

Chapter XXXII

Treats Of Todger's Again; And Of Another Blighted Plant Besides The Plants Upon The Leads

Early on the day next after that on which she bade adieu to the halls of her youth and the scenes of her childhood, Miss Pecksniff, arriving safely at the coach-office in London, was there received, and conducted to her peaceful home beneath the shadow of the Monument, by Mrs Todgers. M. Todgers looked a little worn by cares of gravity and other such solitudes arising out of her establishment, but displayed her usual earnestness and warmth of manner.

'And how, my sweet Miss Pecksniff,' said she, 'how is your princely pa?'

Miss Pecksniff signified (in confidence) that he contemplated the introduction of a princely ma; and repeated the sentiment that she wasn't blind, and wasn't quite a fool, and wouldn't bear it.

Mrs Todgers was more shocked by the intelligence than any one could have expected. She was quite bitter. She said there was no truth in man and that the warmer he expressed himself, as a general principle, the falser and more treacherous he was. She foresaw with astonishing clearness that the object of Mr Pecksniff's attachment was designing, worthless, and wicked; and receiving from Charity the fullest confirmation of these views, protested with tears in her eyes that she loved Miss Pecksniff like a sister, and felt her injuries as if they were her own.

'Your real darling sister, I have not seen her more than once since her marriage,' said Mrs Todgers, 'and then I thought her looking poorly. My sweet Miss Pecksniff, I always thought that you was to be the lady?'

'Oh dear no!' cried Cherry, shaking her head. 'Oh no, Mrs Todgers. Thank you. No! not for any consideration he could offer.'

'I dare say you are right,' said Mrs Todgers with a sigh. 'I feared it all along. But the misery we have had from that match, here among ourselves, in this house, my dear Miss Pecksniff, nobody would believe.'

'Lor, Mrs Todgers!'

'Awful, awful!' repeated Mrs Todgers, with strong emphasis. 'You recollect our youngest gentleman, my dear?'

'Of course I do,' said Cherry.

'You might have observed,' said Mrs Todgers, 'how he used to watch your sister; and that a kind of stony dumbness came over him whenever she was in company?'

'I am sure I never saw anything of the sort,' said Cherry, in a peevish manner. 'What nonsense, Mrs Todgers!'

'My dear,' returned that lady in a hollow voice, 'I have seen him again and again, sitting over his pie at dinner, with his spoon a perfect fixture in his mouth, looking at your sister. I have seen him standing in a corner of our drawing-room, gazing at her, in such a lonely, melancholy state, that he was more like a Pump than a man, and might have drawed tears.'

'I never saw it!' cried Cherry; 'that's all I can say.'

'But when the marriage took place,' said Mrs Todgers, proceeding with her subject, 'when it was in the paper, and was read out here at breakfast, I thought he had taken leave of his senses, I did indeed. The violence of that young man, my dear Miss Pecksniff; the frightful opinions he expressed upon the subject of self-destruction; the extraordinary actions he performed with his tea; the clenching way in which he bit his bread and butter; the manner in which he taunted Mr Jinkins; all combined to form a picture never to be forgotten.'

'It's a pity he didn't destroy himself, I think,' observed Miss Pecksniff.

'Himself!' said Mrs Todgers, 'it took another turn at night. He was for destroying other people then. There was a little chaffing going on - I hope you don't consider that a low expression, Miss Pecksniff; it is always in our gentlemen's mouths - a little chaffing going on, my dear, among 'em, all in good nature, when suddenly he rose up, foaming with his fury, and but for being held by three would have had Mr Jinkins's life with a bootjack.'

Miss Pecksniff's face expressed supreme indifference.

'And now,' said Mrs Todgers, 'now he is the meekest of men. You can almost bring the tears into his eyes by looking at him. He sits with me the whole day long on Sundays, talking in such a dismal way that I find it next to impossible to keep my spirits up equal to the accommodation of the boarders. His only comfort is in female society. He takes me half-price to the play, to an extent which I sometimes fear is beyond his means; and I see the tears a-standing in his eyes during the whole performance - particularly if it is anything of a comic nature. The turn I experienced only yesterday,' said Mrs Todgers

putting her hand to her side, 'when the house-maid threw his bedside carpet out of the window of his room, while I was sitting here, no one can imagine. I thought it was him, and that he had done it at last!'

The contempt with which Miss Charity received this pathetic account of the state to which the youngest gentleman in company was reduced, did not say much for her power of sympathising with that unfortunate character. She treated it with great levity, and went on to inform herself, then and afterwards, whether any other changes had occurred in the commercial boarding-house.

Mr Bailey was gone, and had been succeeded (such is the decay of human greatness!) by an old woman whose name was reported to be Tamaroo - which seemed an impossibility. Indeed it appeared in the fullness of time that the jocular boarders had appropriated the word from an English ballad, in which it is supposed to express the bold and fiery nature of a certain hackney coachman; and that it was bestowed upon Mr Bailey's successor by reason of her having nothing fiery about her, except an occasional attack of that fire which is called St. Anthony's. This ancient female had been engaged, in fulfillment of a vow, registered by Mrs Todgers, that no more boys should darken the commercial doors; and she was chiefly remarkable for a total absence of all comprehension upon every subject whatever. She was a perfect Tomb for messages and small parcels; and when dispatched to the Post Office with letters, had been frequently seen endeavouring to insinuate them into casual chinks in private doors, under the delusion that any door with a hole in it would answer the purpose. She was a very little old woman, and always wore a very coarse apron with a bib before and a loop behind, together with bandages on her wrists, which appeared to be afflicted with an everlasting sprain. She was on all occasions chary of opening the street door, and ardent to shut it again; and she waited at table in a bonnet.

This was the only great change over and above the change which had fallen on the youngest gentleman. As for him, he more than corroborated the account of Mrs Todgers; possessing greater sensibility than even she had given him credit for. He entertained some terrible notions of Destiny, among other matters, and talked much about people's 'Missions'; upon which he seemed to have some private information not generally attainable, as he knew it had been poor Merry's mission to crush him in the bud. He was very frail and tearful; for being aware that a shepherd's mission was to pipe to his flocks, and that a boatswain's mission was to pipe all hands, and that one man's mission was to be a paid piper, and another man's mission was to pay the piper, so he had got it into his head that his own peculiar mission was to pipe his eye. Which he did perpetually.

He often informed Mrs Todgers that the sun had set upon him; that the billows had rolled over him; that the car of Juggernaut had crushed him, and also that the deadly Upas tree of Java had blighted him. His name was Moddle.

Towards this most unhappy Moddle, Miss Pecksniff conducted herself at first with distant haughtiness, being in no humour to be entertained with dirges in honour of her married sister. The poor young gentleman was additionally crushed by this, and remonstrated with Mrs Todgers on the subject.

'Even she turns from me, Mrs Todgers,' said Moddle.

'Then why don't you try and be a little bit more cheerful, sir?' retorted Mrs Todgers.

'Cheerful, Mrs Todgers! cheerful!' cried the youngest gentleman; 'when she reminds me of days for ever fled, Mrs Todgers!'

'Then you had better avoid her for a short time, if she does,' said Mrs Todgers, 'and come to know her again, by degrees. That's my advice.'

'But I can't avoid her,' replied Moddle, 'I haven't strength of mind to do it. Oh, Mrs Todgers, if you knew what a comfort her nose is to me!'

'Her nose, sir!' Mrs Todgers cried.

'Her profile, in general,' said the youngest gentleman, 'but particularly her nose. It's so like;' here he yielded to a burst of grief. 'It's so like hers who is Another's, Mrs Todgers!'

The observant matron did not fail to report this conversation to Charity, who laughed at the time, but treated Mr Moddle that very evening with increased consideration, and presented her side face to him as much as possible. Mr Moddle was not less sentimental than usual; was rather more so, if anything; but he sat and stared at her with glistening eyes, and seemed grateful.

'Well, sir!' said the lady of the Boarding-House next day. 'You held up your head last night. You're coming round, I think.'

'Only because she's so like her who is Another's, Mrs Todgers,' rejoined the youth. 'When she talks, and when she smiles, I think I'm looking on HER brow again, Mrs Todgers.'

This was likewise carried to Charity, who talked and smiled next evening in her most engaging manner, and rallying Mr Moddle on the lowness of his spirits, challenged him to play a rubber at cribbage. Mr

Moddle taking up the gauntlet, they played several rubbers for sixpences, and Charity won them all. This may have been partially attributable to the gallantry of the youngest gentleman, but it was certainly referable to the state of his feelings also; for his eyes being frequently dimmed by tears, he thought that aces were tens, and knaves queens, which at times occasioned some confusion in his play.

On the seventh night of cribbage, when Mrs Todgers, sitting by, proposed that instead of gambling they should play for 'love,' Mr Moddle was seen to change colour. On the fourteenth night, he kissed Miss Pecksniff's snuffers, in the passage, when she went upstairs to bed; meaning to have kissed her hand, but missing it.

In short, Mr Moddle began to be impressed with the idea that Miss Pecksniff's mission was to comfort him; and Miss Pecksniff began to speculate on the probability of its being her mission to become ultimately Mrs Moddle. He was a young gentleman (Miss Pecksniff was not a very young lady) with rising prospects, and 'almost' enough to live on. Really it looked very well.

Besides - besides - he had been regarded as devoted to Merry. Merry had joked about him, and had once spoken of it to her sister as a conquest. He was better looking, better shaped, better spoken, better tempered, better mannered than Jonas. He was easy to manage, could be made to consult the humours of his Betrothed, and could be shown off like a lamb when Jonas was a bear. There was the rub!

In the meantime the cribbage went on, and Mrs Todgers went off; for the youngest gentleman, dropping her society, began to take Miss Pecksniff to the play. He also began, as Mrs Todgers said, to slip home 'in his dinner-times,' and to get away from 'the office' at unholy seasons; and twice, as he informed Mrs Todgers himself, he received anonymous letters, enclosing cards from Furniture Warehouses - clearly the act of that ungentlemanly ruffian Jinkins; only he hadn't evidence enough to call him out upon. All of which, so Mrs Todgers told Miss Pecksniff, spoke as plain English as the shining sun.

'My dear Miss Pecksniff, you may depend upon it,' said Mrs Todgers, 'that he is burning to propose.'

'My goodness me, why don't he then?' cried Cherry.

'Men are so much more timid than we think 'em, my dear,' returned Mrs Todgers. 'They baulk themselves continually. I saw the words on Todgers's lips for months and months and months, before he said 'em.'

Miss Pecksniff submitted that Todgers might not have been a fair specimen.

'Oh yes, he was. Oh bless you, yes, my dear. I was very particular in those days, I assure you,' said Mrs Todgers, bridling. 'No, no. You give Mr Moddle a little encouragement, Miss Pecksniff, if you wish him to speak; and he'll speak fast enough, depend upon it.'

'I am sure I don't know what encouragement he would have, Mrs Todgers,' returned Charity. 'He walks with me, and plays cards with me, and he comes and sits alone with me.'

'Quite right,' said Mrs Todgers. 'That's indispensable, my dear.'

'And he sits very close to me.'

'Also quite correct,' said Mrs Todgers.

'And he looks at me.'

'To be sure he does,' said Mrs Todgers.

'And he has his arm upon the back of the chair or sofa, or whatever it is - behind me, you know.'

'I should think so,' said Mrs Todgers.

'And then he begins to cry!'

Mrs Todgers admitted that he might do better than that; and might undoubtedly profit by the recollection of the great Lord Nelson's signal at the battle of Trafalgar. Still, she said, he would come round, or, not to mince the matter, would be brought round, if Miss Pecksniff took up a decided position, and plainly showed him that it must be done.

Determining to regulate her conduct by this opinion, the young lady received Mr Moddle, on the earliest subsequent occasion, with an air of constraint; and gradually leading him to inquire, in a dejected manner, why she was so changed, confessed to him that she felt it necessary for their mutual peace and happiness to take a decided step. They had been much together lately, she observed, much together, and had tasted the sweets of a genuine reciprocity of sentiment. She never could forget him, nor could she ever cease to think of him with feelings of the liveliest friendship, but people had begun to talk, the thing had been observed, and it was necessary that they should be nothing more to each other, than any gentleman and lady in society usually are. She was glad she had had the resolution to say thus much before her feelings had been tried too far; they had

been greatly tried, she would admit; but though she was weak and silly, she would soon get the better of it, she hoped.

Moddle, who had by this time become in the last degree maudlin, and wept abundantly, inferred from the foregoing avowal, that it was his mission to communicate to others the blight which had fallen on himself; and that, being a kind of unintentional Vampire, he had had Miss Pecksniff assigned to him by the Fates, as Victim Number One. Miss Pecksniff controverting this opinion as sinful, Moddle was goaded on to ask whether she could be contented with a blighted heart; and it appearing on further examination that she could be, plighted his dismal troth, which was accepted and returned.

He bore his good fortune with the utmost moderation. Instead of being triumphant, he shed more tears than he had ever been known to shed before; and, sobbing, said:

'Oh! what a day this has been! I can't go back to the office this afternoon. Oh, what a trying day this has been! Good Gracious!'