

Chapter XXXI

Mr Pinch Is Discharged Of A Duty Which He Never Owed To Anybody, And Mr Pecksniff Discharges A Duty Which He Owes To Society

The closing words of the last chapter lead naturally to the commencement of this, its successor; for it has to do with a church. With the church, so often mentioned heretofore, in which Tom Pinch played the organ for nothing.

One sultry afternoon, about a week after Miss Charity's departure for London, Mr Pecksniff being out walking by himself, took it into his head to stray into the churchyard. As he was lingering among the tombstones, endeavouring to extract an available sentiment or two from the epitaphs - for he never lost an opportunity of making up a few moral crackers, to be let off as occasion served - Tom Pinch began to practice. Tom could run down to the church and do so whenever he had time to spare; for it was a simple little organ, provided with wind by the action of the musician's feet; and he was independent, even of a bellows-blower. Though if Tom had wanted one at any time, there was not a man or boy in all the village, and away to the turnpike (tollman included), but would have blown away for him till he was black in the face.

Mr Pecksniff had no objection to music; not the least. He was tolerant of everything; he often said so. He considered it a vagabond kind of trifling, in general, just suited to Tom's capacity. But in regard to Tom's performance upon this same organ, he was remarkably lenient, singularly amiable; for when Tom played it on Sundays, Mr Pecksniff in his unbounded sympathy felt as if he played it himself, and were a benefactor to the congregation. So whenever it was impossible to devise any other means of taking the value of Tom's wages out of him, Mr Pecksniff gave him leave to cultivate this instrument. For which mark of his consideration Tom was very grateful.

The afternoon was remarkably warm, and Mr Pecksniff had been strolling a long way. He had not what may be called a fine ear for music, but he knew when it had a tranquilizing influence on his soul; and that was the case now, for it sounded to him like a melodious snore. He approached the church, and looking through the diamond lattice of a window near the porch, saw Tom, with the curtains in the loft drawn back, playing away with great expression and tenderness.

The church had an inviting air of coolness. The old oak roof supported by cross-beams, the hoary walls, the marble tablets, and the cracked stone pavement, were refreshing to look at. There were leaves of ivy tapping gently at the opposite windows; and the sun poured in

through only one; leaving the body of the church in tempting shade. But the most tempting spot of all, was one red-curtained and soft-cushioned pew, wherein the official dignitaries of the place (of whom Mr Pecksniff was the head and chief) enshrined themselves on Sundays. Mr Pecksniff's seat was in the corner; a remarkably comfortable corner; where his very large Prayer-Book was at that minute making the most of its quarto self upon the desk. He determined to go in and rest.

He entered very softly; in part because it was a church; in part because his tread was always soft; in part because Tom played a solemn tune; in part because he thought he would surprise him when he stopped. Unbolting the door of the high pew of state, he glided in and shut it after him; then sitting in his usual place, and stretching out his legs upon the hassocks, he composed himself to listen to the music.

It is an unaccountable circumstance that he should have felt drowsy there, where the force of association might surely have been enough to keep him wide awake; but he did. He had not been in the snug little corner five minutes before he began to nod. He had not recovered himself one minute before he began to nod again. In the very act of opening his eyes indolently, he nodded again. In the very act of shutting them, he nodded again. So he fell out of one nod into another until at last he ceased to nod at all, and was as fast as the church itself.

He had a consciousness of the organ, long after he fell asleep, though as to its being an organ he had no more idea of that than he had of its being a bull. After a while he began to have at intervals the same dreamy impressions of voices; and awakening to an indolent curiosity upon the subject, opened his eyes.

He was so indolent, that after glancing at the hassocks and the pew, he was already half-way off to sleep again, when it occurred to him that there really were voices in the church; low voices, talking earnestly hard by; while the echoes seemed to mutter responses. He roused himself, and listened.

Before he had listened half a dozen seconds, he became as broad awake as ever he had been in all his life. With eyes, and ears, and mouth, wide open, he moved himself a very little with the utmost caution, and gathering the curtain in his hand, peeped out.

Tom Pinch and Mary. Of course. He had recognized their voices, and already knew the topic they discussed. Looking like the small end of a guillotined man, with his chin on a level with the top of the pew, so that he might duck down immediately in case of either of them

turning round, he listened. Listened with such concentrated eagerness, that his very hair and shirt-collar stood bristling up to help him.

'No,' cried Tom. 'No letters have ever reached me, except that one from New York. But don't be uneasy on that account, for it's very likely they have gone away to some far-off place, where the posts are neither regular nor frequent. He said in that very letter that it might be so, even in that city to which they thought of travelling - Eden, you know.'

'It is a great weight upon my mind,' said Mary.

'Oh, but you mustn't let it be,' said Tom. 'There's a true saying that nothing travels so fast as ill news; and if the slightest harm had happened to Martin, you may be sure you would have heard of it long ago. I have often wished to say this to you,' Tom continued with an embarrassment that became him very well, 'but you have never given me an opportunity.'

'I have sometimes been almost afraid,' said Mary, 'that you might suppose I hesitated to confide in you, Mr Pinch.'

'No,' Tom stammered, 'I - I am not aware that I ever supposed that. I am sure that if I have, I have checked the thought directly, as an injustice to you. I feel the delicacy of your situation in having to confide in me at all,' said Tom, 'but I would risk my life to save you from one day's uneasiness; indeed I would!'

Poor Tom!

'I have dreaded sometimes,' Tom continued, 'that I might have displeased you by - by having the boldness to try and anticipate your wishes now and then. At other times I have fancied that your kindness prompted you to keep aloof from me.'

'Indeed!'

'It was very foolish; very presumptuous and ridiculous, to think so,' Tom pursued; 'but I feared you might suppose it possible that I - I - should admire you too much for my own peace; and so denied yourself the slight assistance you would otherwise have accepted from me. If such an idea has ever presented itself to you,' faltered Tom, 'pray dismiss it. I am easily made happy; and I shall live contented here long after you and Martin have forgotten me. I am a poor, shy, awkward creature; not at all a man of the world; and you should think no more of me, bless you, than if I were an old friar!'

If friars bear such hearts as thine, Tom, let friars multiply; though they have no such rule in all their stern arithmetic.

'Dear Mr Pinch!' said Mary, giving him her hand; 'I cannot tell you how your kindness moves me. I have never wronged you by the lightest doubt, and have never for an instant ceased to feel that you were all - much more than all - that Martin found you. Without the silent care and friendship I have experienced from you, my life here would have been unhappy. But you have been a good angel to me; filling me with gratitude of heart, hope, and courage.'

'I am as little like an angel, I am afraid,' replied Tom, shaking his head, 'as any stone cherubim among the grave-stones; and I don't think there are many real angels of THAT pattern. But I should like to know (if you will tell me) why you have been so very silent about Martin.'

'Because I have been afraid,' said Mary, 'of injuring you.'

'Of injuring me!' cried Tom.

'Of doing you an injury with your employer.'

The gentleman in question dived.

'With Pecksniff!' rejoined Tom, with cheerful confidence. 'Oh dear, he'd never think of us! He's the best of men. The more at ease you were, the happier he would be. Oh dear, you needn't be afraid of Pecksniff. He is not a spy.'

Many a man in Mr Pecksniff's place, if he could have dived through the floor of the pew of state and come out at Calcutta or any inhabited region on the other side of the earth, would have done it instantly. Mr Pecksniff sat down upon a hassock, and listening more attentively than ever, smiled.

Mary seemed to have expressed some dissent in the meanwhile, for Tom went on to say, with honest energy:

'Well, I don't know how it is, but it always happens, whenever I express myself in this way to anybody almost, that I find they won't do justice to Pecksniff. It is one of the most extraordinary circumstances that ever came within my knowledge, but it is so. There's John Westlock, who used to be a pupil here, one of the best-hearted young men in the world, in all other matters - I really believe John would have Pecksniff flogged at the cart's tail if he could. And John is not a solitary case, for every pupil we have had in my time has gone away with the same inveterate hatred of him. There was Mark Tapley, too,

quite in another station of life,' said Tom; 'the mockery he used to make of Pecksniff when he was at the Dragon was shocking. Martin too: Martin was worse than any of 'em. But I forgot. He prepared you to dislike Pecksniff, of course. So you came with a prejudice, you know, Miss Graham, and are not a fair witness.'

Tom triumphed very much in this discovery, and rubbed his hands with great satisfaction.

'Mr Pinch,' said Mary, 'you mistake him.'

'No, no!' cried Tom. 'YOU mistake him. But,' he added, with a rapid change in his tone, 'what is the matter? Miss Graham, what is the matter?'

Mr Pecksniff brought up to the top of the pew, by slow degrees, his hair, his forehead, his eyebrow, his eye. She was sitting on a bench beside the door with her hands before her face; and Tom was bending over her.

'What is the matter?' cried Tom. 'Have I said anything to hurt you? Has any one said anything to hurt you? Don't cry. Pray tell me what it is. I cannot bear to see you so distressed. Mercy on us, I never was so surprised and grieved in all my life!'

Mr Pecksniff kept his eye in the same place. He could have moved it now for nothing short of a gimlet or a red-hot wire.

'I wouldn't have told you, Mr Pinch,' said Mary, 'if I could have helped it; but your delusion is so absorbing, and it is so necessary that we should be upon our guard; that you should not be compromised; and to that end that you should know by whom I am beset; that no alternative is left me. I came here purposely to tell you, but I think I should have wanted courage if you had not chanced to lead me so directly to the object of my coming.'

Tom gazed at her steadfastly, and seemed to say, 'What else?' But he said not a word.

'That person whom you think the best of men,' said Mary, looking up, and speaking with a quivering lip and flashing eye.

'Lord bless me!' muttered Tom, staggering back. 'Wait a moment. That person whom I think the best of men! You mean Pecksniff, of course. Yes, I see you mean Pecksniff. Good gracious me, don't speak without authority. What has he done? If he is not the best of men, what is he?'

'The worst. The falsest, craftiest, meanest, cruellest, most sordid, most shameless,' said the trembling girl - trembling with her indignation.

Tom sat down on a seat, and clasped his hands.

'What is he,' said Mary, 'who receiving me in his house as his guest; his unwilling guest; knowing my history, and how defenceless and alone I am, presumes before his daughters to affront me so, that if I had a brother but a child, who saw it, he would instinctively have helped me?'

'He is a scoundrel!' exclaimed Tom. 'Whoever he may be, he is a scoundrel.'

Mr Pecksniff dived again.

'What is he,' said Mary, 'who, when my only friend - a dear and kind one, too - was in full health of mind, humbled himself before him, but was spurned away (for he knew him then) like a dog. Who, in his forgiving spirit, now that that friend is sunk into a failing state, can crawl about him again, and use the influence he basely gains for every base and wicked purpose, and not for one - not one - that's true or good?'

'I say he is a scoundrel!' answered Tom.

'But what is he - oh, Mr Pinch, what IS he - who, thinking he could compass these designs the better if I were his wife, assails me with the coward's argument that if I marry him, Martin, on whom I have brought so much misfortune, shall be restored to something of his former hopes; and if I do not, shall be plunged in deeper ruin? What is he who makes my very constancy to one I love with all my heart a torture to myself and wrong to him; who makes me, do what I will, the instrument to hurt a head I would heap blessings on! What is he who, winding all these cruel snares about me, explains their purpose to me, with a smooth tongue and a smiling face, in the broad light of day; dragging me on, the while, in his embrace, and holding to his lips a hand,' pursued the agitated girl, extending it, 'which I would have struck off, if with it I could lose the shame and degradation of his touch?'

'I say,' cried Tom, in great excitement, 'he is a scoundrel and a villain! I don't care who he is, I say he is a double-dyed and most intolerable villain!'

Covering her face with her hands again, as if the passion which had sustained her through these disclosures lost itself in an overwhelming sense of shame and grief, she abandoned herself to tears.

Any sight of distress was sure to move the tenderness of Tom, but this especially. Tears and sobs from her were arrows in his heart. He tried to comfort her; sat down beside her; expended all his store of homely eloquence; and spoke in words of praise and hope of Martin. Aye, though he loved her from his soul with such a self-denying love as woman seldom wins; he spoke from first to last of Martin. Not the wealth of the rich Indies would have tempted Tom to shirk one mention of her lover's name.

When she was more composed, she impressed upon Tom that this man she had described, was Pecksniff in his real colours; and word by word and phrase by phrase, as well as she remembered it, related what had passed between them in the wood: which was no doubt a source of high gratification to that gentleman himself, who in his desire to see and his dread of being seen, was constantly diving down into the state pew, and coming up again like the intelligent householder in Punch's Show, who avoids being knocked on the head with a cudgel. When she had concluded her account, and had besought Tom to be very distant and unconscious in his manner towards her after this explanation, and had thanked him very much, they parted on the alarm of footsteps in the burial-ground; and Tom was left alone in the church again.

And now the full agitation and misery of the disclosure came rushing upon Tom indeed. The star of his whole life from boyhood had become, in a moment, putrid vapour. It was not that Pecksniff, Tom's Pecksniff, had ceased to exist, but that he never had existed. In his death Tom would have had the comfort of remembering what he used to be, but in this discovery, he had the anguish of recollecting what he never was. For, as Tom's blindness in this matter had been total and not partial, so was his restored sight. HIS Pecksniff could never have worked the wickedness of which he had just now heard, but any other Pecksniff could; and the Pecksniff who could do that could do anything, and no doubt had been doing anything and everything except the right thing, all through his career. From the lofty height on which poor Tom had placed his idol it was tumbled down headlong, and

Not all the king's horses, nor all the king's men,
Could have set Mr Pecksniff up again.

Legions of Titans couldn't have got him out of the mud; and serve him right! But it was not he who suffered; it was Tom. His compass was broken, his chart destroyed, his chronometer had stopped, his masts were gone by the board; his anchor was adrift, ten thousand leagues away.

Mr Pecksniff watched him with a lively interest, for he divined the purpose of Tom's ruminations, and was curious to see how he conducted himself. For some time, Tom wandered up and down the aisle like a man demented, stopping occasionally to lean against a pew and think it over; then he stood staring at a blank old monument bordered tastefully with skulls and cross-bones, as if it were the finest work of Art he had ever seen, although at other times he held it in unspeakable contempt; then he sat down; then walked to and fro again; then went wandering up into the organ-loft, and touched the keys. But their minstrelsy was changed, their music gone; and sounding one long melancholy chord, Tom drooped his head upon his hands and gave it up as hopeless.

'I wouldn't have cared,' said Tom Pinch, rising from his stool and looking down into the church as if he had been the Clergyman, 'I wouldn't have cared for anything he might have done to Me, for I have tried his patience often, and have lived upon his sufferance and have never been the help to him that others could have been. I wouldn't have minded, Pecksniff,' Tom continued, little thinking who heard him, 'if you had done Me any wrong; I could have found plenty of excuses for that; and though you might have hurt me, could have still gone on respecting you. But why did you ever fall so low as this in my esteem! Oh Pecksniff, Pecksniff, there is nothing I would not have given, to have had you deserve my old opinion of you; nothing!'

Mr Pecksniff sat upon the hassock pulling up his shirt-collar, while Tom, touched to the quick, delivered this apostrophe. After a pause he heard Tom coming down the stairs, jingling the church keys; and bringing his eye to the top of the pew again, saw him go slowly out and lock the door.

Mr Pecksniff durst not issue from his place of concealment; for through the windows of the church he saw Tom passing on among the graves, and sometimes stopping at a stone, and leaning there as if he were a mourner who had lost a friend. Even when he had left the churchyard, Mr Pecksniff still remained shut up; not being at all secure but that in his restless state of mind Tom might come wandering back. At length he issued forth, and walked with a pleasant countenance into the vestry; where he knew there was a window near the ground, by which he could release himself by merely stepping out.

He was in a curious frame of mind, Mr Pecksniff; being in no hurry to go, but rather inclining to a dilatory trifling with the time, which prompted him to open the vestry cupboard, and look at himself in the parson's little glass that hung within the door. Seeing that his hair was rumpled, he took the liberty of borrowing the canonical brush and arranging it. He also took the liberty of opening another cupboard; but he shut it up again quickly, being rather startled by the sight of a

black and a white surplice dangling against the wall; which had very much the appearance of two curates who had committed suicide by hanging themselves. Remembering that he had seen in the first cupboard a port-wine bottle and some biscuits, he peeped into it again, and helped himself with much deliberation; cogitating all the time though, in a very deep and weighty manner, as if his thoughts were otherwise employed.

He soon made up his mind, if it had ever been in doubt; and putting back the bottle and biscuits, opened the casement. He got out into the churchyard without any difficulty; shut the window after him; and walked straight home.

'Is Mr Pinch indoors?' asked Mr Pecksniff of his serving-maid.

'Just come in, sir.'

'Just come in, eh?' repeated Mr Pecksniff, cheerfully. 'And gone upstairs, I suppose?'

'Yes sir. Gone upstairs. Shall I call him, sir?'

'No,' said Mr Pecksniff, 'no. You needn't call him, Jane. Thank you, Jane. How are your relations, Jane?'

'Pretty well, I thank you, sir.'

'I am glad to hear it. Let them know I asked about them, Jane. Is Mr Chuzzlewit in the way, Jane?'

'Yes, sir. He's in the parlour, reading.'

'He's in the parlour, reading, is he, Jane?' said Mr Pecksniff. 'Very well. Then I think I'll go and see him, Jane.'

Never had Mr Pecksniff been beheld in a more pleasant humour!

But when he walked into the parlour where the old man was engaged as Jane had said; with pen and ink and paper on a table close at hand (for Mr Pecksniff was always very particular to have him well supplied with writing materials), he became less cheerful. He was not angry, he was not vindictive, he was not cross, he was not moody, but he was grieved; he was sorely grieved. As he sat down by the old man's side, two tears - not tears like those with which recording angels blot their entries out, but drops so precious that they use them for their ink - stole down his meritorious cheeks.

'What is the matter?' asked old Martin. 'Pecksniff, what ails you, man?'

'I am sorry to interrupt you, my dear sir, and I am still more sorry for the cause. My good, my worthy friend, I am deceived.'

'You are deceived!'

'Ah!' cried Mr Pecksniff, in an agony, 'deceived in the tenderest point. Cruelly deceived in that quarter, sir, in which I placed the most unbounded confidence. Deceived, Mr Chuzzlewit, by Thomas Pinch.'

'Oh! bad, bad, bad!' said Martin, laying down his book. 'Very bad! I hope not. Are you certain?'

'Certain, my good sir! My eyes and ears are witnesses. I wouldn't have believed it otherwise. I wouldn't have believed it, Mr Chuzzlewit, if a Fiery Serpent had proclaimed it from the top of Salisbury Cathedral. I would have said,' cried Mr Pecksniff, 'that the Serpent lied. Such was my faith in Thomas Pinch, that I would have cast the falsehood back into the Serpent's teeth, and would have taken Thomas to my heart. But I am not a Serpent, sir, myself, I grieve to say, and no excuse or hope is left me.'

Martin was greatly disturbed to see him so much agitated, and to hear such unexpected news. He begged him to compose himself, and asked upon what subject Mr Pinch's treachery had been developed.

'That is almost the worst of all, sir,' Mr Pecksniff answered, 'on a subject nearly concerning YOU. Oh! is it not enough,' said Mr Pecksniff, looking upward, 'that these blows must fall on me, but must they also hit my friends!'

'You alarm me,' cried the old man, changing colour. 'I am not so strong as I was. You terrify me, Pecksniff!'

'Cheer up, my noble sir,' said Mr Pecksniff, taking courage, 'and we will do what is required of us. You shall know all, sir, and shall be righted. But first excuse me, sir, excuse me. I have a duty to discharge, which I owe to society.'

He rang the bell, and Jane appeared. 'Send Mr Pinch here, if you please, Jane.'

Tom came. Constrained and altered in his manner, downcast and dejected, visibly confused; not liking to look Pecksniff in the face.

The honest man bestowed a glance on Mr Chuzzlewit, as who should say 'You see!' and addressed himself to Tom in these terms:

'Mr Pinch, I have left the vestry-window unfastened. Will you do me the favour to go and secure it; then bring the keys of the sacred edifice to me!'

'The vestry-window, sir?' cried Tom.

'You understand me, Mr Pinch, I think,' returned his patron. 'Yes, Mr Pinch, the vestry-window. I grieve to say that sleeping in the church after a fatiguing ramble, I overheard just now some fragments,' he emphasised that word, 'of a dialogue between two parties; and one of them locking the church when he went out, I was obliged to leave it myself by the vestry-window. Do me the favour to secure that vestry-window, Mr Pinch, and then come back to me.'

No physiognomist that ever dwelt on earth could have construed Tom's face when he heard these words. Wonder was in it, and a mild look of reproach, but certainly no fear or guilt, although a host of strong emotions struggled to display themselves. He bowed, and without saying one word, good or bad, withdrew.

'Pecksniff,' cried Martin, in a tremble, 'what does all this mean? You are not going to do anything in haste, you may regret!'

'No, my good sir,' said Mr Pecksniff, firmly, 'No. But I have a duty to discharge which I owe to society; and it shall be discharged, my friend, at any cost!'

Oh, late-remembered, much-forgotten, mouthing, braggart duty, always owed, and seldom paid in any other coin than punishment and wrath, when will mankind begin to know thee! When will men acknowledge thee in thy neglected cradle, and thy stunted youth, and not begin their recognition in thy sinful manhood and thy desolate old age! Oh, ermined Judge whose duty to society is, now, to doom the ragged criminal to punishment and death, hadst thou never, Man, a duty to discharge in barring up the hundred open gates that wooed him to the felon's dock, and throwing but ajar the portals to a decent life! Oh, prelate, prelate, whose duty to society it is to mourn in melancholy phrase the sad degeneracy of these bad times in which thy lot of honours has been cast, did nothing go before thy elevation to the lofty seat, from which thou dealest out thy homilies to other tarriers for dead men's shoes, whose duty to society has not begun! Oh! magistrate, so rare a country gentleman and brave a squire, had you no duty to society, before the ricks were blazing and the mob were mad; or did it spring up, armed and booted from the earth, a corps of yeomanry full-grown!

Mr Pecksniff's duty to society could not be paid till Tom came back. The interval which preceded the return of that young man, he occupied in a close conference with his friend; so that when Tom did arrive, he found the two quite ready to receive him. Mary was in her own room above, whither Mr Pecksniff, always considerate, had besought old Martin to entreat her to remain some half-hour longer, that her feelings might be spared.

When Tom came back, he found old Martin sitting by the window, and Mr Pecksniff in an imposing attitude at the table. On one side of him was his pocket-handkerchief; and on the other a little heap (a very little heap) of gold and silver, and odd pence. Tom saw, at a glance, that it was his own salary for the current quarter.

'Have you fastened the vestry-window, Mr Pinch?' said Pecksniff.

'Yes, sir.'

'Thank you. Put down the keys if you please, Mr Pinch.'

Tom placed them on the table. He held the bunch by the key of the organ-loft (though it was one of the smallest), and looked hard at it as he laid it down. It had been an old, old friend of Tom's; a kind companion to him, many and many a day.

'Mr Pinch,' said Pecksniff, shaking his head; 'oh, Mr Pinch! I wonder you can look me in the face!'

Tom did it though; and notwithstanding that he has been described as stooping generally, he stood as upright then as man could stand.

'Mr Pinch,' said Pecksniff, taking up his handkerchief, as if he felt that he should want it soon, 'I will not dwell upon the past. I will spare you, and I will spare myself, that pain at least.'

Tom's was not a very bright eye, but it was a very expressive one when he looked at Mr Pecksniff, and said:

'Thank you, sir. I am very glad you will not refer to the past.'

'The present is enough,' said Mr Pecksniff, dropping a penny, 'and the sooner THAT is past, the better. Mr Pinch, I will not dismiss you without a word of explanation. Even such a course would be quite justifiable under the circumstances; but it might wear an appearance of hurry, and I will not do it; for I am,' said Mr Pecksniff, knocking down another penny, 'perfectly self-possessed. Therefore I will say to you, what I have already said to Mr Chuzzlewit.'

Tom glanced at the old gentleman, who nodded now and then as approving of Mr Pecksniff's sentences and sentiments, but interposed between them in no other way.

'From fragments of a conversation which I overheard in the church, just now, Mr Pinch,' said Pecksniff, 'between yourself and Miss Graham - I say fragments, because I was slumbering at a considerable distance from you, when I was roused by your voices - and from what I saw, I ascertained (I would have given a great deal not to have ascertained, Mr Pinch) that you, forgetful of all ties of duty and of honour, sir; regardless of the sacred laws of hospitality, to which you were pledged as an inmate of this house; have presumed to address Miss Graham with unreturned professions of attachment and proposals of love.'

Tom looked at him steadily.

'Do you deny it, sir?' asked Mr Pecksniff, dropping one pound two and fourpence, and making a great business of picking it up again.

'No, sir,' replied Tom. 'I do not.'

'You do not,' said Mr Pecksniff, glancing at the old gentleman. 'Oblige me by counting this money, Mr Pinch, and putting your name to this receipt. You do not?'

No, Tom did not. He scorned to deny it. He saw that Mr Pecksniff having overheard his own disgrace, cared not a jot for sinking lower yet in his contempt. He saw that he had devised this fiction as the readiest means of getting rid of him at once, but that it must end in that any way. He saw that Mr Pecksniff reckoned on his not denying it, because his doing so and explaining would incense the old man more than ever against Martin and against Mary; while Pecksniff himself would only have been mistaken in his 'fragments.' Deny it! No.

'You find the amount correct, do you, Mr Pinch?' said Pecksniff.

'Quite correct, sir,' answered Tom.

'A person is waiting in the kitchen,' said Mr Pecksniff, 'to carry your luggage wherever you please. We part, Mr Pinch, at once, and are strangers from this time.'

Something without a name; compassion, sorrow, old tenderness, mistaken gratitude, habit; none of these, and yet all of them; smote upon Tom's gentle heart at parting. There was no such soul as Pecksniff's in that carcase; and yet, though his speaking out had not

involved the compromise of one he loved, he couldn't have denounced the very shape and figure of the man. Not even then.

'I will not say,' cried Mr Pecksniff, shedding tears, 'what a blow this is. I will not say how much it tries me; how it works upon my nature; how it grates upon my feelings. I do not care for that. I can endure as well as another man. But what I have to hope, and what you have to hope, Mr Pinch (otherwise a great responsibility rests upon you), is, that this deception may not alter my ideas of humanity; that it may not impair my freshness, or contract, if I may use the expression, my Pinions. I hope it will not; I don't think it will. It may be a comfort to you, if not now, at some future time, to know that I shall endeavour not to think the worse of my fellow-creatures in general, for what has passed between us. Farewell!'

Tom had meant to spare him one little puncturation with a lancet, which he had it in his power to administer, but he changed his mind on hearing this, and said:

'I think you left something in the church, sir.'

'Thank you, Mr Pinch,' said Pecksniff. 'I am not aware that I did.'

'This is your double eye-glass, I believe?' said Tom.

'Oh!' cried Pecksniff, with some degree of confusion. 'I am obliged to you. Put it down, if you please.'

'I found it,' said Tom, slowly - 'when I went to bolt the vestry-window - in the pew.'

So he had. Mr Pecksniff had taken it off when he was bobbing up and down, lest it should strike against the panelling; and had forgotten it. Going back to the church with his mind full of having been watched, and wondering very much from what part, Tom's attention was caught by the door of the state pew standing open. Looking into it he found the glass. And thus he knew, and by returning it gave Mr Pecksniff the information that he knew, where the listener had been; and that instead of overhearing fragments of the conversation, he must have rejoiced in every word of it.

'I am glad he's gone,' said Martin, drawing a long breath when Tom had left the room.

'It IS a relief,' assented Mr Pecksniff. 'It is a great relief. But having discharged - I hope with tolerable firmness - the duty which I owed to society, I will now, my dear sir, if you will give me leave, retire to shed a few tears in the back garden, as an humble individual.'

Tom went upstairs; cleared his shelf of books; packed them up with his music and an old fiddle in his trunk; got out his clothes (they were not so many that they made his head ache); put them on the top of his books; and went into the workroom for his case of instruments. There was a ragged stool there, with the horsehair all sticking out of the top like a wig: a very Beast of a stool in itself; on which he had taken up his daily seat, year after year, during the whole period of his service. They had grown older and shabbier in company. Pupils had served their time; seasons had come and gone. Tom and the worn-out stool had held together through it all. That part of the room was traditionally called 'Tom's Corner.' It had been assigned to him at first because of its being situated in a strong draught, and a great way from the fire; and he had occupied it ever since. There were portraits of him on the walls, with all his weak points monstrously portrayed. Diabolical sentiments, foreign to his character, were represented as issuing from his mouth in fat balloons. Every pupil had added something, even unto fancy portraits of his father with one eye, and of his mother with a disproportionate nose, and especially of his sister; who always being presented as extremely beautiful, made full amends to Tom for any other jokes. Under less uncommon circumstances, it would have cut Tom to the heart to leave these things and think that he saw them for the last time; but it didn't now. There was no Pecksniff; there never had been a Pecksniff; and all his other griefs were swallowed up in that.

So, when he returned into the bedroom, and, having fastened his box and a carpet-bag, put on his walking gaiters, and his great-coat, and his hat, and taken his stick in his hand, looked round it for the last time. Early on summer mornings, and by the light of private candle-ends on winter nights, he had read himself half blind in this same room. He had tried in this same room to learn the fiddle under the bedclothes, but yielding to objections from the other pupils, had reluctantly abandoned the design. At any other time he would have parted from it with a pang, thinking of all he had learned there, of the many hours he had passed there; for the love of his very dreams. But there was no Pecksniff; there never had been a Pecksniff, and the unreality of Pecksniff extended itself to the chamber, in which, sitting on one particular bed, the thing supposed to be that Great Abstraction had often preached morality with such effect that Tom had felt a moisture in his eyes, while hanging breathless on the words.

The man engaged to bear his box - Tom knew him well: a Dragon man - came stamping up the stairs, and made a roughish bow to Tom (to whom in common times he would have nodded with a grin) as though he were aware of what had happened, and wished him to perceive it made no difference to HIM. It was clumsily done; he was a mere waterer of horses; but Tom liked the man for it, and felt it more than going away.

Tom would have helped him with the box, but he made no more of it, though it was a heavy one, than an elephant would have made of a castle; just swinging it on his back and bowling downstairs as if, being naturally a heavy sort of fellow, he could carry a box infinitely better than he could go alone. Tom took the carpet-bag, and went downstairs along with him. At the outer door stood Jane, crying with all her might; and on the steps was Mrs Lupin, sobbing bitterly, and putting out her hand for Tom to shake.

'You're coming to the Dragon, Mr Pinch?'

'No,' said Tom, 'no. I shall walk to Salisbury to-night. I couldn't stay here. For goodness' sake, don't make me so unhappy, Mrs Lupin.'

'But you'll come to the Dragon, Mr Pinch. If it's only for tonight. To see me, you know; not as a traveller.'

'God bless my soul!' said Tom, wiping his eyes. 'The kindness of people is enough to break one's heart! I mean to go to Salisbury to-night, my dear good creature. If you'll take care of my box for me till I write for it, I shall consider it the greatest kindness you can do me.'

'I wish,' cried Mrs Lupin, 'there were twenty boxes, Mr Pinch, that I might have 'em all.'

'Thank'ee,' said Tom. 'It's like you. Good-bye. Good-bye.'

There were several people, young and old, standing about the door, some of whom cried with Mrs Lupin; while others tried to keep up a stout heart, as Tom did; and others were absorbed in admiration of Mr Pecksniff - a man who could build a church, as one may say, by squinting at a sheet of paper; and others were divided between that feeling and sympathy with Tom. Mr Pecksniff had appeared on the top of the steps, simultaneously with his old pupil, and while Tom was talking with Mrs Lupin kept his hand stretched out, as though he said 'Go forth!' When Tom went forth, and had turned the corner Mr Pecksniff shook his head, shut his eyes, and heaving a deep sigh, shut the door. On which, the best of Tom's supporters said he must have done some dreadful deed, or such a man as Mr Pecksniff never could have felt like that. If it had been a common quarrel (they observed), he would have said something, but when he didn't, Mr Pinch must have shocked him dreadfully.

Tom was out of hearing of their shrewd opinions, and plodded on as steadily as he could go, until he came within sight of the turnpike where the tollman's family had cried out 'Mr Pinch!' that frosty morning, when he went to meet young Martin. He had got through the village, and this toll-bar was his last trial; but when the infant toll-

takers came screeching out, he had half a mind to run for it, and make a bolt across the country.

'Why, deary Mr Pinch! oh, deary sir!' cried the tollman's wife. 'What an unlikely time for you to be a-going this way with a bag!'

'I am going to Salisbury,' said Tom.

'Why, goodness, where's the gig, then?' cried the tollman's wife, looking down the road, as if she thought Tom might have been upset without observing it.

'I haven't got it,' said Tom. 'I - ' he couldn't evade it; he felt she would have him in the next question, if he got over this one. 'I have left Mr Pecksniff.'

The tollman - a crusty customer, always smoking solitary pipes in a Windsor chair, inside, set artfully between two little windows that looked up and down the road, so that when he saw anything coming up he might hug himself on having toll to take, and when he saw it going down, might hug himself on having taken it - the tollman was out in an instant.

'Left Mr Pecksniff!' cried the tollman.

'Yes,' said Tom, 'left him.'

The tollman looked at his wife, uncertain whether to ask her if she had anything to suggest, or to order her to mind the children. Astonishment making him surly, he preferred the latter, and sent her into the toll-house with a flea in her ear.

'You left Mr Pecksniff!' cried the tollman, folding his arms, and spreading his legs. 'I should as soon have thought of his head leaving him.'

'Aye!' said Tom, 'so should I, yesterday. Good night!'

If a heavy drove of oxen hadn't come by immediately, the tollman would have gone down to the village straight, to inquire into it. As things turned out, he smoked another pipe, and took his wife into his confidence. But their united sagacity could make nothing of it, and they went to bed - metaphorically - in the dark. But several times that night, when a waggon or other vehicle came through, and the driver asked the tollkeeper 'What news?' he looked at the man by the light of his lantern, to assure himself that he had an interest in the subject, and then said, wrapping his watch-coat round his legs:

'You've heard of Mr Pecksniff down yonder?'

'Ah! sure-ly!'

'And of his young man Mr Pinch, p'raps?'

'Ah!'

'They've parted.'

After every one of these disclosures, the tollman plunged into his house again, and was seen no more, while the other side went on in great amazement.

But this was long after Tom was abed, and Tom was now with his face towards Salisbury, doing his best to get there. The evening was beautiful at first, but it became cloudy and dull at sunset, and the rain fell heavily soon afterwards. For ten long miles he plodded on, wet through, until at last the lights appeared, and he came into the welcome precincts of the city.

He went to the inn where he had waited for Martin, and briefly answering their inquiries after Mr Pecksniff, ordered a bed. He had no heart for tea or supper, meat or drink of any kind, but sat by himself before an empty table in the public room while the bed was getting ready, revolving in his mind all that had happened that eventful day, and wondering what he could or should do for the future. It was a great relief when the chambermaid came in, and said the bed was ready.

It was a low four-poster, shelving downward in the centre like a trough, and the room was crowded with impracticable tables and exploded chests of drawers, full of damp linen. A graphic representation in oil of a remarkably fat ox hung over the fireplace, and the portrait of some former landlord (who might have been the ox's brother, he was so like him) stared roundly in, at the foot of the bed. A variety of queer smells were partially quenched in the prevailing scent of very old lavender; and the window had not been opened for such a long space of time that it pleaded immemorial usage, and wouldn't come open now.

These were trifles in themselves, but they added to the strangeness of the place, and did not induce Tom to forget his new position. Pecksniff had gone out of the world - had never been in it - and it was as much as Tom could do to say his prayers without him. But he felt happier afterwards, and went to sleep, and dreamed about him as he Never Was.