

## Chapter XLV

### **In Which Tom Pinch And His Sister Take A Little Pleasure; But Quite In A Domestic Way, And With No Ceremony About It**

Tom Pinch and his sister having to part, for the dispatch of the morning's business, immediately after the dispersion of the other actors in the scene upon the wharf with which the reader has been already made acquainted, had no opportunity of discussing the subject at that time. But Tom, in his solitary office, and Ruth, in the triangular parlour, thought about nothing else all day; and, when their hour of meeting in the afternoon approached, they were very full of it, to be sure.

There was a little plot between them, that Tom should always come out of the Temple by one way; and that was past the fountain. Coming through Fountain Court, he was just to glance down the steps leading into Garden Court, and to look once all round him; and if Ruth had come to meet him, there he would see her; not sauntering, you understand (on account of the clerks), but coming briskly up, with the best little laugh upon her face that ever played in opposition to the fountain, and beat it all to nothing. For, fifty to one, Tom had been looking for her in the wrong direction, and had quite given her up, while she had been tripping towards him from the first; jingling that little reticule of hers (with all the keys in it) to attract his wandering observation.

Whether there was life enough left in the slow vegetation of Fountain Court for the smoky shrubs to have any consciousness of the brightest and purest-hearted little woman in the world, is a question for gardeners, and those who are learned in the loves of plants. But, that it was a good thing for that same paved yard to have such a delicate little figure flitting through it; that it passed like a smile from the grimy old houses, and the worn flagstones, and left them duller, darker, sterner than before; there is no sort of doubt. The Temple fountain might have leaped up twenty feet to greet the spring of hopeful maidenhood, that in her person stole on, sparkling, through the dry and dusty channels of the Law; the chirping sparrows, bred in Temple chinks and crannies, might have held their peace to listen to imaginary skylarks, as so fresh a little creature passed; the dingy boughs, unused to droop, otherwise than in their puny growth, might have bent down in a kindred gracefulness to shed their benedictions on her graceful head; old love letters, shut up in iron boxes in the neighbouring offices, and made of no account among the heaps of family papers into which they had strayed, and of which, in their degeneracy, they formed a part, might have stirred and fluttered with a moment's recollection of their ancient tenderness, as she went

lightly by. Anything might have happened that did not happen, and never will, for the love of Ruth.

Something happened, too, upon the afternoon of which the history treats. Not for her love. Oh no! quite by accident, and without the least reference to her at all. Either she was a little too soon, or Tom was a little too late - she was so precise in general, that she timed it to half a minute - but no Tom was there. Well! But was anybody else there, that she blushed so deeply, after looking round, and tripped off down the steps with such unusual expedition?

Why, the fact is, that Mr Westlock was passing at that moment. The Temple is a public thoroughfare; they may write up on the gates that it is not, but so long as the gates are left open it is, and will be; and Mr Westlock had as good a right to be there as anybody else. But why did she run away, then? Not being ill dressed, for she was much too neat for that, why did she run away? The brown hair that had fallen down beneath her bonnet, and had one impertinent imp of a false flower clinging to it, boastful of its licence before all men, THAT could not have been the cause, for it looked charming. Oh! foolish, panting, frightened little heart, why did she run away!

Merrily the tiny fountain played, and merrily the dimples sparkled on its sunny face. John Westlock hurried after her. Softly the whispering water broke and fell; as roguishly the dimples twinkled, as he stole upon her footsteps.

Oh, foolish, panting, timid little heart, why did she feign to be unconscious of his coming! Why wish herself so far away, yet be so flutteringly happy there!

'I felt sure it was you,' said John, when he overtook her in the sanctuary of Garden Court. 'I knew I couldn't be mistaken.'

She was SO surprised.

'You are waiting for your brother,' said John. 'Let me bear you company.'

So light was the touch of the coy little hand, that he glanced down to assure himself he had it on his arm. But his glance, stopping for an instant at the bright eyes, forgot its first design, and went no farther.

They walked up and down three or four times, speaking about Tom and his mysterious employment. Now that was a very natural and innocent subject, surely. Then why, whenever Ruth lifted up her eyes, did she let them fall again immediately, and seek the uncongenial pavement of the court? They were not such eyes as shun the light;

they were not such eyes as require to be hoarded to enhance their value. They were much too precious and too genuine to stand in need of arts like those. Somebody must have been looking at them!

They found out Tom, though, quickly enough. This pair of eyes descried him in the distance, the moment he appeared. He was staring about him, as usual, in all directions but the right one; and was as obstinate in not looking towards them, as if he had intended it. As it was plain that, being left to himself, he would walk away home, John Westlock darted off to stop him.

This made the approach of poor little Ruth, by herself, one of the most embarrassing of circumstances. There was Tom, manifesting extreme surprise (he had no presence of mind, that Tom, on small occasions); there was John, making as light of it as he could, but explaining at the same time with most unnecessary elaboration; and here was she, coming towards them, with both of them looking at her, conscious of blushing to a terrible extent, but trying to throw up her eyebrows carelessly, and pout her rosy lips, as if she were the coolest and most unconcerned of little women.

Merrily the fountain plashed and plashed, until the dimples, merging into one another, swelled into a general smile, that covered the whole surface of the basin.

'What an extraordinary meeting!' said Tom. 'I should never have dreamed of seeing you two together here.'

'Quite accidental,' John was heard to murmur.

'Exactly,' cried Tom; 'that's what I mean, you know. If it wasn't accidental, there would be nothing remarkable in it.'

'To be sure,' said John.

'Such an out-of-the-way place for you to have met in,' pursued Tom, quite delighted. 'Such an unlikely spot!'

John rather disputed that. On the contrary, he considered it a very likely spot, indeed. He was constantly passing to and fro there, he said. He shouldn't wonder if it were to happen again. His only wonder was, that it had never happened before.

By this time Ruth had got round on the farther side of her brother, and had taken his arm. She was squeezing it now, as much as to say 'Are you going to stop here all day, you dear, old, blundering Tom?'

Tom answered the squeeze as if it had been a speech. 'John,' he said, 'if you'll give my sister your arm, we'll take her between us, and walk on. I have a curious circumstance to relate to you. Our meeting could not have happened better.'

Merrily the fountain leaped and danced, and merrily the smiling dimples twinkled and expanded more and more, until they broke into a laugh against the basin's rim, and vanished.

'Tom,' said his friend, as they turned into the noisy street, 'I have a proposition to make. It is, that you and your sister - if she will so far honour a poor bachelor's dwelling - give me a great pleasure, and come and dine with me.'

'What, to-day?' cried Tom.

'Yes, to-day. It's close by, you know. Pray, Miss Pinch, insist upon it. It will be very disinterested, for I have nothing to give you.'

'Oh! you must not believe that, Ruth,' said Tom. 'He is the most tremendous fellow, in his housekeeping, that I ever heard of, for a single man. He ought to be Lord Mayor. Well! what do you say? Shall we go?'

'If you please, Tom,' rejoined his dutiful little sister.

'But I mean,' said Tom, regarding her with smiling admiration; 'is there anything you ought to wear, and haven't got? I am sure I don't know, John; she may not be able to take her bonnet off, for anything I can tell.'

There was a great deal of laughing at this, and there were divers compliments from John Westlock - not compliments HE said at least (and really he was right), but good, plain, honest truths, which no one could deny. Ruth laughed, and all that, but she made no objection; so it was an engagement.

'If I had known it a little sooner,' said John, 'I would have tried another pudding. Not in rivalry; but merely to exalt that famous one. I wouldn't on any account have had it made with suet.'

'Why not?' asked Tom.

'Because that cookery-book advises suet,' said John Westlock; 'and ours was made with flour and eggs.'

'Oh good gracious!' cried Tom. 'Ours was made with flour and eggs, was it? Ha, ha, ha! A beefsteak pudding made with flour and eggs!'

Why anybody knows better than that. I know better than that! Ha, ha, ha!

It is unnecessary to say that Tom had been present at the making of the pudding, and had been a devoted believer in it all through. But he was so delighted to have this joke against his busy little sister and was tickled to that degree at having found her out, that he stopped in Temple Bar to laugh; and it was no more to Tom, that he was anathematized and knocked about by the surly passengers, than it would have been to a post; for he continued to exclaim with unabated good humour, 'flour and eggs! A beefsteak pudding made with flour and eggs!' until John Westlock and his sister fairly ran away from him, and left him to have his laugh out by himself; which he had, and then came dodging across the crowded street to them, with such sweet temper and tenderness (it was quite a tender joke of Tom's) beaming in his face, God bless it, that it might have purified the air, though Temple Bar had been, as in the golden days gone by, embellished with a row of rotting human heads.

There are snug chambers in those Inns where the bachelors live, and, for the desolate fellows they pretend to be, it is quite surprising how well they get on. John was very pathetic on the subject of his dreary life, and the deplorable makeshifts and apologetic contrivances it involved, but he really seemed to make himself pretty comfortable. His rooms were the perfection of neatness and convenience at any rate; and if he were anything but comfortable, the fault was certainly not theirs.

He had no sooner ushered Tom and his sister into his best room (where there was a beautiful little vase of fresh flowers on the table, all ready for Ruth. Just as if he had expected her, Tom said), than, seizing his hat, he bustled out again, in his most energetically bustling way; and presently came hurrying back, as they saw through the half-opened door, attended by a fiery-faced matron attired in a crunched bonnet, with particularly long strings to it hanging down her back; in conjunction with whom he instantly began to lay the cloth for dinner, polishing up the wine-glasses with his own hands, brightening the silver top of the pepper-caster on his coat-sleeve, drawing corks and filling decanters, with a skill and expedition that were quite dazzling. And as if, in the course of this rubbing and polishing, he had rubbed an enchanted lamp or a magic ring, obedient to which there were twenty thousand supernatural slaves at least, suddenly there appeared a being in a white waistcoat, carrying under his arm a napkin, and attended by another being with an oblong box upon his head, from which a banquet, piping hot, was taken out and set upon the table.

Salmon, lamb, peas, innocent young potatoes, a cool salad, sliced cucumber, a tender duckling, and a tart - all there. They all came at the right time. Where they came from, didn't appear; but the oblong box was constantly going and coming, and making its arrival known to the man in the white waistcoat by bumping modestly against the outside of the door; for, after its first appearance, it entered the room no more. He was never surprised, this man; he never seemed to wonder at the extraordinary things he found in the box, but took them out with a face expressive of a steady purpose and impenetrable character, and put them on the table. He was a kind man; gentle in his manners, and much interested in what they ate and drank. He was a learned man, and knew the flavour of John Westlock's private sauces, which he softly and feelingly described, as he handed the little bottles round. He was a grave man, and a noiseless; for dinner being done, and wine and fruit arranged upon the board, he vanished, box and all, like something that had never been.

'Didn't I say he was a tremendous fellow in his housekeeping?' cried Tom. 'Bless my soul! It's wonderful.'

'Ah, Miss Pinch,' said John. 'This is the bright side of the life we lead in such a place. It would be a dismal life, indeed, if it didn't brighten up to-day'

'Don't believe a word he says,' cried Tom. 'He lives here like a monarch, and wouldn't change his mode of life for any consideration. He only pretends to grumble.'

No, John really did not appear to pretend; for he was uncommonly earnest in his desire to have it understood that he was as dull, solitary, and uncomfortable on ordinary occasions as an unfortunate young man could, in reason, be. It was a wretched life, he said, a miserable life. He thought of getting rid of the chambers as soon as possible; and meant, in fact, to put a bill up very shortly.

'Well' said Tom Pinch, 'I don't know where you can go, John, to be more comfortable. That's all I can say. What do YOU say, Ruth?'

Ruth trifled with the cherries on her plate, and said that she thought Mr Westlock ought to be quite happy, and that she had no doubt he was.

Ah, foolish, panting, frightened little heart, how timidly she said it!

'But you are forgetting what you had to tell, Tom; what occurred this morning,' she added in the same breath.

'So I am,' said Tom. 'We have been so talkative on other topics that I declare I have not had time to think of it. I'll tell it you at once, John, in case I should forget it altogether.'

On Tom's relating what had passed upon the wharf, his friend was very much surprised, and took such a great interest in the narrative as Tom could not quite understand. He believed he knew the old lady whose acquaintance they had made, he said; and that he might venture to say, from their description of her, that her name was Gamp. But of what nature the communication could have been which Tom had borne so unexpectedly; why its delivery had been entrusted to him; how it happened that the parties were involved together; and what secret lay at the bottom of the whole affair; perplexed him very much. Tom had been sure of his taking some interest in the matter; but was not prepared for the strong interest he showed. It held John Westlock to the subject even after Ruth had left the room; and evidently made him anxious to pursue it further than as a mere subject of conversation.

'I shall remonstrate with my landlord, of course,' said Tom; 'though he is a very singular secret sort of man, and not likely to afford me much satisfaction; even if he knew what was in the letter.'

'Which you may swear he did,' John interposed.

'You think so?'

'I am certain of it.'

'Well!' said Tom, 'I shall remonstrate with him when I see him (he goes in and out in a strange way, but I will try to catch him tomorrow morning), on his having asked me to execute such an unpleasant commission. And I have been thinking, John, that if I went down to Mrs What's-her-name's in the City, where I was before, you know - Mrs Todgers's - to-morrow morning, I might find poor Mercy Pecksniff there, perhaps, and be able to explain to her how I came to have any hand in the business.'

'You are perfectly right, Tom,' returned his friend, after a short interval of reflection. 'You cannot do better. It is quite clear to me that whatever the business is, there is little good in it; and it is so desirable for you to disentangle yourself from any appearance of willful connection with it, that I would counsel you to see her husband, if you can, and wash your hands of it by a plain statement of the facts. I have a misgiving that there is something dark at work here, Tom. I will tell you why, at another time; when I have made an inquiry or two myself.'

All this sounded very mysterious to Tom Pinch. But as he knew he could rely upon his friend, he resolved to follow this advice.

Ah, but it would have been a good thing to have had a coat of invisibility, wherein to have watched little Ruth, when she was left to herself in John Westlock's chambers, and John and her brother were talking thus, over their wine! The gentle way in which she tried to get up a little conversation with the fiery-faced matron in the crunched bonnet, who was waiting to attend her; after making a desperate rally in regard of her dress, and attiring herself in a washed-out yellow gown with sprigs of the same upon it, so that it looked like a tessellated work of pats of butter. That would have been pleasant. The grim and griffin-like inflexibility with which the fiery-faced matron repelled these engaging advances, as proceeding from a hostile and dangerous power, who could have no business there, unless it were to deprive her of a customer, or suggest what became of the self-consuming tea and sugar, and other general trifles. That would have been agreeable. The bashful, winning, glorious curiosity, with which little Ruth, when fiery-face was gone, peeped into the books and nick-nacks that were lying about, and had a particular interest in some delicate paper-matches on the chimney-piece; wondering who could have made them. That would have been worth seeing. The faltering hand with which she tied those flowers together; with which, almost blushing at her own fair self as imaged in the glass, she arranged them in her breast, and looking at them with her head aside, now half resolved to take them out again, now half resolved to leave them where they were. That would have been delightful!

John seemed to think it all delightful; for coming in with Tom to tea, he took his seat beside her like a man enchanted. And when the tea-service had been removed, and Tom, sitting down at the piano, became absorbed in some of his old organ tunes, he was still beside her at the open window, looking out upon the twilight.

There is little enough to see in Furnival's Inn. It is a shady, quiet place, echoing to the footsteps of the stragglers who have business there; and rather monotonous and gloomy on summer evenings. What gave it such a charm to them, that they remained at the window as unconscious of the flight of time as Tom himself, the dreamer, while the melodies which had so often soothed his spirit were hovering again about him! What power infused into the fading light, the gathering darkness; the stars that here and there appeared; the evening air, the City's hum and stir, the very chiming of the old church clocks; such exquisite enthrallment, that the divinest regions of the earth spread out before their eyes could not have held them captive in a stronger chain?



The shadows deepened, deepened, and the room became quite dark. Still Tom's fingers wandered over the keys of the piano, and still the window had its pair of tenants. At length, her hand upon his shoulder, and her breath upon his forehead, roused Tom from his reverie.

'Dear me!' he cried, desisting with a start. 'I am afraid I have been very inconsiderate and unpolite.'

Tom little thought how much consideration and politeness he had shown!

'Sing something to us, my dear,' said Tom, 'let us hear your voice. Come!'

John Westlock added his entreaties with such earnestness that a flinty heart alone could have resisted them. Hers was not a flinty heart. Oh, dear no! Quite another thing.

So down she sat, and in a pleasant voice began to sing the ballads Tom loved well. Old rhyming stories, with here and there a pause for a few simple chords, such as a harper might have sounded in the ancient time while looking upward for the current of some half-remembered legend; words of old poets, wedded to such measures that the strain of music might have been the poet's breath, giving utterance and expression to his thoughts; and now a melody so joyous and light-hearted, that the singer seemed incapable of sadness, until in her inconstancy (oh wicked little singer!) she relapsed, and broke the listeners' hearts again; these were the simple means she used to please them. And that these simple means prevailed, and she DID please them, let the still darkened chamber, and its long-deferred illumination witness.

The candles came at last, and it was time for moving homeward. Cutting paper carefully, and rolling it about the stalks of those same flowers, occasioned some delay; but even this was done in time, and Ruth was ready.

'Good night!' said Tom. 'A memorable and delightful visit, John! Good night!'

John thought he would walk with them.

'No, no. Don't!' said Tom. 'What nonsense! We can get home very well alone. I couldn't think of taking you out.'

But John said he would rather.

'Are you sure you would rather?' said Tom. 'I am afraid you only say so out of politeness.'

John being quite sure, gave his arm to Ruth, and led her out. Fiery-face, who was again in attendance, acknowledged her departure with so cold a curtesy that it was hardly visible; and cut Tom, dead.

Their host was bent on walking the whole distance, and would not listen to Tom's dissuasions. Happy time, happy walk, happy parting, happy dreams! But there are some sweet day-dreams, so there are that put the visions of the night to shame.

Busily the Temple fountain murmured in the moonlight, while Ruth lay sleeping, with her flowers beside her; and John Westlock sketched a portrait - whose? - from memory.