

Still Mr Pecksniff, perhaps from having caught it already, said nothing.

'You're round the corner now,' cried Miss Pecksniff. She said it at a venture, but there was appropriate matter in it too; for Mr Pecksniff, being in the act of extinguishing the candles before mentioned pretty rapidly, and of reducing the number of brass knobs on his street door from four or five hundred (which had previously been juggling of their own accord before his eyes in a very novel manner) to a dozen or so, might in one sense have been said to be coming round the corner, and just turning it.

With a sharply delivered warning relative to the cage and the constable, and the stocks and the gallows, Miss Pecksniff was about to close the door again, when Mr Pecksniff (being still at the bottom of the steps) raised himself on one elbow, and sneezed.

'That voice!' cried Miss Pecksniff. 'My parent!'

At this exclamation, another Miss Pecksniff bounced out of the parlour; and the two Miss Pecksniffs, with many incoherent expressions, dragged Mr Pecksniff into an upright posture.

'Pa!' they cried in concert. 'Pa! Speak, Pa! Do not look so wild my dearest Pa!'

But as a gentleman's looks, in such a case of all others, are by no means under his own control, Mr Pecksniff continued to keep his mouth and his eyes very wide open, and to drop his lower jaw, somewhat after the manner of a toy nut-cracker; and as his hat had fallen off, and his face was pale, and his hair erect, and his coat muddy, the spectacle he presented was so very doleful, that neither of the Miss Pecksniffs could repress an involuntary screech.

'That'll do,' said Mr Pecksniff. 'I'm better.'

'He's come to himself!' cried the youngest Miss Pecksniff.

'He speaks again!' exclaimed the eldest.

With these joyful words they kissed Mr Pecksniff on either cheek; and bore him into the house. Presently, the youngest Miss Pecksniff ran out again to pick up his hat, his brown paper parcel, his umbrella, his gloves, and other small articles; and that done, and the door closed, both young ladies applied themselves to tending Mr Pecksniff's wounds in the back parlour.

They were not very serious in their nature; being limited to abrasions on what the eldest Miss Pecksniff called 'the knobby parts' of her parent's anatomy, such as his knees and elbows, and to the development of an entirely new organ, unknown to phrenologists, on

the back of his head. These injuries having been comforted externally, with patches of pickled brown paper, and Mr Pecksniff having been comforted internally, with some stiff brandy-and-water, the eldest Miss Pecksniff sat down to make the tea, which was all ready. In the meantime the youngest Miss Pecksniff brought from the kitchen a smoking dish of ham and eggs, and, setting the same before her father, took up her station on a low stool at his feet; thereby bringing her eyes on a level with the teaboard.

It must not be inferred from this position of humility, that the youngest Miss Pecksniff was so young as to be, as one may say, forced to sit upon a stool, by reason of the shortness of her legs. Miss Pecksniff sat upon a stool because of her simplicity and innocence, which were very great, very great. Miss Pecksniff sat upon a stool because she was all girlishness, and playfulness, and wildness, and kittenish buoyancy. She was the most arch and at the same time the most artless creature, was the youngest Miss Pecksniff, that you can possibly imagine. It was her great charm. She was too fresh and guileless, and too full of child-like vivacity, was the youngest Miss Pecksniff, to wear combs in her hair, or to turn it up, or to frizzle it, or braid it. She wore it in a crop, a loosely flowing crop, which had so many rows of curls in it, that the top row was only one curl. Moderately buxom was her shape, and quite womanly too; but sometimes - yes, sometimes - she even wore a pinafore; and how charming THAT was! Oh! she was indeed 'a gushing thing' (as a young gentleman had observed in verse, in the Poet's Corner of a provincial newspaper), was the youngest Miss Pecksniff!

Mr Pecksniff was a moral man - a grave man, a man of noble sentiments and speech - and he had had her christened Mercy. Mercy! oh, what a charming name for such a pure-souled Being as the youngest Miss Pecksniff! Her sister's name was Charity. There was a good thing! Mercy and Charity! And Charity, with her fine strong sense and her mild, yet not reproachful gravity, was so well named, and did so well set off and illustrate her sister! What a pleasant sight was that the contrast they presented; to see each loved and loving one sympathizing with, and devoted to, and leaning on, and yet correcting and counter-checking, and, as it were, antidoting, the other! To behold each damsel in her very admiration of her sister, setting up in business for herself on an entirely different principle, and announcing no connection with over-the-way, and if the quality of goods at that establishment don't please you, you are respectfully invited to favour ME with a call! And the crowning circumstance of the whole delightful catalogue was, that both the fair creatures were so utterly unconscious of all this! They had no idea of it. They no more thought or dreamed of it than Mr Pecksniff did. Nature played them off against each other; THEY had no hand in it, the two Miss Pecksniffs.

It has been remarked that Mr Pecksniff was a moral man. So he was. Perhaps there never was a more moral man than Mr Pecksniff, especially in his conversation and correspondence. It was once said of him by a homely admirer, that he had a Fortunatus's purse of good sentiments in his inside. In this particular he was like the girl in the fairy tale, except that if they were not actual diamonds which fell from his lips, they were the very brightest paste, and shone prodigiously. He was a most exemplary man; fuller of virtuous precept than a copy book. Some people likened him to a direction-post, which is always telling the way to a place, and never goes there; but these were his enemies, the shadows cast by his brightness; that was all. His very throat was moral. You saw a good deal of it. You looked over a very low fence of white cravat (whereof no man had ever beheld the tie for he fastened it behind), and there it lay, a valley between two jutting heights of collar, serene and whiskerless before you. It seemed to say, on the part of Mr Pecksniff, 'There is no deception, ladies and gentlemen, all is peace, a holy calm pervades me.' So did his hair, just grizzled with an iron-grey which was all brushed off his forehead, and stood bolt upright, or slightly drooped in kindred action with his heavy eyelids. So did his person, which was sleek though free from corpulency. So did his manner, which was soft and oily. In a word, even his plain black suit, and state of widower and dangling double eye-glass, all tended to the same purpose, and cried aloud, 'Behold the moral Pecksniff!'

The brazen plate upon the door (which being Mr Pecksniff's, could not lie) bore this inscription, 'PECKSNIFF, ARCHITECT,' to which Mr Pecksniff, on his cards of business, added, 'AND LAND SURVEYOR.' In one sense, and only one, he may be said to have been a Land Surveyor on a pretty large scale, as an extensive prospect lay stretched out before the windows of his house. Of his architectural doings, nothing was clearly known, except that he had never designed or built anything; but it was generally understood that his knowledge of the science was almost awful in its profundity.

Mr Pecksniff's professional engagements, indeed, were almost, if not entirely, confined to the reception of pupils; for the collection of rents, with which pursuit he occasionally varied and relieved his graver toils, can hardly be said to be a strictly architectural employment. His genius lay in ensnaring parents and guardians, and pocketing premiums. A young gentleman's premium being paid, and the young gentleman come to Mr Pecksniff's house, Mr Pecksniff borrowed his case of mathematical instruments (if silver-mounted or otherwise valuable); entreated him, from that moment, to consider himself one of the family; complimented him highly on his parents or guardians, as the case might be; and turned him loose in a spacious room on the two-pair front; where, in the company of certain drawing-boards, parallel rulers, very stiff-legged compasses, and two, or perhaps three,

other young gentlemen, he improved himself, for three or five years, according to his articles, in making elevations of Salisbury Cathedral from every possible point of sight; and in constructing in the air a vast quantity of Castles, Houses of Parliament, and other Public Buildings. Perhaps in no place in the world were so many gorgeous edifices of this class erected as under Mr Pecksniff's auspices; and if but one-twentieth part of the churches which were built in that front room, with one or other of the Miss Pecksniffs at the altar in the act of marrying the architect, could only be made available by the parliamentary commissioners, no more churches would be wanted for at least five centuries.

'Even the worldly goods of which we have just disposed,' said Mr Pecksniff, glancing round the table when he had finished, 'even cream, sugar, tea, toast, ham - '

'And eggs,' suggested Charity in a low voice.

'And eggs,' said Mr Pecksniff, 'even they have their moral. See how they come and go! Every pleasure is transitory. We can't even eat, long. If we indulge in harmless fluids, we get the dropsy; if in exciting liquids, we get drunk. What a soothing reflection is that!'

'Don't say WE get drunk, Pa,' urged the eldest Miss Pecksniff.

'When I say we, my dear,' returned her father, 'I mean mankind in general; the human race, considered as a body, and not as individuals. There is nothing personal in morality, my love. Even such a thing as this,' said Mr Pecksniff, laying the fore-finger of his left hand upon the brown paper patch on the top of his head, 'slight casual baldness though it be, reminds us that we are but' - he was going to say 'worms,' but recollecting that worms were not remarkable for heads of hair, he substituted 'flesh and blood.'

'Which,' cried Mr Pecksniff after a pause, during which he seemed to have been casting about for a new moral, and not quite successfully, 'which is also very soothing. Mercy, my dear, stir the fire and throw up the cinders.'

The young lady obeyed, and having done so, resumed her stool, reposed one arm upon her father's knee, and laid her blooming cheek upon it. Miss Charity drew her chair nearer the fire, as one prepared for conversation, and looked towards her father.

'Yes,' said Mr Pecksniff, after a short pause, during which he had been silently smiling, and shaking his head at the fire - 'I have again been fortunate in the attainment of my object. A new inmate will very shortly come among us.'

'A youth, papa?' asked Charity.

'Ye-es, a youth,' said Mr Pecksniff. 'He will avail himself of the eligible opportunity which now offers, for uniting the advantages of the best practical architectural education with the comforts of a home, and the constant association with some who (however humble their sphere, and limited their capacity) are not unmindful of their moral responsibilities.'

'Oh Pa!' cried Mercy, holding up her finger archly. 'See advertisement!'

'Playful - playful warbler,' said Mr Pecksniff. It may be observed in connection with his calling his daughter a 'warbler,' that she was not at all vocal, but that Mr Pecksniff was in the frequent habit of using any word that occurred to him as having a good sound, and rounding a sentence well without much care for its meaning. And he did this so boldly, and in such an imposing manner, that he would sometimes stagger the wisest people with his eloquence, and make them gasp again.

His enemies asserted, by the way, that a strong trustfulness in sounds and forms was the master-key to Mr Pecksniff's character.

'Is he handsome, Pa?' inquired the younger daughter.

'Silly Merry!' said the eldest: Merry being fond for Mercy. 'What is the premium, Pa? tell us that.'

'Oh, good gracious, Cherry!' cried Miss Mercy, holding up her hands with the most winning giggle in the world, 'what a mercenary girl you are! oh you naughty, thoughtful, prudent thing!'

It was perfectly charming, and worthy of the Pastoral age, to see how the two Miss Pecksniffs slapped each other after this, and then subsided into an embrace expressive of their different dispositions.

'He is well looking,' said Mr Pecksniff, slowly and distinctly; 'well looking enough. I do not positively expect any immediate premium with him.'

Notwithstanding their different natures, both Charity and Mercy concurred in opening their eyes uncommonly wide at this announcement, and in looking for the moment as blank as if their thoughts had actually had a direct bearing on the main chance.

'But what of that!' said Mr Pecksniff, still smiling at the fire. 'There is disinterestedness in the world, I hope? We are not all arrayed in two opposite ranks; the OFFensive and the DEFensive. Some few there are

who walk between; who help the needy as they go; and take no part with either side. Umph!

There was something in these morsels of philanthropy which reassured the sisters. They exchanged glances, and brightened very much.

'Oh! let us not be for ever calculating, devising, and plotting for the future,' said Mr Pecksniff, smiling more and more, and looking at the fire as a man might, who was cracking a joke with it: 'I am weary of such arts. If our inclinations are but good and open-hearted, let us gratify them boldly, though they bring upon us Loss instead of Profit. Eh, Charity?'

Glancing towards his daughters for the first time since he had begun these reflections, and seeing that they both smiled, Mr Pecksniff eyed them for an instant so jocosely (though still with a kind of saintly waggishness) that the younger one was moved to sit upon his knee forthwith, put her fair arms round his neck, and kiss him twenty times. During the whole of this affectionate display she laughed to a most immoderate extent: in which hilarious indulgence even the prudent Cherry joined.

'Tut, tut,' said Mr Pecksniff, pushing his latest-born away and running his fingers through his hair, as he resumed his tranquil face. 'What folly is this! Let us take heed how we laugh without reason lest we cry with it. What is the domestic news since yesterday? John Westlock is gone, I hope?'

'Indeed, no,' said Charity.

'And why not?' returned her father. 'His term expired yesterday. And his box was packed, I know; for I saw it, in the morning, standing in the hall.'

'He slept last night at the Dragon,' returned the young lady, 'and had Mr Pinch to dine with him. They spent the evening together, and Mr Pinch was not home till very late.'

'And when I saw him on the stairs this morning, Pa,' said Mercy with her usual sprightliness, 'he looked, oh goodness, SUCH a monster! with his face all manner of colours, and his eyes as dull as if they had been boiled, and his head aching dreadfully, I am sure from the look of it, and his clothes smelling, oh it's impossible to say how strong, oh' - here the young lady shuddered - 'of smoke and punch.'

'Now I think,' said Mr Pecksniff with his accustomed gentleness, though still with the air of one who suffered under injury without

complaint, 'I think Mr Pinch might have done better than choose for his companion one who, at the close of a long intercourse, had endeavoured, as he knew, to wound my feelings. I am not quite sure that this was delicate in Mr Pinch. I am not quite sure that this was kind in Mr Pinch. I will go further and say, I am not quite sure that this was even ordinarily grateful in Mr Pinch.'

'But what can anyone expect from Mr Pinch!' cried Charity, with as strong and scornful an emphasis on the name as if it would have given her unspeakable pleasure to express it, in an acted charade, on the calf of that gentleman's leg.

'Aye, aye,' returned her father, raising his hand mildly: 'it is very well to say what can we expect from Mr Pinch, but Mr Pinch is a fellow-creature, my dear; Mr Pinch is an item in the vast total of humanity, my love; and we have a right, it is our duty, to expect in Mr Pinch some development of those better qualities, the possession of which in our own persons inspires our humble self-respect. No,' continued Mr Pecksniff. 'No! Heaven forbid that I should say, nothing can be expected from Mr Pinch; or that I should say, nothing can be expected from any man alive (even the most degraded, which Mr Pinch is not, no, really); but Mr Pinch has disappointed me; he has hurt me; I think a little the worse of him on this account, but not if human nature. Oh, no, no!'

'Hark!' said Miss Charity, holding up her finger, as a gentle rap was heard at the street door. 'There is the creature! Now mark my words, he has come back with John Westlock for his box, and is going to help him to take it to the mail. Only mark my words, if that isn't his intention!'

Even as she spoke, the box appeared to be in progress of conveyance from the house, but after a brief murmuring of question and answer, it was put down again, and somebody knocked at the parlour door.

'Come in!' cried Mr Pecksniff - not severely; only virtuously. 'Come in!'

An ungainly, awkward-looking man, extremely short-sighted, and prematurely bald, availed himself of this permission; and seeing that Mr Pecksniff sat with his back towards him, gazing at the fire, stood hesitating, with the door in his hand. He was far from handsome certainly; and was drest in a snuff-coloured suit, of an uncouth make at the best, which, being shrunk with long wear, was twisted and tortured into all kinds of odd shapes; but notwithstanding his attire, and his clumsy figure, which a great stoop in his shoulders, and a ludicrous habit he had of thrusting his head forward, by no means redeemed, one would not have been disposed (unless Mr Pecksniff said so) to consider him a bad fellow by any means. He was perhaps

about thirty, but he might have been almost any age between sixteen and sixty; being one of those strange creatures who never decline into an ancient appearance, but look their oldest when they are very young, and get it over at once.

Keeping his hand upon the lock of the door, he glanced from Mr Pecksniff to Mercy, from Mercy to Charity, and from Charity to Mr Pecksniff again, several times; but the young ladies being as intent upon the fire as their father was, and neither of the three taking any notice of him, he was fain to say, at last,

'Oh! I beg your pardon, Mr Pecksniff: I beg your pardon for intruding; but - '

'No intrusion, Mr Pinch,' said that gentleman very sweetly, but without looking round. 'Pray be seated, Mr Pinch. Have the goodness to shut the door, Mr Pinch, if you please.'

'Certainly, sir,' said Pinch; not doing so, however, but holding it rather wider open than before, and beckoning nervously to somebody without: 'Mr Westlock, sir, hearing that you were come home - '

'Mr Pinch, Mr Pinch!' said Pecksniff, wheeling his chair about, and looking at him with an aspect of the deepest melancholy, 'I did not expect this from you. I have not deserved this from you!'

'No, but upon my word, sir - ' urged Pinch.

'The less you say, Mr Pinch,' interposed the other, 'the better. I utter no complaint. Make no defence.'

'No, but do have the goodness, sir,' cried Pinch, with great earnestness, 'if you please. Mr Westlock, sir, going away for good and all, wishes to leave none but friends behind him. Mr Westlock and you, sir, had a little difference the other day; you have had many little differences.'

'Little differences!' cried Charity.

'Little differences!' echoed Mercy.

'My loves!' said Mr Pecksniff, with the same serene upraising of his hand; 'My dears!' After a solemn pause he meekly bowed to Mr Pinch, as who should say, 'Proceed;' but Mr Pinch was so very much at a loss how to resume, and looked so helplessly at the two Miss Pecksniffs, that the conversation would most probably have terminated there, if a good-looking youth, newly arrived at man's estate, had not stepped forward from the doorway and taken up the thread of the discourse.

'Come, Mr Pecksniff,' he said, with a smile, 'don't let there be any ill-blood between us, pray. I am sorry we have ever differed, and extremely sorry I have ever given you offence. Bear me no ill-will at parting, sir.'

'I bear,' answered Mr Pecksniff, mildly, 'no ill-will to any man on earth.'

'I told you he didn't,' said Pinch, in an undertone; 'I knew he didn't! He always says he don't.'

'Then you will shake hands, sir?' cried Westlock, advancing a step or two, and bespeaking Mr Pinch's close attention by a glance.

'Umph!' said Mr Pecksniff, in his most winning tone.

'You will shake hands, sir.'

'No, John,' said Mr Pecksniff, with a calmness quite ethereal; 'no, I will not shake hands, John. I have forgiven you. I had already forgiven you, even before you ceased to reproach and taunt me. I have embraced you in the spirit, John, which is better than shaking hands.'

'Pinch,' said the youth, turning towards him, with a hearty disgust of his late master, 'what did I tell you?'

Poor Pinch looked down uneasily at Mr Pecksniff, whose eye was fixed upon him as it had been from the first; and looking up at the ceiling again, made no reply.

'As to your forgiveness, Mr Pecksniff,' said the youth, 'I'll not have it upon such terms. I won't be forgiven.'

'Won't you, John?' retorted Mr Pecksniff, with a smile. 'You must. You can't help it. Forgiveness is a high quality; an exalted virtue; far above YOUR control or influence, John. I WILL forgive you. You cannot move me to remember any wrong you have ever done me, John.'

'Wrong!' cried the other, with all the heat and impetuosity of his age. 'Here's a pretty fellow! Wrong! Wrong I have done him! He'll not even remember the five hundred pounds he had with me under false pretences; or the seventy pounds a year for board and lodging that would have been dear at seventeen! Here's a martyr!'

'Money, John,' said Mr Pecksniff, 'is the root of all evil. I grieve to see that it is already bearing evil fruit in you. But I will not remember its existence. I will not even remember the conduct of that misguided person' - and here, although he spoke like one at peace with all the

world, he used an emphasis that plainly said 'I have my eye upon the rascal now' - 'that misguided person who has brought you here to-night, seeking to disturb (it is a happiness to say, in vain) the heart's repose and peace of one who would have shed his dearest blood to serve him.'

The voice of Mr Pecksniff trembled as he spoke, and sobs were heard from his daughters. Sounds floated on the air, moreover, as if two spirit voices had exclaimed: one, 'Beast!' the other, 'Savage!'

'Forgiveness,' said Mr Pecksniff, 'entire and pure forgiveness is not incompatible with a wounded heart; perchance when the heart is wounded, it becomes a greater virtue. With my breast still wrung and grieved to its inmost core by the ingratitude of that person, I am proud and glad to say that I forgive him. Nay! I beg,' cried Mr Pecksniff, raising his voice, as Pinch appeared about to speak, 'I beg that individual not to offer a remark; he will truly oblige me by not uttering one word, just now. I am not sure that I am equal to the trial. In a very short space of time, I shall have sufficient fortitude, I trust to converse with him as if these events had never happened. But not,' said Mr Pecksniff, turning round again towards the fire, and waving his hand in the direction of the door, 'not now.'

'Bah!' cried John Westlock, with the utmost disgust and disdain the monosyllable is capable of expressing. 'Ladies, good evening. Come, Pinch, it's not worth thinking of. I was right and you were wrong. That's small matter; you'll be wiser another time.'

So saying, he clapped that dejected companion on the shoulder, turned upon his heel, and walked out into the passage, whither poor Mr Pinch, after lingering irresolutely in the parlour for a few seconds, expressing in his countenance the deepest mental misery and gloom followed him. Then they took up the box between them, and sallied out to meet the mail.

That fleet conveyance passed, every night, the corner of a lane at some distance; towards which point they bent their steps. For some minutes they walked along in silence, until at length young Westlock burst into a loud laugh, and at intervals into another, and another. Still there was no response from his companion.

'I'll tell you what, Pinch!' he said abruptly, after another lengthened silence - 'You haven't half enough of the devil in you. Half enough! You haven't any.'

'Well!' said Pinch with a sigh, 'I don't know, I'm sure. It's compliment to say so. If I haven't, I suppose, I'm all the better for it.'

'All the better!' repeated his companion tartly: 'All the worse, you mean to say.'

'And yet,' said Pinch, pursuing his own thoughts and not this last remark on the part of his friend, 'I must have a good deal of what you call the devil in me, too, or how could I make Pecksniff so uncomfortable? I wouldn't have occasioned him so much distress - don't laugh, please - for a mine of money; and Heaven knows I could find good use for it too, John. How grieved he was!'

'HE grieved!' returned the other.

'Why didn't you observe that the tears were almost starting out of his eyes!' cried Pinch. 'Bless my soul, John, is it nothing to see a man moved to that extent and know one's self to be the cause! And did you hear him say that he could have shed his blood for me?'

'Do you WANT any blood shed for you?' returned his friend, with considerable irritation. 'Does he shed anything for you that you DO want? Does he shed employment for you, instruction for you, pocket money for you? Does he shed even legs of mutton for you in any decent proportion to potatoes and garden stuff?'

'I am afraid,' said Pinch, sighing again, 'that I am a great eater; I can't disguise from myself that I'm a great eater. Now, you know that, John.'

'You a great eater!' retorted his companion, with no less indignation than before. 'How do you know you are?'

There appeared to be forcible matter in this inquiry, for Mr Pinch only repeated in an undertone that he had a strong misgiving on the subject, and that he greatly feared he was.

'Besides, whether I am or no,' he added, 'that has little or nothing to do with his thinking me ungrateful. John, there is scarcely a sin in the world that is in my eyes such a crying one as ingratitude; and when he taxes me with that, and believes me to be guilty of it, he makes me miserable and wretched.'

'Do you think he don't know that?' returned the other scornfully. 'But come, Pinch, before I say anything more to you, just run over the reasons you have for being grateful to him at all, will you? Change hands first, for the box is heavy. That'll do. Now, go on.'

'In the first place,' said Pinch, 'he took me as his pupil for much less than he asked.'

'Well,' rejoined his friend, perfectly unmoved by this instance of generosity. 'What in the second place?'

'What in the second place?' cried Pinch, in a sort of desperation, 'why, everything in the second place. My poor old grandmother died happy to think that she had put me with such an excellent man. I have grown up in his house, I am in his confidence, I am his assistant, he allows me a salary; when his business improves, my prospects are to improve too. All this, and a great deal more, is in the second place. And in the very prologue and preface to the first place, John, you must consider this, which nobody knows better than I: that I was born for much plainer and poorer things, that I am not a good hand for his kind of business, and have no talent for it, or indeed for anything else but odds and ends that are of no use or service to anybody.'

He said this with so much earnestness, and in a tone so full of feeling, that his companion instinctively changed his manner as he sat down on the box (they had by this time reached the finger-post at the end of the lane); motioned him to sit down beside him; and laid his hand upon his shoulder.

'I believe you are one of the best fellows in the world,' he said, 'Tom Pinch.'

'Not at all,' rejoined Tom. 'If you only knew Pecksniff as well as I do, you might say it of him, indeed, and say it truly.'

'I'll say anything of him, you like,' returned the other, 'and not another word to his disparagement.'

'It's for my sake, then; not his, I am afraid,' said Pinch, shaking his head gravely.

'For whose you please, Tom, so that it does please you. Oh! He's a famous fellow! HE never scraped and clawed into his pouch all your poor grandmother's hard savings - she was a housekeeper, wasn't she, Tom?'

'Yes,' said Mr Pinch, nursing one of his large knees, and nodding his head; 'a gentleman's housekeeper.'

'HE never scraped and clawed into his pouch all her hard savings; dazzling her with prospects of your happiness and advancement, which he knew (and no man better) never would be realised! HE never speculated and traded on her pride in you, and her having educated you, and on her desire that you at least should live to be a gentleman. Not he, Tom!'

'No,' said Tom, looking into his friend's face, as if he were a little doubtful of his meaning. 'Of course not.'

'So I say,' returned the youth, 'of course he never did. HE didn't take less than he had asked, because that less was all she had, and more than he expected; not he, Tom! He doesn't keep you as his assistant because you are of any use to him; because your wonderful faith in his pretensions is of inestimable service in all his mean disputes; because your honesty reflects honesty on him; because your wandering about this little place all your spare hours, reading in ancient books and foreign tongues, gets noised abroad, even as far as Salisbury, making of him, Pecksniff the master, a man of learning and of vast importance. HE gets no credit from you, Tom, not he.'

'Why, of course he don't,' said Pinch, gazing at his friend with a more troubled aspect than before. 'Pecksniff get credit from me! Well!'

'Don't I say that it's ridiculous,' rejoined the other, 'even to think of such a thing?'

'Why, it's madness,' said Tom.

'Madness!' returned young Westlock. 'Certainly it's madness. Who but a madman would suppose he cares to hear it said on Sundays, that the volunteer who plays the organ in the church, and practises on summer evenings in the dark, is Mr Pecksniff's young man, eh, Tom? Who but a madman would suppose it is the game of such a man as he, to have his name in everybody's mouth, connected with the thousand useless odds and ends you do (and which, of course, he taught you), eh, Tom? Who but a madman would suppose you advertised him hereabouts, much cheaper and much better than a chalker on the walls could, eh, Tom? As well might one suppose that he doesn't on all occasions pour out his whole heart and soul to you; that he doesn't make you a very liberal and indeed rather an extravagant allowance; or, to be more wild and monstrous still, if that be possible, as well might one suppose,' and here, at every word, he struck him lightly on the breast, 'that Pecksniff traded in your nature, and that your nature was to be timid and distrustful of yourself, and trustful of all other men, but most of all, of him who least deserves it. There would be madness, Tom!'

Mr Pinch had listened to all this with looks of bewilderment, which seemed to be in part occasioned by the matter of his companion's speech, and in part by his rapid and vehement manner. Now that he had come to a close, he drew a very long breath; and gazing wistfully in his face as if he were unable to settle in his own mind what expression it wore, and were desirous to draw from it as good a clue to his real meaning as it was possible to obtain in the dark, was about to

answer, when the sound of the mail guard's horn came cheerily upon their ears, putting an immediate end to the conference; greatly as it seemed to the satisfaction of the younger man, who jumped up briskly, and gave his hand to his companion.

'Both hands, Tom. I shall write to you from London, mind!'

'Yes,' said Pinch. 'Yes. Do, please. Good-bye. Good-bye. I can hardly believe you're going. It seems, now, but yesterday that you came. Good-bye! my dear old fellow!'

John Westlock returned his parting words with no less heartiness of manner, and sprung up to his seat upon the roof. Off went the mail at a canter down the dark road; the lamps gleaming brightly, and the horn awakening all the echoes, far and wide.

'Go your ways,' said Pinch, apostrophizing the coach; 'I can hardly persuade myself but you're alive, and are some great monster who visits this place at certain intervals, to bear my friends away into the world. You're more exulting and rampant than usual tonight, I think; and you may well crow over your prize; for he is a fine lad, an ingenuous lad, and has but one fault that I know of; he don't mean it, but he is most cruelly unjust to Pecksniff!'