Chapter XXXVII

Tom Pinch, Going Astray, Finds That He Is Not The Only Person In That Predicament. He Retaliates Upon A Fallen Foe

Tom's evil genius did not lead him into the dens of any of those preparers of cannibalic pastry, who are represented in many standard country legends as doing a lively retail business in the Metropolis; nor did it mark him out as the prey of ring-droppers, pea and thimble-riggers, duffers, touters, or any of those bloodless sharpers, who are, perhaps, a little better known to the Police. He fell into conversation with no gentleman who took him into a public-house, where there happened to be another gentleman who swore he had more money than any gentleman, and very soon proved he had more money than one gentleman by taking his away from him; neither did he fall into any other of the numerous man-traps which are set up without notice, in the public grounds of this city. But he lost his way. He very soon did that; and in trying to find it again he lost it more and more.

Now, Tom, in his guileless distrust of London, thought himself very knowing in coming to the determination that he would not ask to be directed to Furnival's Inn, if he could help it; unless, indeed, he should happen to find himself near the Mint, or the Bank of England; in which case he would step in, and ask a civil question or two, confiding in the perfect respectability of the concern. So on he went, looking up all the streets he came near, and going up half of them; and thus, by dint of not being true to Goswell Street, and filing off into Aldermanbury, and bewildering himself in Barbican, and being constant to the wrong point of the compass in London Wall, and then getting himself crosswise into Thames Street, by an instinct that would have been marvellous if he had had the least desire or reason to go there, he found himself, at last, hard by the Monument.

The Man in the Monument was quite as mysterious a being to Tom as the Man in the Moon. It immediately occurred to him that the lonely creature who held himself aloof from all mankind in that pillar like some old hermit was the very man of whom to ask his way. Cold, he might be; little sympathy he had, perhaps, with human passion - the column seemed too tall for that; but if Truth didn't live in the base of the Monument, notwithstanding Pope's couplet about the outside of it, where in London (thought Tom) was she likely to be found!

Coming close below the pillar, it was a great encouragement to Tom to find that the Man in the Monument had simple tastes; that stony and artificial as his residence was, he still preserved some rustic recollections; that he liked plants, hung up bird-cages, was not wholly cut off from fresh groundsel, and kept young trees in tubs. The Man in the Monument, himself, was sitting outside the door - his own door:

the Monument-door: what a grand idea! - and was actually yawning, as if there were no Monument to stop his mouth, and give him a perpetual interest in his own existence.

Tom was advancing towards this remarkable creature, to inquire the way to Furnival's Inn, when two people came to see the Monument. They were a gentleman and a lady; and the gentleman said, 'How much a-piece?'

The Man in the Monument replied, 'A Tanner.'

It seemed a low expression, compared with the Monument.

The gentleman put a shilling into his hand, and the Man in the Monument opened a dark little door. When the gentleman and lady had passed out of view, he shut it again, and came slowly back to his chair.

He sat down and laughed.

'They don't know what a many steps there is!' he said. 'It's worth twice the money to stop here. Oh, my eye!'

The Man in the Monument was a Cynic; a worldly man! Tom couldn't ask his way of HIM. He was prepared to put no confidence in anything he said.

'My gracious!' cried a well-known voice behind Mr Pinch. 'Why, to be sure it is!'

At the same time he was poked in the back by a parasol. Turning round to inquire into this salute, he beheld the eldest daughter of his late patron.

'Miss Pecksniff!' said Tom.

'Why, my goodness, Mr Pinch!' cried Cherry. 'What are you doing here?'

'I have rather wandered from my way,' said Tom. 'I - '

'I hope you have run away,' said Charity. 'It would be quite spirited and proper if you had, when my Papa so far forgets himself.'

'I have left him,' returned Tom. 'But it was perfectly understood on both sides. It was not done clandestinely.'

'Is he married?' asked Cherry, with a spasmodic shake of her chin.

'No, not yet,' said Tom, colouring; 'to tell you the truth, I don't think he is likely to be, if - if Miss Graham is the object of his passion.'

'Tcha, Mr Pinch!' cried Charity, with sharp impatience, 'you're very easily deceived. You don't know the arts of which such a creature is capable. Oh! it's a wicked world.'

'You are not married?' Tom hinted, to divert the conversation.

'N - no!' said Cherry, tracing out one particular paving-stone in Monument Yard with the end of her parasol. 'I - but really it's quite impossible to explain. Won't you walk in?'

'You live here, then?' said Tom

'Yes,' returned Miss Pecksniff, pointing with her parasol to Todgers's; 'I reside with this lady, AT PRESENT.'

The great stress on the two last words suggested to Tom that he was expected to say something in reference to them. So he said.

'Only at present! Are you going home again soon?'

'No, Mr Pinch,' returned Charity. 'No, thank you. No! A mother-in-law who is younger than - I mean to say, who is as nearly as possible about the same age as one's self, would not quite suit my spirit. Not quite!' said Cherry, with a spiteful shiver.

'I thought from your saying ‘at present" - Tom observed.

'Really, upon my word! I had no idea you would press me so very closely on the subject, Mr Pinch,' said Charity, blushing, 'or I should not have been so foolish as to allude to - oh really! - won't you walk in?'

Tom mentioned, to excuse himself, that he had an appointment in Furnival's Inn, and that coming from Islington he had taken a few wrong turnings, and arrived at the Monument instead. Miss Pecksniff simpered very much when he asked her if she knew the way to Furnival's Inn, and at length found courage to reply.

'A gentleman who is a friend of mine, or at least who is not exactly a friend so much as a sort of acquaintance - Oh upon my word, I hardly know what I say, Mr Pinch; you mustn't suppose there is any engagement between us; or at least if there is, that it is at all a settled thing as yet - is going to Furnival's Inn immediately, I believe upon a little business, and I am sure he would be very glad to accompany you, so as to prevent your going wrong again. You had better walk in.

You will very likely find my sister Merry here,' she said with a curious toss of her head, and anything but an agreeable smile.

'Then, I think, I'll endeavour to find my way alone,' said Tom, 'for I fear she would not be very glad to see me. That unfortunate occurrence, in relation to which you and I had some amicable words together, in private, is not likely to have impressed her with any friendly feeling towards me. Though it really was not my fault.'

'She has never heard of that, you may depend,' said Cherry, gathering up the corners of her mouth, and nodding at Tom. 'I am far from sure that she would bear you any mighty ill will for it, if she had.'

'You don't say so?' cried Tom, who was really concerned by this insinuation.

'I say nothing,' said Charity. 'If I had not already known what shocking things treachery and deceit are in themselves, Mr Pinch, I might perhaps have learnt it from the success they meet with - from the success they meet with.' Here she smiled as before. 'But I don't say anything. On the contrary, I should scorn it. You had better walk in!'

There was something hidden here, which piqued Tom's interest and troubled his tender heart. When, in a moment's irresolution, he looked at Charity, he could not but observe a struggle in her face between a sense of triumph and a sense of shame; nor could he but remark how, meeting even his eyes, which she cared so little for, she turned away her own, for all the splenetic defiance in her manner.

An uneasy thought entered Tom's head; a shadowy misgiving that the altered relations between himself and Pecksniff were somehow to involve an altered knowledge on his part of other people, and were to give him an insight into much of which he had had no previous suspicion. And yet he put no definite construction upon Charity's proceedings. He certainly had no idea that as he had been the audience and spectator of her mortification, she grasped with eager delight at any opportunity of reproaching her sister with his presence in HER far deeper misery; for he knew nothing of it, and only pictured that sister as the same giddy, careless, trivial creature she always had been, with the same slight estimation of himself which she had never been at the least pains to conceal. In short, he had merely a confused impression that Miss Pecksniff was not quite sisterly or kind; and being curious to set it right, accompanied her as she desired.

The house-door being opened, she went in before Tom, requesting him to follow her; and led the way to the parlour door.

'Oh, Merry!' she said, looking in, 'I am so glad you have not gone home. Who do you think I have met in the street, and brought to see you! Mr Pinch! There. Now you ARE surprised, I am sure!'

Not more surprised than Tom was, when he looked upon her. Not so much. Not half so much.

'Mr Pinch has left Papa, my dear,' said Cherry, 'and his prospects are quite flourishing. I have promised that Augustus, who is going that way, shall escort him to the place he wants. Augustus, my child, where are you?'

With these words Miss Pecksniff screamed her way out of the parlour, calling on Augustus Moddle to appear; and left Tom Pinch alone with her sister.

If she had always been his kindest friend; if she had treated him through all his servitude with such consideration as was never yet received by struggling man; if she had lightened every moment of those many years, and had ever spared and never wounded him; his honest heart could not have swelled before her with a deeper pity, or a purer freedom from all base remembrance than it did then.

'My gracious me! You are really the last person in the world I should have thought of seeing, I am sure!'

Tom was sorry to hear her speaking in her old manner. He had not expected that. Yet he did not feel it a contradiction that he should be sorry to see her so unlike her old self, and sorry at the same time to hear her speaking in her old manner. The two things seemed quite natural.

'I wonder you find any gratification in coming to see me. I can't think what put it in your head. I never had much in seeing you. There was no love lost between us, Mr Pinch, at any time, I think.'

Her bonnet lay beside her on the sofa, and she was very busy with the ribbons as she spoke. Much too busy to be conscious of the work her fingers did.

'We never quarrelled,' said Tom. - Tom was right in that, for one person can no more quarrel without an adversary, than one person can play at chess, or fight a duel. 'I hoped you would be glad to shake hands with an old friend. Don't let us rake up bygones,' said Tom. 'If I ever offended you, forgive me.'

She looked at him for a moment; dropped her bonnet from her hands; spread them before her altered face, and burst into tears.

'Oh, Mr Pinch!' she said, 'although I never used you well, I did believe your nature was forgiving. I did not think you could be cruel.'

She spoke as little like her old self now, for certain, as Tom could possibly have wished. But she seemed to be appealing to him reproachfully, and he did not understand her.

'I seldom showed it - never - I know that. But I had that belief in you, that if I had been asked to name the person in the world least likely to retort upon me, I would have named you, confidently.'

'Would have named me!' Tom repeated.

'Yes,' she said with energy, 'and I have often thought so.'

After a moment's reflection, Tom sat himself upon a chair beside her.

'Do you believe,' said Tom, 'oh, can you think, that what I said just now, I said with any but the true and plain intention which my words professed? I mean it, in the spirit and the letter. If I ever offended you, forgive me; I may have done so, many times. You never injured or offended me. How, then, could I possibly retort, if even I were stern and bad enough to wish to do it!'

After a little while she thanked him, through her tears and sobs, and told him she had never been at once so sorry and so comforted, since she left home. Still she wept bitterly; and it was the greater pain to Tom to see her weeping, from her standing in especial need, just then, of sympathy and tenderness.

'Come, come!' said Tom, 'you used to be as cheerful as the day was long.'

'Ah! used!' she cried, in such a tone as rent Tom's heart.

'And will be again,' said Tom.

'No, never more. No, never, never more. If you should talk with old Mr Chuzzlewit, at any time,' she added, looking hurriedly into his face - 'I sometimes thought he liked you, but suppressed it - will you promise me to tell him that you saw me here, and that I said I bore in mind the time we talked together in the churchyard?'

Tom promised that he would.

'Many times since then, when I have wished I had been carried there before that day, I have recalled his words. I wish that he should know

how true they were, although the least acknowledgment to that effect has never passed my lips and never will.'

Tom promised this, conditionally too. He did not tell her how improbable it was that he and the old man would ever meet again, because he thought it might disturb her more.

'If he should ever know this, through your means, dear Mr Pinch,' said Mercy, 'tell him that I sent the message, not for myself, but that he might be more forbearing and more patient, and more trustful to some other person, in some other time of need. Tell him that if he could know how my heart trembled in the balance that day, and what a very little would have turned the scale, his own would bleed with pity for me.'

'Yes, yes,' said Tom, 'I will.'

'When I appeared to him the most unworthy of his help, I was - I know I was, for I have often, often, thought about it since - the most inclined to yield to what he showed me. Oh! if he had relented but a little more; if he had thrown himself in my way for but one other quarter of an hour; if he had extended his compassion for a vain, unthinking, miserable girl, in but the least degree; he might, and I believe he would, have saved her! Tell him that I don't blame him, but am grateful for the effort that he made; but ask him for the love of God, and youth, and in merciful consideration for the struggle which an ill-advised and unwakened nature makes to hide the strength it thinks its weakness - ask him never, never, to forget this, when he deals with one again!'

Although Tom did not hold the clue to her full meaning, he could guess it pretty nearly. Touched to the quick, he took her hand and said, or meant to say, some words of consolation. She felt and understood them, whether they were spoken or no. He was not quite certain, afterwards, but that she had tried to kneel down at his feet, and bless him.

He found that he was not alone in the room when she had left it. Mrs Todgers was there, shaking her head. Tom had never seen Mrs Todgers, it is needless to say, but he had a perception of her being the lady of the house; and he saw some genuine compassion in her eyes, that won his good opinion.

'Ah, sir! You are an old friend, I see,' said Mrs Todgers.

'Yes,' said Tom.

'And yet,' quoth Mrs Todgers, shutting the door softly, 'she hasn't told you what her troubles are, I'm certain.'

Tom was struck by these words, for they were quite true. 'Indeed,' he said, 'she has not.'

'And never would,' said Mrs Todgers, 'if you saw her daily. She never makes the least complaint to me, or utters a single word of explanation or reproach. But I know,' said Mrs Todgers, drawing in her breath, 'I know!'

Tom nodded sorrowfully, 'So do I.'

'I fully believe,' said Mrs Todgers, taking her pocket-handkerchief from the flat reticule, 'that nobody can tell one half of what that poor young creature has to undergo. But though she comes here, constantly, to ease her poor full heart without his knowing it; and saying, 'Mrs Todgers, I am very low to-day; I think that I shall soon be dead,' sits crying in my room until the fit is past; I know no more from her. And, I believe,' said Mrs Todgers, putting back her handkerchief again, 'that she considers me a good friend too.'

Mrs Todgers might have said her best friend. Commercial gentlemen and gravy had tried Mrs Todgers's temper; the main chance - it was such a very small one in her case, that she might have been excused for looking sharp after it, lest it should entirely vanish from her sight - had taken a firm hold on Mrs Todgers's attention. But in some odd nook in Mrs Todgers's breast, up a great many steps, and in a corner easy to be overlooked, there was a secret door, with 'Woman' written on the spring, which, at a touch from Mercy's hand, had flown wide open, and admitted her for shelter.

When boarding-house accounts are balanced with all other ledgers, and the books of the Recording Angel are made up for ever, perhaps there may be seen an entry to thy credit, lean Mrs Todgers, which shall make thee beautiful!

She was growing beautiful so rapidly in Tom's eyes; for he saw that she was poor, and that this good had sprung up in her from among the sordid strivings of her life; that she might have been a very Venus in a minute more, if Miss Pecksniff had not entered with her friend.

'Mr Thomas Pinch!' said Charity, performing the ceremony of introduction with evident pride. 'Mr Moddle. Where's my sister?'

'Gone, Miss Pecksniff,' Mrs Todgers answered. 'She had appointed to be home.'

'Ah!' said Charity, looking at Tom. 'Oh, dear me!'

'She's greatly altered since she's been Anoth - since she's been married, Mrs Todgers!' observed Moddle.

'My dear Augustus!' said Miss Pecksniff, in a low voice. 'I verily believe you have said that fifty thousand times, in my hearing. What a Prose you are!'

This was succeeded by some trifling love passages, which appeared to originate with, if not to be wholly carried on by Miss Pecksniff. At any rate, Mr Moddle was much slower in his responses than is customary with young lovers, and exhibited a lowness of spirits which was quite oppressive.

He did not improve at all when Tom and he were in the streets, but sighed so dismally that it was dreadful to hear him. As a means of cheering him up, Tom told him that he wished him joy.

'Joy!' cried Moddle. 'Ha, ha!'

'What an extraordinary young man!' thought Tom.

'The Scorner has not set his seal upon you. YOU care what becomes of you?' said Moddle.

Tom admitted that it was a subject in which he certainly felt some interest.

'I don't,' said Mr Moddle. 'The Elements may have me when they please. I'm ready.'

Tom inferred from these, and other expressions of the same nature, that he was jealous. Therefore he allowed him to take his own course; which was such a gloomy one, that he felt a load removed from his mind when they parted company at the gate of Furnival's Inn.

It was now a couple of hours past John Westlock's dinner-time; and he was walking up and down the room, quite anxious for Tom's safety. The table was spread; the wine was carefully decanted; and the dinner smelt delicious.

'Why, Tom, old boy, where on earth have you been? Your box is here. Get your boots off instantly, and sit down!'

'I am sorry to say I can't stay, John,' replied Tom Pinch, who was breathless with the haste he had made in running up the stairs.

'Can't stay!'

'If you'll go on with your dinner,' said Tom, 'I'll tell you my reason the while. I mustn't eat myself, or I shall have no appetite for the chops.'

'There are no chops here, my food fellow.'

'No. But there are at Islington,' said Tom.

John Westlock was perfectly confounded by this reply, and vowed he would not touch a morsel until Tom had explained himself fully. So Tom sat down, and told him all; to which he listened with the greatest interest.

He knew Tom too well, and respected his delicacy too much, to ask him why he had taken these measures without communicating with him first. He quite concurred in the expediency of Tom's immediately returning to his sister, as he knew so little of the place in which he had left her, and good-humouredly proposed to ride back with him in a cab, in which he might convey his box. Tom's proposition that he should sup with them that night, he flatly rejected, but made an appointment with him for the morrow. 'And now Tom,' he said, as they rode along, 'I have a question to ask you to which I expect a manly and straightforward answer. Do you want any money? I am pretty sure you do.'

'I don't indeed,' said Tom.

'I believe you are deceiving me.'

'No. With many thanks to you, I am quite in earnest,' Tom replied. 'My sister has some money, and so have I. If I had nothing else, John, I have a five-pound note, which that good creature, Mrs Lupin, of the Dragon, handed up to me outside the coach, in a letter begging me to borrow it; and then drove off as hard as she could go.'

'And a blessing on every dimple in her handsome face, say I!' cried John, 'though why you should give her the preference over me, I don't know. Never mind. I bide my time, Tom.'

'And I hope you'll continue to bide it,' returned Tom, gayly. 'For I owe you more, already, in a hundred other ways, than I can ever hope to pay.'

They parted at the door of Tom's new residence. John Westlock, sitting in the cab, and, catching a glimpse of a blooming little busy creature darting out to kiss Tom and to help him with his box, would not have had the least objection to change places with him.

Well! she WAS a cheerful little thing; and had a quaint, bright quietness about her that was infinitely pleasant. Surely she was the best sauce for chops ever invented. The potatoes seemed to take a pleasure in sending up their grateful steam before her; the froth upon the pint of porter pouted to attract her notice. But it was all in vain. She saw nothing but Tom. Tom was the first and last thing in the world.

As she sat opposite to Tom at supper, fingering one of Tom's pet tunes upon the table-cloth, and smiling in his face, he had never been so happy in his life.