

## Chapter XXXIX

### **Containing Some Further Particulars Of The Domestic Economy Of The Pinches; With Strange News From The City, Narrowly Concerning Tom**

Pleasant little Ruth! Cheerful, tidy, bustling, quiet little Ruth! No doll's house ever yielded greater delight to its young mistress, than little Ruth derived from her glorious dominion over the triangular parlour and the two small bedrooms.

To be Tom's housekeeper. What dignity! Housekeeping, upon the commonest terms, associated itself with elevated responsibilities of all sorts and kinds; but housekeeping for Tom implied the utmost complication of grave trusts and mighty charges. Well might she take the keys out of the little chiffonier which held the tea and sugar; and out of the two little damp cupboards down by the fireplace, where the very black beetles got mouldy, and had the shine taken out of their backs by envious mildew; and jingle them upon a ring before Tom's eyes when he came down to breakfast! Well might she, laughing musically, put them up in that blessed little pocket of hers with a merry pride! For it was such a grand novelty to be mistress of anything, that if she had been the most relentless and despotic of all little housekeepers, she might have pleaded just that much for her excuse, and have been honourably acquitted.

So far from being despotic, however, there was a coyness about her very way of pouring out the tea, which Tom quite revelled in. And when she asked him what he would like to have for dinner, and faltered out 'chops' as a reasonably good suggestion after their last night's successful supper, Tom grew quite facetious, and rallied her desperately.

'I don't know, Tom,' said his sister, blushing, 'I am not quite confident, but I think I could make a beef-steak pudding, if I tried, Tom.'

'In the whole catalogue of cookery, there is nothing I should like so much as a beef-steak pudding!' cried Tom, slapping his leg to give the greater force to this reply.

'Yes, dear, that's excellent! But if it should happen not to come quite right the first time,' his sister faltered; 'if it should happen not to be a pudding exactly, but should turn out a stew, or a soup, or something of that sort, you'll not be vexed, Tom, will you?'

The serious way in which she looked at Tom; the way in which Tom looked at her; and the way in which she gradually broke into a merry laugh at her own expense, would have enchanted you.

'Why,' said Tom 'this is capital. It gives us a new, and quite an uncommon interest in the dinner. We put into a lottery for a beefsteak pudding, and it is impossible to say what we may get. We may make some wonderful discovery, perhaps, and produce such a dish as never was known before.'

'I shall not be at all surprised if we do, Tom,' returned his sister, still laughing merrily, 'or if it should prove to be such a dish as we shall not feel very anxious to produce again; but the meat must come out of the saucepan at last, somehow or other, you know. We can't cook it into nothing at all; that's a great comfort. So if you like to venture, I will.'

'I have not the least doubt,' rejoined Tom, 'that it will come out an excellent pudding, or at all events, I am sure that I shall think it so. There is naturally something so handy and brisk about you, Ruth, that if you said you could make a bowl of faultless turtle soup, I should believe you.'

And Tom was right. She was precisely that sort of person. Nobody ought to have been able to resist her coaxing manner; and nobody had any business to try. Yet she never seemed to know it was her manner at all. That was the best of it.

Well! she washed up the breakfast cups, chatting away the whole time, and telling Tom all sorts of anecdotes about the brass-and-copper founder; put everything in its place; made the room as neat as herself; - you must not suppose its shape was half as neat as hers though, or anything like it - and brushed Tom's old hat round and round and round again, until it was as sleek as Mr Pecksniff. Then she discovered, all in a moment, that Tom's shirt-collar was frayed at the edge; and flying upstairs for a needle and thread, came flying down again with her thimble on, and set it right with wonderful expertness; never once sticking the needle into his face, although she was humming his pet tune from first to last, and beating time with the fingers of her left hand upon his neckcloth. She had no sooner done this, than off she was again; and there she stood once more, as brisk and busy as a bee, tying that compact little chin of hers into an equally compact little bonnet; intent on bustling out to the butcher's, without a minute's loss of time; and inviting Tom to come and see the steak cut, with his own eyes. As to Tom, he was ready to go anywhere; so off they trotted, arm-in-arm, as nimbly as you please; saying to each other what a quiet street it was to lodge in, and how very cheap, and what an airy situation.

To see the butcher slap the steak, before he laid it on the block, and give his knife a sharpening, was to forget breakfast instantly. It was agreeable, too - it really was - to see him cut it off, so smooth and

juicy. There was nothing savage in the act, although the knife was large and keen; it was a piece of art, high art; there was delicacy of touch, clearness of tone, skillful handling of the subject, fine shading. It was the triumph of mind over matter; quite.

Perhaps the greenest cabbage-leaf ever grown in a garden was wrapped about this steak, before it was delivered over to Tom. But the butcher had a sentiment for his business, and knew how to refine upon it. When he saw Tom putting the cabbage-leaf into his pocket awkwardly, he begged to be allowed to do it for him; 'for meat,' he said with some emotion, 'must be humoured, not drove.'

Back they went to the lodgings again, after they had bought some eggs, and flour, and such small matters; and Tom sat gravely down to write at one end of the parlour table, while Ruth prepared to make the pudding at the other end; for there was nobody in the house but an old woman (the landlord being a mysterious sort of man, who went out early in the morning, and was scarcely ever seen); and saving in mere household drudgery, they waited on themselves.

'What are you writing, Tom?' inquired his sister, laying her hand upon his shoulder.

'Why, you see, my dear,' said Tom, leaning back in his chair, and looking up in her face, 'I am very anxious, of course, to obtain some suitable employment; and before Mr Westlock comes this afternoon, I think I may as well prepare a little description of myself and my qualifications; such as he could show to any friend of his.'

'You had better do the same for me, Tom, also,' said his sister, casting down her eyes. 'I should dearly like to keep house for you and take care of you always, Tom; but we are not rich enough for that.'

'We are not rich,' returned Tom, 'certainly; and we may be much poorer. But we will not part if we can help it. No, no; we will make up our minds Ruth, that unless we are so very unfortunate as to render me quite sure that you would be better off away from me than with me, we will battle it out together. I am certain we shall be happier if we can battle it out together. Don't you think we shall?'

'Think, Tom!'

'Oh, tut, tut!' interposed Tom, tenderly. 'You mustn't cry.'

'No, no; I won't, Tom. But you can't afford it, dear. You can't, indeed.'

'We don't know that,' said Tom. 'How are we to know that, yet awhile, and without trying? Lord bless my soul!' - Tom's energy became quite

grand - 'there is no knowing what may happen, if we try hard. And I am sure we can live contentedly upon a very little - if we can only get it.'

'Yes; that I am sure we can, Tom.'

'Why, then,' said Tom, 'we must try for it. My friend, John Westlock, is a capital fellow, and very shrewd and intelligent. I'll take his advice. We'll talk it over with him - both of us together. You'll like John very much, when you come to know him, I am certain. Don't cry, don't cry. YOU make a beef-steak pudding, indeed!' said Tom, giving her a gentle push. 'Why, you haven't boldness enough for a dumpling!'

'You WILL call it a pudding, Tom. Mind! I told you not!'

'I may as well call it that, till it proves to be something else,' said Tom. 'Oh, you are going to work in earnest, are you?'

Aye, aye! That she was. And in such pleasant earnest, moreover, that Tom's attention wandered from his writing every moment. First, she tripped downstairs into the kitchen for the flour, then for the pie-board, then for the eggs, then for the butter, then for a jug of water, then for the rolling-pin, then for a pudding-basin, then for the pepper, then for the salt; making a separate journey for everything, and laughing every time she started off afresh. When all the materials were collected she was horrified to find she had no apron on, and so ran UPstairs by way of variety, to fetch it. She didn't put it on upstairs, but came dancing down with it in her hand; and being one of those little women to whom an apron is a most becoming little vanity, it took an immense time to arrange; having to be carefully smoothed down beneath - Oh, heaven, what a wicked little stomacher! - and to be gathered up into little plaits by the strings before it could be tied, and to be tapped, rebuked, and wheedled, at the pockets, before it would set right, which at last it did, and when it did - but never mind; this is a sober chronicle. And then, there were her cuffs to be tucked up, for fear of flour; and she had a little ring to pull off her finger, which wouldn't come off (foolish little ring!); and during the whole of these preparations she looked demurely every now and then at Tom, from under her dark eyelashes, as if they were all a part of the pudding, and indispensable to its composition.

For the life and soul of him, Tom could get no further in his writing than, 'A respectable young man, aged thirty-five,' and this, notwithstanding the show she made of being supernaturally quiet, and going about on tiptoe, lest she should disturb him; which only served as an additional means of distracting his attention, and keeping it upon her.

'Tom,' she said at last, in high glee. 'Tom!'

'What now?' said Tom, repeating to himself, 'aged thirty-five!'

'Will you look here a moment, please?'

As if he hadn't been looking all the time!

'I am going to begin, Tom. Don't you wonder why I butter the inside of the basin?' said his busy little sister.

'Not more than you do, I dare say,' replied Tom, laughing. 'For I believe you don't know anything about it.'

'What an infidel you are, Tom! How else do you think it would turn out easily when it was done! For a civil-engineer and land-surveyor not to know that! My goodness, Tom!'

It was wholly out of the question to try to write. Tom lined out 'respectable young man, aged thirty-five;' and sat looking on, pen in hand, with one of the most loving smiles imaginable.

Such a busy little woman as she was! So full of self-importance and trying so hard not to smile, or seem uncertain about anything! It was a perfect treat to Tom to see her with her brows knit, and her rosy lips pursed up, kneading away at the crust, rolling it out, cutting it up into strips, lining the basin with it, shaving it off fine round the rim, chopping up the steak into small pieces, raining down pepper and salt upon them, packing them into the basin, pouring in cold water for gravy, and never venturing to steal a look in his direction, lest her gravity should be disturbed; until, at last, the basin being quite full and only wanting the top crust, she clapped her hands all covered with paste and flour, at Tom, and burst out heartily into such a charming little laugh of triumph, that the pudding need have had no other seasoning to commend it to the taste of any reasonable man on earth.

'Where's the pudding?' said Tom. For he was cutting his jokes, Tom was.

'Where!' she answered, holding it up with both hands. 'Look at it!'

'THAT a pudding!' said Tom.

'It WILL be, you stupid fellow, when it's covered in,' returned his sister. Tom still pretending to look incredulous, she gave him a tap on the head with the rolling-pin, and still laughing merrily, had returned to the composition of the top crust, when she started and turned very

red. Tom started, too, for following her eyes, he saw John Westlock in the room.

'Why, my goodness, John! How did YOU come in?'

'I beg pardon,' said John - ' your sister's pardon especially - but I met an old lady at the street door, who requested me to enter here; and as you didn't hear me knock, and the door was open, I made bold to do so. I hardly know,' said John, with a smile, 'why any of us should be disconcerted at my having accidentally intruded upon such an agreeable domestic occupation, so very agreeably and skillfully pursued; but I must confess that I am. Tom, will you kindly come to my relief?'

'Mr John Westlock,' said Tom. 'My sister.'

'I hope that, as the sister of so old a friend,' said John, laughing 'you will have the goodness to detach your first impressions of me from my unfortunate entrance.'

'My sister is not indisposed perhaps to say the same to you on her own behalf,' retorted Tom.

John said, of course, that this was quite unnecessary, for he had been transfixed in silent admiration; and he held out his hand to Miss Pinch; who couldn't take it, however, by reason of the flour and paste upon her own. This, which might seem calculated to increase the general confusion and render matters worse, had in reality the best effect in the world, for neither of them could help laughing; and so they both found themselves on easy terms immediately.

'I am delighted to see you,' said Tom. 'Sit down.'

'I can only think of sitting down on one condition,' returned his friend; 'and that is, that your sister goes on with the pudding, as if you were still alone.'

'That I am sure she will,' said Tom. 'On one other condition, and that is, that you stay and help us to eat it.'

Poor little Ruth was seized with a palpitation of the heart when Tom committed this appalling indiscretion, for she felt that if the dish turned out a failure, she never would be able to hold up her head before John Westlock again. Quite unconscious of her state of mind, John accepted the invitation with all imaginable heartiness; and after a little more pleasantry concerning this same pudding, and the tremendous expectations he made believe to entertain of it, she blushing resumed her occupation, and he took a chair.

'I am here much earlier than I intended, Tom; but I will tell you, what brings me, and I think I can answer for your being glad to hear it. Is that anything you wish to show me?'

'Oh dear no!' cried Tom, who had forgotten the blotted scrap of paper in his hand, until this inquiry brought it to his recollection. 'A respectable young man, aged thirty-five' - The beginning of a description of myself. That's all.'

'I don't think you will have occasion to finish it, Tom. But how is it you never told me you had friends in London?'

Tom looked at his sister with all his might; and certainly his sister looked with all her might at him.

'Friends in London!' echoed Tom.

'Ah!' said Westlock, 'to be sure.'

'Have YOU any friends in London, Ruth, my dear!' asked Tom.

'No, Tom.'

'I am very happy to hear that I have,' said Tom, 'but it's news to me. I never knew it. They must be capital people to keep a secret, John.'

'You shall judge for yourself,' returned the other. 'Seriously, Tom, here is the plain state of the case. As I was sitting at breakfast this morning, there comes a knock at my door.'

'On which you cried out, very loud, "Come in!" suggested Tom.

'So I did. And the person who knocked, not being a respectable young man, aged thirty-five, from the country, came in when he was invited, instead of standing gaping and staring about him on the landing. Well! When he came in, I found he was a stranger; a grave, business-like, sedate-looking, stranger. 'Mr Westlock?' said he. 'That is my name,' said I. 'The favour of a few words with you?' said he. 'Pray be seated, sir,' said I.'

Here John stopped for an instant, to glance towards the table, where Tom's sister, listening attentively, was still busy with the basin, which by this time made a noble appearance. Then he resumed:

'The pudding having taken a chair, Tom - '

'What!' cried Tom.

'Having taken a chair.'

'You said a pudding.'

'No, no,' replied John, colouring rather; 'a chair. The idea of a stranger coming into my rooms at half-past eight o'clock in the morning, and taking a pudding! Having taken a chair, Tom, a chair - amazed me by opening the conversation thus: 'I believe you are acquainted, sir, with Mr Thomas Pinch?'

'No!' cried Tom.

'His very words, I assure you. I told him I was. Did I know where you were at present residing? Yes. In London? Yes. He had casually heard, in a roundabout way, that you had left your situation with Mr Pecksniff. Was that the fact? Yes, it was. Did you want another? Yes, you did.'

'Certainly,' said Tom, nodding his head.

'Just what I impressed upon him. You may rest assured that I set that point beyond the possibility of any mistake, and gave him distinctly to understand that he might make up his mind about it. Very well.'

'Then,' said he, 'I think I can accommodate him.'

Tom's sister stopped short.

'Lord bless me!' cried Tom. 'Ruth, my dear, 'think I can accommodate him.'

'Of course I begged him,' pursued John Westlock, glancing at Tom's sister, who was not less eager in her interest than Tom himself, 'to proceed, and said that I would undertake to see you immediately. He replied that he had very little to say, being a man of few words, but such as it was, it was to the purpose - and so, indeed, it turned out - for he immediately went on to tell me that a friend of his was in want of a kind of secretary and librarian; and that although the salary was small, being only a hundred pounds a year, with neither board nor lodging, still the duties were not heavy, and there the post was. Vacant, and ready for your acceptance.'

'Good gracious me!' cried Tom; 'a hundred pounds a year! My dear John! Ruth, my love! A hundred pounds a year!'

'But the strangest part of the story,' resumed John Westlock, laying his hand on Tom's wrist, to bespeak his attention, and repress his ecstasies for the moment; 'the strangest part of the story, Miss Pinch,



is this. I don't know this man from Adam; neither does this man know Tom.'

'He can't,' said Tom, in great perplexity, 'if he's a Londoner. I don't know any one in London.'

'And on my observing,' John resumed, still keeping his hand upon Tom's wrist, 'that I had no doubt he would excuse the freedom I took in inquiring who directed him to me; how he came to know of the change which had taken place in my friend's position; and how he came to be acquainted with my friend's peculiar fitness for such an office as he had described; he drily said that he was not at liberty to enter into any explanations.'

'Not at liberty to enter into any explanations!' repeated Tom, drawing a long breath.

'I must be perfectly aware,' he said,' John added, 'that to any person who had ever been in Mr Pecksniff's neighbourhood, Mr Thomas Pinch and his acquirements were as well known as the Church steeple, or the Blue Dragon.'

'The Blue Dragon!' repeated Tom, staring alternately at his friend and his sister.

'Aye, think of that! He spoke as familiarly of the Blue Dragon, I give you my word, as if he had been Mark Tapley. I opened my eyes, I can tell you, when he did so; but I could not fancy I had ever seen the man before, although he said with a smile, 'You know the Blue Dragon, Mr Westlock; you kept it up there, once or twice, yourself.' Kept it up there! So I did. You remember, Tom?'

Tom nodded with great significance, and, falling into a state of deeper perplexity than before, observed that this was the most unaccountable and extraordinary circumstance he had ever heard of in his life.

'Unaccountable?' his friend repeated. 'I became afraid of the man. Though it was broad day, and bright sunshine, I was positively afraid of him. I declare I half suspected him to be a supernatural visitor, and not a mortal, until he took out a common-place description of pocket-book, and handed me this card.'

'Mr Fips,' said Tom, reading it aloud. 'Austin Friars. Austin Friars sounds ghostly, John.'

'Fips don't, I think,' was John's reply. 'But there he lives, Tom, and there he expects us to call this morning. And now you know as much of this strange incident as I do, upon my honour.'

Tom's face, between his exultation in the hundred pounds a year, and his wonder at this narration, was only to be equalled by the face of his sister, on which there sat the very best expression of blooming surprise that any painter could have wished to see. What the beef-steak pudding would have come to, if it had not been by this time finished, astrology itself could hardly determine.

'Tom,' said Ruth, after a little hesitation, 'perhaps Mr Westlock, in his friendship for you, knows more of this than he chooses to tell.'

'No, indeed!' cried John, eagerly. 'It is not so, I assure you. I wish it were. I cannot take credit to myself, Miss Pinch, for any such thing. All that I know, or, so far as I can judge, am likely to know, I have told you.'

'Couldn't you know more, if you thought proper?' said Ruth, scraping the pie-board industriously.

'No,' retorted John. 'Indeed, no. It is very ungenerous in you to be so suspicious of me when I repose implicit faith in you. I have unbounded confidence in the pudding, Miss Pinch.'

She laughed at this, but they soon got back into a serious vein, and discussed the subject with profound gravity. Whatever else was obscure in the business, it appeared to be quite plain that Tom was offered a salary of one hundred pounds a year; and this being the main point, the surrounding obscurity rather set it off than otherwise.

Tom, being in a great flutter, wished to start for Austin Friars instantly, but they waited nearly an hour, by John's advice, before they departed. Tom made himself as spruce as he could before leaving home, and when John Westlock, through the half-opened parlour door, had glimpses of that brave little sister brushing the collar of his coat in the passage, taking up loose stitches in his gloves and hovering lightly about and about him, touching him up here and there in the height of her quaint, little, old-fashioned tidiness, he called to mind the fancy-portraits of her on the wall of the Pecksniffian workroom, and decided with uncommon indignation that they were gross libels, and not half pretty enough; though, as hath been mentioned in its place, the artists always made those sketches beautiful, and he had drawn at least a score of them with his own hands.

'Tom,' he said, as they were walking along, 'I begin to think you must be somebody's son.'

'I suppose I am,' Tom answered in his quiet way.

'But I mean somebody's of consequence.'

'Bless your heart,' replied Tom, 'my poor father was of no consequence, nor my mother either.'

'You remember them perfectly, then?'

'Remember them? oh dear yes. My poor mother was the last. She died when Ruth was a mere baby, and then we both became a charge upon the savings of that good old grandmother I used to tell you of. You remember! Oh! There's nothing romantic in our history, John.'

'Very well,' said John in quiet despair. 'Then there is no way of accounting for my visitor of this morning. So we'll not try, Tom.'

They did try, notwithstanding, and never left off trying until they got to Austin Friars, where, in a very dark passage on the first floor, oddly situated at the back of a house, across some leads, they found a little bleak-eyed glass door up in one corner, with Mr FIPS painted on it in characters which were meant to be transparent. There was also a wicked old sideboard hiding in the gloom hard by, meditating designs upon the ribs of visitors; and an old mat, worn into lattice work, which, being useless as a mat (even if anybody could have seen it, which was impossible), had for many years directed its industry into another channel, and regularly tripped up every one of Mr Fips's clients.

Mr Fips, hearing a violent concussion between a human hat and his office door, was apprised, by the usual means of communication, that somebody had come to call upon him, and giving that somebody admission, observed that it was 'rather dark.'

'Dark indeed,' John whispered in Tom Pinch's ear. 'Not a bad place to dispose of a countryman in, I should think, Tom.'

Tom had been already turning over in his mind the possibility of their having been tempted into that region to furnish forth a pie; but the sight of Mr Fips, who was small and spare, and looked peaceable, and wore black shorts and powder, dispelled his doubts.

'Walk in,' said Mr Fips.

They walked in. And a mighty yellow-jaundiced little office Mr Fips had of it; with a great, black, sprawling splash upon the floor in one corner, as if some old clerk had cut his throat there, years ago, and had let out ink instead of blood.

'I have brought my friend Mr Pinch, sir,' said John Westlock.

'Be pleased to sit,' said Mr Fips.

They occupied the two chairs, and Mr Fips took the office stool from the stuffing whereof he drew forth a piece of horse-hair of immense length, which he put into his mouth with a great appearance of appetite.

He looked at Tom Pinch curiously, but with an entire freedom from any such expression as could be reasonably construed into an unusual display of interest. After a short silence, during which Mr Fips was so perfectly unembarrassed as to render it manifest that he could have broken it sooner without hesitation, if he had felt inclined to do so, he asked if Mr Westlock had made his offer fully known to Mr Pinch.

John answered in the affirmative.

'And you think it worth your while, sir, do you?' Mr Fips inquired of Tom.

'I think it a piece of great good fortune, sir,' said Tom. 'I am exceedingly obliged to you for the offer.'

'Not to me,' said Mr Fips. 'I act upon instructions.'

'To your friend, sir, then,' said Tom. 'To the gentleman with whom I am to engage, and whose confidence I shall endeavour to deserve. When he knows me better, sir, I hope he will not lose his good opinion of me. He will find me punctual and vigilant, and anxious to do what is right. That I think I can answer for, and so,' looking towards him, 'can Mr Westlock.'

'Most assuredly,' said John.

Mr Fips appeared to have some little difficulty in resuming the conversation. To relieve himself, he took up the wafer-stamp, and began stamping capital F's all over his legs.

'The fact is,' said Mr Fips, 'that my friend is not, at this present moment, in town.'

Tom's countenance fell; for he thought this equivalent to telling him that his appearance did not answer; and that Fips must look out for somebody else.

'When do you think he will be in town, sir?' he asked.

'I can't say; it's impossible to tell. I really have no idea. But,' said Fips, taking off a very deep impression of the wafer-stamp upon the calf of his left leg, and looking steadily at Tom, 'I don't know that it's a matter of much consequence.'

Poor Tom inclined his head deferentially, but appeared to doubt that.

'I say,' repeated Mr Fips, 'that I don't know it's a matter of much consequence. The business lies entirely between yourself and me, Mr Pinch. With reference to your duties, I can set you going; and with reference to your salary, I can pay it. Weekly,' said Mr Fips, putting down the wafer-stamp, and looking at John Westlock and Tom Pinch by turns, 'weekly; in this office; at any time between the hours of four and five o'clock in the afternoon.' As Mr Fips said this, he made up his face as if he were going to whistle. But he didn't.

'You are very good,' said Tom, whose countenance was now suffused with pleasure; 'and nothing can be more satisfactory or straightforward. My attendance will be required - '

'From half-past nine to four o'clock or so, I should say,' interrupted Mr Fips. 'About that.'

'I did not mean the hours of attendance,' retorted Tom, 'which are light and easy, I am sure; but the place.'

'Oh, the place! The place is in the Temple.'

Tom was delighted.

'Perhaps,' said Mr Fips, 'you would like to see the place?'

'Oh, dear!' cried Tom. 'I shall only be too glad to consider myself engaged, if you will allow me; without any further reference to the place.'

'You may consider yourself engaged, by all means,' said Mr Fips; 'you couldn't meet me at the Temple Gate in Fleet Street, in an hour from this time, I suppose, could you?'

Certainly Tom could.

'Good,' said Mr Fips, rising. 'Then I will show you the place; and you can begin your attendance to-morrow morning. In an hour, therefore, I shall see you. You too, Mr Westlock? Very good. Take care how you go. It's rather dark.'

With this remark, which seemed superfluous, he shut them out upon the staircase, and they groped their way into the street again. The interview had done so little to remove the mystery in which Tom's new engagement was involved, and had done so much to thicken it, that neither could help smiling at the puzzled looks of the other. They agreed, however, that the introduction of Tom to his new office and office companions could hardly fail to throw a light upon the subject; and therefore postponed its further consideration until after the fulfillment of the appointment they had made with Mr Fips.

After looking at John Westlock's chambers, and devoting a few spare minutes to the Boar's Head, they issued forth again to the place of meeting. The time agreed upon had not quite come; but Mr Fips was already at the Temple Gate, and expressed his satisfaction at their punctuality.

He led the way through sundry lanes and courts, into one more quiet and more gloomy than the rest, and, singling out a certain house, ascended a common staircase; taking from his pocket, as he went, a bunch of rusty keys. Stopping before a door upon an upper story, which had nothing but a yellow smear of paint where custom would have placed the tenant's name, he began to beat the dust out of one of these keys, very deliberately, upon the great broad handrail of the balustrade.

'You had better have a little plug made,' he said, looking round at Tom, after blowing a shrill whistle into the barrel of the key. 'It's the only way of preventing them from getting stopped up. You'll find the lock go the better, too, I dare say, for a little oil.'

Tom thanked him; but was too much occupied with his own speculations, and John Westlock's looks, to be very talkative. In the meantime Mr Fips opened the door, which yielded to his hand very unwillingly, and with a horribly discordant sound. He took the key out, when he had done so, and gave it to Tom.

'Aye, aye!' said Mr Fips. 'The dust lies rather thick here.'

Truly, it did. Mr Fips might have gone so far as to say, very thick. It had accumulated everywhere; lay deep on everything, and in one part, where a ray of sun shone through a crevice in the shutter and struck upon the opposite wall, it went twirling round and round, like a gigantic squirrel-cage.

Dust was the only thing in the place that had any motion about it. When their conductor admitted the light freely, and lifting up the heavy window-sash, let in the summer air, he showed the mouldering furniture, discoloured wainscoting and ceiling, rusty stove, and ashy

hearth, in all their inert neglect. Close to the door there stood a candlestick, with an extinguisher upon it; as if the last man who had been there had paused, after securing a retreat, to take a parting look at the dreariness he left behind, and then had shut out light and life together, and closed the place up like a tomb.

There were two rooms on that floor; and in the first or outer one a narrow staircase, leading to two more above. These last were fitted up as bed-chambers. Neither in them, nor in the rooms below, was any scarcity of convenient furniture observable, although the fittings were of a bygone fashion; but solitude and want of use seemed to have rendered it unfit for any purposes of comfort, and to have given it a grisly, haunted air.

Movables of every kind lay strewn about, without the least attempt at order, and were intermixed with boxes, hampers, and all sorts of lumber. On all the floors were piles of books, to the amount, perhaps, of some thousands of volumes: these, still in bales; those, wrapped in paper, as they had been purchased; others scattered singly or in heaps; not one upon the shelves which lined the walls. To these Mr Fips called Tom's attention.

'Before anything else can be done, we must have them put in order, catalogued, and ranged upon the book-shelves, Mr Pinch. That will do to begin with, I think, sir.'

Tom rubbed his hands in the pleasant anticipation of a task so congenial to his taste, and said:

'An occupation full of interest for me, I assure you. It will occupy me, perhaps, until Mr - '

'Until Mr - ' repeated Fips; as much as to ask Tom what he was stopping for.

'I forgot that you had not mentioned the gentleman's name,' said Tom.

'Oh!' cried Mr Fips, pulling on his glove, 'didn't I? No, by-the-bye, I don't think I did. Ah! I dare say he'll be here soon. You will get on very well together, I have no doubt. I wish you success I am sure. You won't forget to shut the door? It'll lock of itself if you slam it. Half-past nine, you know. Let us say from half-past nine to four, or half-past four, or thereabouts; one day, perhaps, a little earlier, another day, perhaps, a little later, according as you feel disposed, and as you arrange your work. Mr Fips, Austin Friars of course you'll remember? And you won't forget to slam the door, if you please!'

He said all this in such a comfortable, easy manner, that Tom could only rub his hands, and nod his head, and smile in acquiescence which he was still doing, when Mr Fips walked coolly out.

'Why, he's gone!' cried Tom.

'And what's more, Tom,' said John Westlock, seating himself upon a pile of books, and looking up at his astonished friend, 'he is evidently not coming back again; so here you are, installed. Under rather singular circumstances, Tom!'

It was such an odd affair throughout, and Tom standing there among the books with his hat in one hand and the key in the other, looked so prodigiously confounded, that his friend could not help laughing heartily. Tom himself was tickled; no less by the hilarity of his friend than by the recollection of the sudden manner in which he had been brought to a stop, in the very height of his urbane conference with Mr Fips; so by degrees Tom burst out laughing too; and each making the other laugh more, they fairly roared.

When they had had their laugh out, which did not happen very soon, for give John an inch that way and he was sure to take several ells, being a jovial, good-tempered fellow, they looked about them more closely, groping among the lumber for any stray means of enlightenment that might turn up. But no scrap or shred of information could they find. The books were marked with a variety of owner's names, having, no doubt, been bought at sales, and collected here and there at different times; but whether any one of these names belonged to Tom's employer, and, if so, which of them, they had no means whatever of determining. It occurred to John as a very bright thought to make inquiry at the steward's office, to whom the chambers belonged, or by whom they were held; but he came back no wiser than he went, the answer being, 'Mr Fips, of Austin Friars.'

'After all, Tom, I begin to think it lies no deeper than this. Fips is an eccentric man; has some knowledge of Pecksniff; despises him, of course; has heard or seen enough of you to know that you are the man he wants; and engages you in his own whimsical manner.'

'But why in his own whimsical manner?' asked Tom.

'Oh! why does any man entertain his own whimsical taste? Why does Mr Fips wear shorts and powder, and Mr Fips's next-door neighbour boots and a wig?'

Tom, being in that state of mind in which any explanation is a great relief, adopted this last one (which indeed was quite as feasible as any other) readily, and said he had no doubt of it. Nor was his faith at all



shaken by his having said exactly the same thing to each suggestion of his friend's in turn, and being perfectly ready to say it again if he had any new solution to propose.

As he had not, Tom drew down the window-sash, and folded the shutter; and they left the rooms. He closed the door heavily, as Mr Fips had desired him; tried it, found it all safe, and put the key in his pocket.

They made a pretty wide circuit in going back to Islington, as they had time to spare, and Tom was never tired of looking about him. It was well he had John Westlock for his companion, for most people would have been weary of his perpetual stoppages at shop-windows, and his frequent dashes into the crowded carriage-way at the peril of his life, to get the better view of church steeples, and other public buildings. But John was charmed to see him so much interested, and every time Tom came back with a beaming face from among the wheels of carts and hackney-coaches, wholly unconscious of the personal congratulations addressed to him by the drivers, John seemed to like him better than before.

There was no flour on Ruth's hands when she received them in the triangular parlour, but there were pleasant smiles upon her face, and a crowd of welcomes shining out of every smile, and gleaming in her bright eyes. By the bye, how bright they were! Looking into them for but a moment, when you took her hand, you saw, in each, such a capital miniature of yourself, representing you as such a restless, flashing, eager, brilliant little fellow -

Ah! if you could only have kept them for your own miniature! But, wicked, roving, restless, too impartial eyes, it was enough for any one to stand before them, and, straightway, there he danced and sparkled quite as merrily as you!

The table was already spread for dinner; and though it was spread with nothing very choice in the way of glass or linen, and with green-handled knives, and very mountebanks of two-pronged forks, which seemed to be trying how far asunder they could possibly stretch their legs without converting themselves into double the number of iron toothpicks, it wanted neither damask, silver, gold, nor china; no, nor any other garniture at all. There it was; and, being there, nothing else would have done as well.

The success of that initiative dish; that first experiment of hers in cookery; was so entire, so unalloyed and perfect, that John Westlock and Tom agreed she must have been studying the art in secret for a long time past; and urged her to make a full confession of the fact. They were exceedingly merry over this jest, and many smart things

were said concerning it; but John was not as fair in his behaviour as might have been expected, for, after luring Tom Pinch on for a long time, he suddenly went over to the enemy, and swore to everything his sister said. However, as Tom observed the same night before going to bed, it was only in joke, and John had always been famous for being polite to ladies, even when he was quite a boy. Ruth said, 'Oh! indeed!' She didn't say anything else.

It is astonishing how much three people may find to talk about. They scarcely left off talking once. And it was not all lively chat which occupied them; for when Tom related how he had seen Mr Pecksniff's daughters, and what a change had fallen on the younger, they were very serious.

John Westlock became quite absorbed in her fortunes; asking many questions of Tom Pinch about her marriage, inquiring whether her husband was the gentleman whom Tom had brought to dine with him at Salisbury; in what degree of relationship they stood towards each other, being different persons; and taking, in short, the greatest interest in the subject. Tom then went into it, at full length; he told how Martin had gone abroad, and had not been heard of for a long time; how Dragon Mark had borne him company; how Mr Pecksniff had got the poor old dotting grandfather into his power; and how he basely sought the hand of Mary Graham. But not a word said Tom of what lay hidden in his heart; his heart, so deep, and true, and full of honour, and yet with so much room for every gentle and unselfish thought; not a word.

Tom, Tom! The man in all this world most confident in his sagacity and shrewdness; the man in all this world most proud of his distrust of other men, and having most to show in gold and silver as the gains belonging to his creed; the meekest favourer of that wise doctrine, Every man for himself, and God for us all (there being high wisdom in the thought that the Eternal Majesty of Heaven ever was, or can be, on the side of selfish lust and love!); shall never find, oh, never find, be sure of that, the time come home to him, when all his wisdom is an idiot's folly, weighed against a simple heart!

Well, well, Tom, it was simple too, though simple in a different way, to be so eager touching that same theatre, of which John said, when tea was done, he had the absolute command, so far as taking parties in without the payment of a sixpence was concerned; and simpler yet, perhaps, never to suspect that when he went in first, alone, he paid the money! Simple in thee, dear Tom, to laugh and cry so heartily at such a sorry show, so poorly shown; simple to be so happy and loquacious trudging home with Ruth; simple to be so surprised to find that merry present of a cookery-book awaiting her in the parlour next morning, with the beef-steak-pudding-leaf turned down and blotted

out. There! Let the record stand! Thy quality of soul was simple,  
simple, quite contemptible, Tom Pinch!