

## Chapter XXVI

### An Unexpected Meeting, And A Promising Prospect

The laws of sympathy between beards and birds, and the secret source of that attraction which frequently impels a shaver of the one to be a dealer in the other, are questions for the subtle reasoning of scientific bodies; not the less so, because their investigation would seem calculated to lead to no particular result. It is enough to know that the artist who had the honour of entertaining Mrs Gamp as his first-floor lodger, united the two pursuits of barbering and bird-fancying; and that it was not an original idea of his, but one in which he had, dispersed about the by-streets and suburbs of the town, a host of rivals.

The name of the householder was Paul Sweedlepipe. But he was commonly called Poll Sweedlepipe; and was not uncommonly believed to have been so christened, among his friends and neighbours.

With the exception of the staircase, and his lodger's private apartment, Poll Sweedlepipe's house was one great bird's nest. Gamecocks resided in the kitchen; pheasants wasted the brightness of their golden plumage on the garret; bantams roosted in the cellar; owls had possession of the bedroom; and specimens of all the smaller fry of birds chirruped and twittered in the shop. The staircase was sacred to rabbits. There in hutches of all shapes and kinds, made from old packing-cases, boxes, drawers, and tea-chests, they increased in a prodigious degree, and contributed their share towards that complicated whiff which, quite impartially, and without distinction of persons, saluted every nose that was put into Sweedlepipe's easy shaving-shop.

Many noses found their way there, for all that, especially on Sunday morning, before church-time. Even archbishops shave, or must be shaved, on a Sunday, and beards WILL grow after twelve o'clock on Saturday night, though it be upon the chins of base mechanics; who, not being able to engage their valets by the quarter, hire them by the job, and pay them - oh, the wickedness of copper coin! - in dirty pence. Poll Sweedlepipe, the sinner, shaved all comers at a penny each, and cut the hair of any customer for twopence; and being a lone unmarried man, and having some connection in the bird line, Poll got on tolerably well.

He was a little elderly man, with a clammy cold right hand, from which even rabbits and birds could not remove the smell of shaving-soap. Poll had something of the bird in his nature; not of the hawk or eagle, but of the sparrow, that builds in chimney-stacks and inclines to human company. He was not quarrelsome, though, like the

sparrow; but peaceful, like the dove. In his walk he strutted; and, in this respect, he bore a faint resemblance to the pigeon, as well as in a certain prosiness of speech, which might, in its monotony, be likened to the cooing of that bird. He was very inquisitive; and when he stood at his shop-door in the evening-tide, watching the neighbours, with his head on one side, and his eye cocked knowingly, there was a dash of the raven in him. Yet there was no more wickedness in Poll than in a robin. Happily, too, when any of his ornithological properties were on the verge of going too far, they were quenched, dissolved, melted down, and neutralised in the barber; just as his bald head - otherwise, as the head of a shaved magpie - lost itself in a wig of curly black ringlets, parted on one side, and cut away almost to the crown, to indicate immense capacity of intellect.

Poll had a very small, shrill treble voice, which might have led the wags of Kingsgate Street to insist the more upon his feminine designation. He had a tender heart, too; for, when he had a good commission to provide three or four score sparrows for a shooting-match, he would observe, in a compassionate tone, how singular it was that sparrows should have been made expressly for such purposes. The question, whether men were made to shoot them, never entered into Poll's philosophy.

Poll wore, in his sporting character, a velveteen coat, a great deal of blue stocking, ankle boots, a neckerchief of some bright colour, and a very tall hat. Pursuing his more quiet occupation of barber, he generally subsided into an apron not over-clean, a flannel jacket, and corduroy knee-shorts. It was in this latter costume, but with his apron girded round his waist, as a token of his having shut up shop for the night, that he closed the door one evening, some weeks after the occurrences detailed in the last chapter, and stood upon the steps in Kingsgate Street, listening until the little cracked bell within should leave off ringing. For until it did - this was Mr Sweedlepipe's reflection - the place never seemed quiet enough to be left to itself.

'It's the greediest little bell to ring,' said Poll, 'that ever was. But it's quiet at last.'

He rolled his apron up a little tighter as he said these words, and hastened down the street. Just as he was turning into Holborn, he ran against a young gentleman in a livery. This youth was bold, though small, and with several lively expressions of displeasure, turned upon him instantly.

'Now, STOO-PID!' cried the young gentleman. 'Can't you look where you're a-going to - eh? Can't you mind where you're a-coming to - eh? What do you think your eyes was made for - eh? Ah! Yes. Oh! Now then!'

The young gentleman pronounced the two last words in a very loud tone and with frightful emphasis, as though they contained within themselves the essence of the direst aggravation. But he had scarcely done so, when his anger yielded to surprise, and he cried, in a milder tone:

'What! Polly!'

'Why, it an't you, sure!' cried Poll. 'It can't be you!'

'No. It an't me,' returned the youth. 'It's my son, my oldest one. He's a credit to his father, an't he, Polly?' With this delicate little piece of banter, he halted on the pavement, and went round and round in circles, for the better exhibition of his figure; rather to the inconvenience of the passengers generally, who were not in an equal state of spirits with himself.

'I wouldn't have believed it,' said Poll. 'What! You've left your old place, then? Have you?'

'Have I!' returned his young friend, who had by this time stuck his hands into the pockets of his white cord breeches, and was swaggering along at the barber's side. 'D'ye know a pair of top-boots when you see 'em, Polly? - look here!'

'Beau-ti-ful' cried Mr Sweedlepipe.

'D'ye know a slap-up sort of button, when you see it?' said the youth. 'Don't look at mine, if you ain't a judge, because these lions' heads was made for men of taste; not snobs.'

'Beau-ti-ful!' cried the barber again. 'A grass-green frock-coat, too, bound with gold; and a cockade in your hat!'

'I should hope so,' replied the youth. 'Blow the cockade, though; for, except that it don't turn round, it's like the wentilator that used to be in the kitchen winder at Todgers's. You ain't seen the old lady's name in the Gazette, have you?'

'No,' returned the barber. 'Is she a bankrupt?'

'If she ain't, she will be,' retorted Bailey. 'That bis'ness never can be carried on without ME. Well! How are you?'

'Oh! I'm pretty well,' said Poll. 'Are you living at this end of the town, or were you coming to see me? Was that the bis'ness that brought you to Holborn?'

'I haven't got no bis'ness in Holborn,' returned Bailey, with some displeasure. 'All my bis'ness lays at the West End. I've got the right sort of governor now. You can't see his face for his whiskers, and can't see his whiskers for the dye upon 'em. That's a gentleman ain't it? You wouldn't like a ride in a cab, would you? Why, it wouldn't be safe to offer it. You'd faint away, only to see me a-comin' at a mild trot round the corner.'

To convey a slight idea of the effect of this approach, Mr Bailey counterfeited in his own person the action of a high-trotting horse and threw up his head so high, in backing against a pump, that he shook his hat off.

'Why, he's own uncle to Capricorn,' said Bailey, 'and brother to Cauliflower. He's been through the winders of two chaney shops since we've had him, and was sold for killin' his missis. That's a horse, I hope?'

'Ah! you'll never want to buy any more red polls, now,' observed Poll, looking on his young friend with an air of melancholy. 'You'll never want to buy any more red polls now, to hang up over the sink, will you?'

'I should think not,' replied Bailey. 'Reether so. I wouldn't have nothin' to say to any bird below a Peacock; and HE'd be vulgar. Well, how are you?'

'Oh! I'm pretty well,' said Poll. He answered the question again because Mr Bailey asked it again; Mr Bailey asked it again, because - accompanied with a straddling action of the white cords, a bend of the knees, and a striking forth of the top-boots - it was an easy horse-fleshy, turfy sort of thing to do.

'Wot are you up to, old feller?' added Mr Bailey, with the same graceful rakishness. He was quite the man-about-town of the conversation, while the easy-shaver was the child.

'Why, I am going to fetch my lodger home,' said Paul.

'A woman!' cried Mr Bailey, 'for a twenty-pun' note!'

The little barber hastened to explain that she was neither a young woman, nor a handsome woman, but a nurse, who had been acting as a kind of house-keeper to a gentleman for some weeks past, and left her place that night, in consequence of being superseded by another and a more legitimate house-keeper - to wit, the gentleman's bride.

'He's newly married, and he brings his young wife home to-night,' said the barber. 'So I'm going to fetch my lodger away - Mr Chuzzlewit's, close behind the Post Office - and carry her box for her.'

'Jonas Chuzzlewit's?' said Bailey.

'Ah!' returned Paul: 'that's the name sure enough. Do you know him?'

'Oh, no!' cried Mr Bailey; 'not at all. And I don't know her! Not neither! Why, they first kept company through me, a'most.'

'Ah?' said Paul.

'Ah!' said Mr Bailey, with a wink; 'and she ain't bad looking mind you. But her sister was the best. SHE was the merry one. I often used to have a bit of fun with her, in the hold times!'

Mr Bailey spoke as if he already had a leg and three-quarters in the grave, and this had happened twenty or thirty years ago. Paul Sweedlepipe, the meek, was so perfectly confounded by his precocious self-possession, and his patronizing manner, as well as by his boots, cockade, and livery, that a mist swam before his eyes, and he saw - not the Bailey of acknowledged juvenility from Todgers's Commercial Boarding House, who had made his acquaintance within a twelvemonth, by purchasing, at sundry times, small birds at twopence each - but a highly-condensed embodiment of all the sporting grooms in London; an abstract of all the stable-knowledge of the time; a something at a high-pressure that must have had existence many years, and was fraught with terrible experiences. And truly, though in the cloudy atmosphere of Todgers's, Mr Bailey's genius had ever shone out brightly in this particular respect, it now eclipsed both time and space, cheated beholders of their senses, and worked on their belief in defiance of all natural laws. He walked along the tangible and real stones of Holborn Hill, an undersized boy; and yet he winked the winks, and thought the thoughts, and did the deeds, and said the sayings of an ancient man. There was an old principle within him, and a young surface without. He became an inexplicable creature; a breeched and booted Sphinx. There was no course open to the barber, but to go distracted himself, or to take Bailey for granted; and he wisely chose the latter.

Mr Bailey was good enough to continue to bear him company, and to entertain him, as they went, with easy conversation on various sporting topics; especially on the comparative merits, as a general principle, of horses with white stockings, and horses without. In regard to the style of tail to be preferred, Mr Bailey had opinions of his own, which he explained, but begged they might by no means influence his friend's, as here he knew he had the misfortune to differ

from some excellent authorities. He treated Mr Sweedlepipe to a dram, compounded agreeably to his own directions, which he informed him had been invented by a member of the Jockey Club; and, as they were by this time near the barber's destination, he observed that, as he had an hour to spare, and knew the parties, he would, if quite agreeable, be introduced to Mrs Gamp.

Paul knocked at Jonas Chuzzlewit's; and, on the door being opened by that lady, made the two distinguished persons known to one another. It was a happy feature in Mrs Gamp's twofold profession, that it gave her an interest in everything that was young as well as in everything that was old. She received Mr Bailey with much kindness.

'It's very good, I'm sure, of you to come,' she said to her landlord, 'as well as bring so nice a friend. But I'm afraid that I must trouble you so far as to step in, for the young couple has not yet made appearance.'

'They're late, ain't they?' inquired her landlord, when she had conducted them downstairs into the kitchen.

'Well, sir, considern' the Wings of Love, they are,' said Mrs Gamp.

Mr Bailey inquired whether the Wings of Love had ever won a plate, or could be backed to do anything remarkable; and being informed that it was not a horse, but merely a poetical or figurative expression, evinced considerable disgust. Mrs Gamp was so very much astonished by his affable manners and great ease, that she was about to propound to her landlord in a whisper the staggering inquiry, whether he was a man or a boy, when Mr Sweedlepipe, anticipating her design, made a timely diversion.

'He knows Mrs Chuzzlewit,' said Paul aloud.

'There's nothin' he don't know; that's my opinion,' observed Mrs Gamp. 'All the wickedness of the world is Print to him.'

Mr Bailey received this as a compliment, and said, adjusting his cravat, 'reether so.'

'As you knows Mrs Chuzzlewit, you knows, p'raps, what her chris'en name is?' Mrs Gamp observed.

'Charity,' said Bailey.

'That it ain't!' cried Mrs Gamp.

'Cherry, then,' said Bailey. 'Cherry's short for it. It's all the same.'

'It don't begin with a C at all,' retorted Mrs Gamp, shaking her head. 'It begins with a M.'

'Whew!' cried Mr Bailey, slapping a little cloud of pipe-clay out of his left leg, 'then he's been and married the merry one!'

As these words were mysterious, Mrs Gamp called upon him to explain, which Mr Bailey proceeded to do; that lady listening greedily to everything he said. He was yet in the fullness of his narrative when the sound of wheels, and a double knock at the street door, announced the arrival of the newly married couple. Begging him to reserve what more he had to say for her hearing on the way home, Mrs Gamp took up the candle, and hurried away to receive and welcome the young mistress of the house.

'Wishing you appiness and joy with all my art,' said Mrs Gamp, dropping a curtsey as they entered the hall; 'and you, too, sir. Your lady looks a little tired with the journey, Mr Chuzzlewit, a pretty dear!'

'She has bothered enough about it,' grumbled Mr Jonas. 'Now, show a light, will you?'

'This way, ma'am, if you please,' said Mrs Gamp, going upstairs before them. 'Things has been made as comfortable as they could be, but there's many things you'll have to alter your own self when you gets time to look about you! Ah! sweet thing! But you don't,' added Mrs Gamp, internally, 'you don't look much like a merry one, I must say!'

It was true; she did not. The death that had gone before the bridal seemed to have left its shade upon the house. The air was heavy and oppressive; the rooms were dark; a deep gloom filled up every chink and corner. Upon the hearthstone, like a creature of ill omen, sat the aged clerk, with his eyes fixed on some withered branches in the stove. He rose and looked at her.

'So there you are, Mr Chuff,' said Jonas carelessly, as he dusted his boots; 'still in the land of the living, eh?'

'Still in the land of the living, sir,' retorted Mrs Gamp. 'And Mr Chuffey may thank you for it, as many and many a time I've told him.'

Mr Jonas was not in the best of humours, for he merely said, as he looked round, 'We don't want you any more, you know, Mrs Gamp.'

'I'm a-going immediate, sir,' returned the nurse; 'unless there's nothink I can do for you, ma'am. Ain't there,' said Mrs Gamp, with a look of great sweetness, and rummaging all the time in her pocket; 'ain't there nothink I can do for you, my little bird?'

'No,' said Merry, almost crying. 'You had better go away, please!'

With a leer of mingled sweetness and slyness; with one eye on the future, one on the bride, and an arch expression in her face, partly spiritual, partly spirituous, and wholly professional and peculiar to her art; Mrs Gamp rummaged in her pocket again, and took from it a printed card, whereon was an inscription copied from her signboard.

'Would you be so good, my darling dovey of a dear young married lady,' Mrs Gamp observed, in a low voice, 'as put that somewheres where you can keep it in your mind? I'm well beknown to many ladies, and it's my card. Gamp is my name, and Gamp my nater. Livin' quite handy, I will make so bold as call in now and then, and make inquiry how your health and spirits is, my precious chick!'

And with innumerable leers, winks, coughs, nods, smiles, and curtseys, all leading to the establishment of a mysterious and confidential understanding between herself and the bride, Mrs Gamp, invoking a blessing upon the house, leered, winked, coughed, nodded, smiled, and curtseyed herself out of the room.

'But I will say, and I would if I was led a Martha to the Stakes for it,' Mrs Gamp remarked below stairs, in a whisper, 'that she don't look much like a merry one at this present moment of time.'

'Ah! wait till you hear her laugh!' said Bailey.

'Hem!' cried Mrs Gamp, in a kind of groan. 'I will, child.'

They said no more in the house, for Mrs Gamp put on her bonnet, Mr Sweedlepipe took up her box; and Mr Bailey accompanied them towards Kingsgate Street; recounting to Mrs Gamp as they went along, the origin and progress of his acquaintance with Mrs Chuzzlewit and her sister. It was a pleasant instance of this youth's precocity, that he fancied Mrs Gamp had conceived a tenderness for him, and was much tickled by her misplaced attachment.

As the door closed heavily behind them, Mrs Jonas sat down in a chair, and felt a strange chill creep upon her, whilst she looked about the room. It was pretty much as she had known it, but appeared more dreary. She had thought to see it brightened to receive her.

'It ain't good enough for you, I suppose?' said Jonas, watching her looks.

'Why, it IS dull,' said Merry, trying to be more herself.



'It'll be duller before you're done with it,' retorted Jonas, 'if you give me any of your airs. You're a nice article, to turn sulky on first coming home! Ecod, you used to have life enough, when you could plague me with it. The gal's downstairs. Ring the bell for supper, while I take my boots off!'

She roused herself from looking after him as he left the room, to do what he had desired; when the old man Chuffey laid his hand softly on her arm.

'You are not married?' he said eagerly. 'Not married?'

'Yes. A month ago. Good Heaven, what is the matter?'

He answered nothing was the matter; and turned from her. But in her fear and wonder, turning also, she saw him raise his trembling hands above his head, and heard him say:

'Oh! woe, woe, woe, upon this wicked house!'

It was her welcome - HOME.