

Chapter XXIX

In Which Some People Are Precocious, Others Professional, And Others Mysterious; All In Their Several Ways

It may have been the restless remembrance of what he had seen and heard overnight, or it may have been no deeper mental operation than the discovery that he had nothing to do, which caused Mr Bailey, on the following afternoon, to feel particularly disposed for agreeable society, and prompted him to pay a visit to his friend Poll Sweedlepipe.

On the little bell giving clamorous notice of a visitor's approach (for Mr Bailey came in at the door with a lunge, to get as much sound out of the bell as possible), Poll Sweedlepipe desisted from the contemplation of a favourite owl, and gave his young friend hearty welcome.

'Why, you look smarter by day,' said Poll, 'than you do by candle-light. I never see such a tight young dasher.'

'Reether so, Polly. How's our fair friend, Sairah?'

'Oh, she's pretty well,' said Poll. 'She's at home.'

'There's the remains of a fine woman about Sairah, Poll,' observed Mr Bailey, with genteel indifference.

'Oh!' thought Poll, 'he's old. He must be very old!'

'Too much crumb, you know,' said Mr Bailey; 'too fat, Poll. But there's many worse at her time of life.'

'The very owl's a-opening his eyes!' thought Poll. 'I don't wonder at it in a bird of his opinions.'

He happened to have been sharpening his razors, which were lying open in a row, while a huge strop dangled from the wall. Glancing at these preparations, Mr Bailey stroked his chin, and a thought appeared to occur to him.

'Poll,' he said, 'I ain't as neat as I could wish about the gills. Being here, I may as well have a shave, and get trimmed close.'

The barber stood aghast; but Mr Bailey divested himself of his neck-cloth, and sat down in the easy shaving chair with all the dignity and confidence in life. There was no resisting his manner. The evidence of sight and touch became as nothing. His chin was as smooth as a new-laid egg or a scraped Dutch cheese; but Poll Sweedlepipe wouldn't

have ventured to deny, on affidavit, that he had the beard of a Jewish rabbi.

'Go WITH the grain, Poll, all round, please,' said Mr Bailey, screwing up his face for the reception of the lather. 'You may do wot you like with the bits of whisker. I don't care for 'em.'

The meek little barber stood gazing at him with the brush and soap-dish in his hand, stirring them round and round in a ludicrous uncertainty, as if he were disabled by some fascination from beginning. At last he made a dash at Mr Bailey's cheek. Then he stopped again, as if the ghost of a beard had suddenly receded from his touch; but receiving mild encouragement from Mr Bailey, in the form of an adjuration to 'Go in and win,' he lathered him bountifully. Mr Bailey smiled through the suds in his satisfaction. 'Gently over the stones, Poll. Go a tip-toe over the pimples!'

Poll Sweedlepipe obeyed, and scraped the lather off again with particular care. Mr Bailey squinted at every successive dab, as it was deposited on a cloth on his left shoulder, and seemed, with a microscopic eye, to detect some bristles in it; for he murmured more than once 'Reether redder than I could wish, Poll.' The operation being concluded, Poll fell back and stared at him again, while Mr Bailey, wiping his face on the jack-towel, remarked, 'that arter late hours nothing freshened up a man so much as a easy shave.'

He was in the act of tying his cravat at the glass, without his coat, and Poll had wiped his razor, ready for the next customer, when Mrs Gamp, coming downstairs, looked in at the shop-door to give the barber neighbourly good day. Feeling for her unfortunate situation, in having conceived a regard for himself which it was not in the nature of things that he could return, Mr Bailey hastened to soothe her with words of kindness.

'Hallo!' he said, 'Sairah! I needn't ask you how you've been this long time, for you're in full bloom. All a-blowin and a-growin; ain't she, Polly?'

'Why, drat the Bragian boldness of that boy!' cried Mrs Gamp, though not displeased. 'What a imperent young sparrow it is! I wouldn't be that creetur's mother not for fifty pound!'

Mr Bailey regarded this as a delicate confession of her attachment, and a hint that no pecuniary gain could recompense her for its being rendered hopeless. He felt flattered. Disinterested affection is always flattering.

'Ah, dear!' moaned Mrs Gamp, sinking into the shaving chair, 'that there blessed Bull, Mr Sweedlepipe, has done his very best to conker me. Of all the trying inwalieges in this walley of the shadder, that one beats 'em black and blue.'

It was the practice of Mrs Gamp and her friends in the profession, to say this of all the easy customers; as having at once the effect of discouraging competitors for office, and accounting for the necessity of high living on the part of the nurses.

'Talk of constitooshun!' Mrs Gamp observed. 'A person's constitooshun need be made of bricks to stand it. Mrs Harris jestly says to me, but t'other day, 'Oh! Sairey Gamp,' she says, 'how is it done?' 'Mrs Harris, ma'am,' I says to her, 'we gives no trust ourselves, and puts a deal o'trust elsewere; these is our religious feelins, and we finds 'em answer.' 'Sairey,' says Mrs Harris, 'sech is life. Vich likeways is the hend of all things!'

The barber gave a soft murmur, as much as to say that Mrs Harris's remark, though perhaps not quite so intelligible as could be desired from such an authority, did equal honour to her head and to her heart.

'And here,' continued Mrs Gamp, 'and here am I a-goin twenty mile in distant, on as wentersome a chance as ever any one as monthlied ever run, I do believe. Says Mrs Harris, with a woman's and a mother's art a-beatin in her human breast, she says to me, 'You're not a-goin, Sairey, Lord forgive you!' 'Why am I not a-goin, Mrs Harris?' I replies. 'Mrs Gill,' I says, 'wos never wrong with six; and is it likely, ma'am - I ast you as a mother - that she will begin to be unreg'lar now? Often and often have I heerd him say,' I says to Mrs Harris, meaning Mr Gill, 'that he would back his wife agen Moore's almanack, to name the very day and hour, for ninepence farden. IS it likely, ma'am,' I says, 'as she will fail this once?' Says Mrs Harris 'No, ma'am, not in the course of natur. But,' she says, the tears a-fillin in her eyes, 'you knows much betterer than me, with your experienge, how little puts us out. A Punch's show,' she says, 'a chimbley sweep, a newfundlan dog, or a drunkin man a-comin round the corner sharp may do it.' So it may, Mr Sweedlepipes,' said Mrs Gamp, 'there's no deniging of it; and though my books is clear for a full week, I takes a anxious art along with me, I do assure you, sir.'

'You're so full of zeal, you see!' said Poll. 'You worrit yourself so.'

'Worrit myself!' cried Mrs Gamp, raising her hands and turning up her eyes. 'You speak truth in that, sir, if you never speaks no more 'twixt this and when two Sundays jines together. I feels the sufferins of other people more than I feels my own, though no one mayn't suppose it.'

The families I've had,' said Mrs Gamp, 'if all was knowd and credit done where credit's doo, would take a week to chris'en at Saint Polge's fontin!'

'Where's the patient goin?' asked Sweedlepipe.

'Into Har'fordshire, which is his native air. But native airs nor native graces neither,' Mrs Gamp observed, 'won't bring HIM round.'

'So bad as that?' inquired the wistful barber. 'Indeed!'

Mrs Gamp shook her head mysteriously, and pursed up her lips. 'There's fevers of the mind,' she said, 'as well as body. You may take your slime drafts till you files into the air with efferwescence; but you won't cure that.'

'Ah!' said the barber, opening his eyes, and putting on his raven aspect; 'Lor!'

'No. You may make yourself as light as any gash balloon,' said Mrs Gamp. 'But talk, when you're wrong in your head and when you're in your sleep, of certain things; and you'll be heavy in your mind.'

'Of what kind of things now?' inquired Poll, greedily biting his nails in his great interest. 'Ghosts?'

Mrs Gamp, who perhaps had been already tempted further than she had intended to go, by the barber's stimulating curiosity, gave a sniff of uncommon significance, and said, it didn't signify.

'I'm a-goin down with my patient in the coach this arternoon,' she proceeded. 'I'm a-goin to stop with him a day or so, till he gets a country nuss (drat them country nusses, much the orkard hussies knows about their bis'ness); and then I'm a-comin back; and that's my trouble, Mr Sweedlepipes. But I hope that everythink'll only go on right and comfortable as long as I'm away; perwisin which, as Mrs Harris says, Mrs Gill is welcome to choose her own time; all times of the day and night bein' equally the same to me.'

During the progress of the foregoing remarks, which Mrs Gamp had addressed exclusively to the barber, Mr Bailey had been tying his cravat, getting on his coat, and making hideous faces at himself in the glass. Being now personally addressed by Mrs Gamp, he turned round, and mingled in the conversation.

'You ain't been in the City, I suppose, sir, since we was all three there together,' said Mrs Gamp, 'at Mr Chuzzlewit's?'

'Yes, I have, Sairah. I was there last night.'

'Last night!' cried the barber.

'Yes, Poll, reether so. You can call it this morning, if you like to be particular. He dined with us.'

'Who does that young Limb mean by 'hus?'" said Mrs Gamp, with most impatient emphasis.

'Me and my Governor, Sairah. He dined at our house. We wos very merry, Sairah. So much so, that I was obliged to see him home in a hackney coach at three o'clock in the morning.' It was on the tip of the boy's tongue to relate what had followed; but remembering how easily it might be carried to his master's ears, and the repeated cautions he had had from Mr Crimple 'not to chatter,' he checked himself; adding, only, 'She was sitting up, expecting him.'

'And all things considered,' said Mrs Gamp sharply, 'she might have know'd better than to go a-tirin herself out, by doin' anythink of the sort. Did they seem pretty pleasant together, sir?'

'Oh, yes,' answered Bailey, 'pleasant enough.'

'I'm glad on it,' said Mrs Gamp, with a second sniff of significance.

'They haven't been married so long,' observed Poll, rubbing his hands, 'that they need be anything but pleasant yet awhile.'

'No,' said Mrs Gamp, with a third significant signal.

'Especially,' pursued the barber, 'when the gentleman bears such a character as you gave him.'

'I speak; as I find, Mr Sweedlepipes,' said Mrs Gamp. 'Forbid it should be otherways! But we never knows wot's hidden in each other's hearts; and if we had glass winders there, we'd need keep the shetters up, some on us, I do assure you!'

'But you don't mean to say - ' Poll Sweedlepipe began.

'No,' said Mrs Gamp, cutting him very short, 'I don't. Don't think I do. The torters of the Imposition shouldn't make me own I did. All I says is,' added the good woman, rising and folding her shawl about her, 'that the Bull's a-waitin, and the precious moments is a-flyin' fast.'

The little barber having in his eager curiosity a great desire to see Mrs Gamp's patient, proposed to Mr Bailey that they should accompany

her to the Bull, and witness the departure of the coach. That young gentleman assenting, they all went out together.

Arriving at the tavern, Mrs Gamp (who was full-dressed for the journey, in her latest suit of mourning) left her friends to entertain themselves in the yard, while she ascended to the sick room, where her fellow-labourer Mrs Prig was dressing the invalid.

He was so wasted, that it seemed as if his bones would rattle when they moved him. His cheeks were sunken, and his eyes unnaturally large. He lay back in the easy-chair like one more dead than living; and rolled his languid eyes towards the door when Mrs Gamp appeared, as painfully as if their weight alone were burdensome to move.

'And how are we by this time?' Mrs Gamp observed. 'We looks charming.'

'We looks a deal charmer than we are, then,' returned Mrs Prig, a little chafed in her temper. 'We got out of bed back'ards, I think, for we're as cross as two sticks. I never see sich a man. He wouldn't have been washed, if he'd had his own way.'

'She put the soap in my mouth,' said the unfortunate patient feebly.

'Couldn't you keep it shut then?' retorted Mrs Prig. 'Who do you think's to wash one feater, and miss another, and wear one's eyes out with all manner of fine work of that description, for half-a-crown a day! If you wants to be tittivated, you must pay accordin'.'

'Oh dear me!' cried the patient, 'oh dear, dear!'

'There!' said Mrs Prig, 'that's the way he's been a-conductin of himself, Sarah, ever since I got him out of bed, if you'll believe it.'

'Instead of being grateful,' Mrs Gamp observed, 'for all our little ways. Oh, fie for shame, sir, fie for shame!'

Here Mrs Prig seized the patient by the chin, and began to rasp his unhappy head with a hair-brush.

'I suppose you don't like that, neither!' she observed, stopping to look at him.

It was just possible that he didn't for the brush was a specimen of the hardest kind of instrument producible by modern art; and his very eyelids were red with the friction. Mrs Prig was gratified to observe the

correctness of her supposition, and said triumphantly 'she know'd as much.'

When his hair was smoothed down comfortably into his eyes, Mrs Prig and Mrs Gamp put on his neckerchief; adjusting his shirt collar with great nicety, so that the starched points should also invade those organs, and afflict them with an artificial ophthalmia. His waistcoat and coat were next arranged; and as every button was wrenched into a wrong button-hole, and the order of his boots was reversed, he presented on the whole rather a melancholy appearance.

'I don't think it's right,' said the poor weak invalid. 'I feel as if I was in somebody else's clothes. I'm all on one side; and you've made one of my legs shorter than the other. There's a bottle in my pocket too. What do you make me sit upon a bottle for?'

'Deuce take the man!' cried Mrs Gamp, drawing it forth. 'If he ain't been and got my night-bottle here. I made a little cupboard of his coat when it hung behind the door, and quite forgot it, Betsey. You'll find a ingun or two, and a little tea and sugar in his t'other pocket, my dear, if you'll just be good enough to take 'em out.'

Betsey produced the property in question, together with some other articles of general chandlery; and Mrs Gamp transferred them to her own pocket, which was a species of nankeen pannier. Refreshment then arrived in the form of chops and strong ale for the ladies, and a basin of beef-tea for the patient; which refection was barely at an end when John Westlock appeared.

'Up and dressed!' cried John, sitting down beside him. 'That's brave. How do you feel?'

'Much better. But very weak.'

'No wonder. You have had a hard bout of it. But country air, and change of scene,' said John, 'will make another man of you! Why, Mrs Gamp,' he added, laughing, as he kindly arranged the sick man's garments, 'you have odd notions of a gentleman's dress!'

'Mr Lewsome an't a easy gent to get into his clothes, sir,' Mrs Gamp replied with dignity; 'as me and Betsey Prig can certify afore the Lord Mayor and Uncommon Counsellors, if needful!' John at that moment was standing close in front of the sick man, in the act of releasing him from the torture of the collars before mentioned, when he said in a whisper:

'Mr Westlock! I don't wish to be overheard. I have something very particular and strange to say to you; something that has been a dreadful weight on my mind, through this long illness.'

Quick in all his motions, John was turning round to desire the women to leave the room; when the sick man held him by the sleeve.

'Not now. I've not the strength. I've not the courage. May I tell it when I have? May I write it, if I find that easier and better?'

'May you!' cried John. 'Why, Lewsome, what is this!'

'Don't ask me what it is. It's unnatural and cruel. Frightful to think of. Frightful to tell. Frightful to know. Frightful to have helped in. Let me kiss your hand for all your goodness to me. Be kinder still, and don't ask me what it is!'

At first, John gazed at him in great surprise; but remembering how very much reduced he was, and how recently his brain had been on fire with fever, believed that he was labouring under some imaginary horror or despondent fancy. For farther information on this point, he took an opportunity of drawing Mrs Gamp aside, while Betsey Prig was wrapping him in cloaks and shawls, and asked her whether he was quite collected in his mind.

'Oh bless you, no!' said Mrs Gamp. 'He hates his nusses to this hour. They always does it, sir. It's a certain sign. If you could have heerd the poor dear soul a-findin fault with me and Betsey Prig, not half an hour ago, you would have wondered how it is we don't get fretted to the tomb.'

This almost confirmed John in his suspicion; so, not taking what had passed into any serious account, he resumed his former cheerful manner, and assisted by Mrs Gamp and Betsey Prig, conducted Lewsome downstairs to the coach; just then upon the point of starting. Poll Sweedlepipe was at the door with his arms tight folded and his eyes wide open, and looked on with absorbing interest, while the sick man was slowly moved into the vehicle. His bony hands and haggard face impressed Poll wonderfully; and he informed Mr Bailey in confidence, that he wouldn't have missed seeing him for a pound. Mr Bailey, who was of a different constitution, remarked that he would have stayed away for five shillings.

It was a troublesome matter to adjust Mrs Gamp's luggage to her satisfaction; for every package belonging to that lady had the inconvenient property of requiring to be put in a boot by itself, and to have no other luggage near it, on pain of actions at law for heavy damages against the proprietors of the coach. The umbrella with the

circular patch was particularly hard to be got rid of, and several times thrust out its battered brass nozzle from improper crevices and chinks, to the great terror of the other passengers. Indeed, in her intense anxiety to find a haven of refuge for this chattel, Mrs Gamp so often moved it, in the course of five minutes, that it seemed not one umbrella but fifty. At length it was lost, or said to be; and for the next five minutes she was face to face with the coachman, go wherever he might, protesting that it should be 'made good,' though she took the question to the House of Commons.

At last, her bundle, and her pattens, and her basket, and everything else, being disposed of, she took a friendly leave of Poll and Mr Bailey, dropped a curtsey to John Westlock, and parted as from a cherished member of the sisterhood with Betsey Prig.

'Wishin you lots of sickness, my darlin creetur,' Mrs Gamp observed, 'and good places. It won't be long, I hope, afore we works together, off and on, again, Betsey; and may our next meetin' be at a large family's, where they all takes it reg'lar, one from another, turn and turn about, and has it business-like.'

'I don't care how soon it is,' said Mrs Prig; 'nor how many weeks it lasts.'

Mrs Gamp with a reply in a congenial spirit was backing to the coach, when she came in contact with a lady and gentleman who were passing along the footway.

'Take care, take care here!' cried the gentleman. 'Halloo! My dear! Why, it's Mrs Gamp!'

'What, Mr Mould!' exclaimed the nurse. 'And Mrs Mould! who would have thought as we should ever have a meetin' here, I'm sure!'

'Going out of town, Mrs Gamp?' cried Mould. 'That's unusual, isn't it?'

'It IS unusual, sir,' said Mrs Gamp. 'But only for a day or two at most. The gent,' she whispered, 'as I spoke about.'

'What, in the coach!' cried Mould. 'The one you thought of recommending? Very odd. My dear, this will interest you. The gentleman that Mrs Gamp thought likely to suit us is in the coach, my love.'

Mrs Mould was greatly interested.

'Here, my dear. You can stand upon the door-step,' said Mould, 'and take a look at him. Ha! There he is. Where's my glass? Oh! all right. I've got it. Do you see him, my dear?'

'Quite plain,' said Mrs Mould.

'Upon my life, you know, this is a very singular circumstance,' said Mould, quite delighted. 'This is the sort of thing, my dear, I wouldn't have missed on any account. It tickles one. It's interesting. It's almost a little play, you know. Ah! There he is! To be sure. Looks poorly, Mrs M., don't he?'

Mrs Mould assented.

'He's coming our way, perhaps, after all,' said Mould. 'Who knows! I feel as if I ought to show him some little attention, really. He don't seem a stranger to me. I'm very much inclined to move my hat, my dear.'

'He's looking hard this way,' said Mrs Mould.

'Then I will!' cried Mould. 'How d'ye do, sir! I wish you good day. Ha! He bows too. Very gentlemanly. Mrs Gamp has the cards in her pocket, I have no doubt. This is very singular, my dear - and very pleasant. I am not superstitious, but it really seems as if one was destined to pay him those little melancholy civilities which belong to our peculiar line of business. There can be no kind of objection to your kissing your hand to him, my dear.'

Mrs Mould did so.

'Ha!' said Mould. 'He's evidently gratified. Poor fellow! I am quite glad you did it, my love. Bye bye, Mrs Gamp!' waving his hand. 'There he goes; there he goes!'

So he did; for the coach rolled off as the words were spoken. Mr and Mrs Mould, in high good humour, went their merry way. Mr Bailey retired with Poll Sweedlepipe as soon as possible; but some little time elapsed before he could remove his friend from the ground, owing to the impression wrought upon the barber's nerves by Mrs Prig, whom he pronounced, in admiration of her beard, to be a woman of transcendent charms.

When the light cloud of bustle hanging round the coach was thus dispersed, Nadgett was seen in the darkest box of the Bull coffee-room, looking wistfully up at the clock - as if the man who never appeared were a little behind his time.