

Chapter LIV

GIVES THE AUTHOR GREAT CONCERN. FOR IT IS THE LAST IN THE BOOK

Todger's was in high feather, and mighty preparations for a late breakfast were astir in its commercial bowers. The blissful morning had arrived when Miss Pecksniff was to be united in holy matrimony, to Augustus.

Miss Pecksniff was in a frame of mind equally becoming to herself and the occasion. She was full of clemency and conciliation. She had laid in several caldrons of live coals, and was prepared to heap them on the heads of her enemies. She bore no spite nor malice in her heart. Not the least.

Quarrels, Miss Pecksniff said, were dreadful things in families; and though she never could forgive her dear papa, she was willing to receive her other relations. They had been separated, she observed, too long. It was enough to call down a judgment upon the family. She believed the death of Jonas WAS a judgment on them for their internal dissensions. And Miss Pecksniff was confirmed in this belief, by the lightness with which the visitation had fallen on herself.

By way of doing sacrifice - not in triumph; not, of course, in triumph, but in humiliation of spirit - this amiable young person wrote, therefore, to her kinswoman of the strong mind, and informed her that her nuptials would take place on such a day. That she had been much hurt by the unnatural conduct of herself and daughters, and hoped they might not have suffered in their consciences. That, being desirous to forgive her enemies, and make her peace with the world before entering into the most solemn of covenants with the most devoted of men, she now held out the hand of friendship. That if the strong-minded women took that hand, in the temper in which it was extended to her, she, Miss Pecksniff, did invite her to be present at the ceremony of her marriage, and did furthermore invite the three red-nosed spinsters, her daughters (but Miss Pecksniff did not particularize their noses), to attend as bridesmaids.

The strong-minded women returned for answer, that herself and daughters were, as regarded their consciences, in the enjoyment of robust health, which she knew Miss Pecksniff would be glad to hear. That she had received Miss Pecksniff's note with unalloyed delight, because she never had attached the least importance to the paltry and insignificant jealousies with which herself and circle had been assailed; otherwise than as she had found them, in the contemplation, a harmless source of innocent mirth. That she would joyfully attend Miss Pecksniff's bridal; and that her three dear daughters would be

happy to assist, on so interesting, and SO VERY UNEXPECTED - which the strong-minded woman underlined - SO VERY UNEXPECTED an occasion.

On the receipt of this gracious reply, Miss Pecksniff extended her forgiveness and her invitations to Mr and Mrs Spottletoe; to Mr George Chuzzlewit the bachelor cousin; to the solitary female who usually had the toothache; and to the hairy young gentleman with the outline of a face; surviving remnants of the party that had once assembled in Mr Pecksniff's parlour. After which Miss Pecksniff remarked that there was a sweetness in doing our duty, which neutralized the bitter in our cups.

The wedding guests had not yet assembled, and indeed it was so early that Miss Pecksniff herself was in the act of dressing at her leisure, when a carriage stopped near the Monument; and Mark, dismounting from the rumble, assisted Mr Chuzzlewit to alight. The carriage remained in waiting; so did Mr Tapley. Mr Chuzzlewit betook himself to Todger's.

He was shown, by the degenerate successor of Mr Bailey, into the dining-parlour; where - for his visit was expected - Mrs Todgers immediately appeared.

'You are dressed, I see, for the wedding,' he said.

Mrs Todgers, who was greatly flurried by the preparations, replied in the affirmative.

'It goes against my wishes to have it in progress just now, I assure you, sir,' said Mrs Todgers; 'but Miss Pecksniff's mind was set upon it, and it really is time that Miss Pecksniff was married. That cannot be denied, sir.'

'No,' said Mr Chuzzlewit, 'assuredly not. Her sister takes no part in the proceedings?'

'Oh, dear no, sir. Poor thing!' said Mrs Todgers, shaking her head, and dropping her voice. 'Since she has known the worst, she has never left my room; the next room.'

'Is she prepared to see me?' he inquired.

'Quite prepared, sir.'

'Then let us lose no time.'

Mrs Todgers conducted him into the little back chamber commanding the prospect of the cistern; and there, sadly different from when it had first been her lodging, sat poor Merry, in mourning weeds. The room looked very dark and sorrowful; and so did she; but she had one friend beside her, faithful to the last. Old Chuffey.

When Mr Chuzzlewit sat down at her side, she took his hand and put it to her lips. She was in great grief. He too was agitated; for he had not seen her since their parting in the churchyard.

'I judged you hastily,' he said, in a low voice. 'I fear I judged you cruelly. Let me know that I have your forgiveness.'

She kissed his hand again; and retaining it in hers, thanked him in a broken voice, for all his kindness to her since.

'Tom Pinch,' said Martin, 'has faithfully related to me all that you desired him to convey; at a time when he deemed it very improbable that he would ever have an opportunity of delivering your message. Believe me, that if I ever deal again with an ill-advised and unawakened nature, hiding the strength it thinks its weakness, I will have long and merciful consideration for it.'

'You had for me; even for me,' she answered. 'I quite believe it. I said the words you have repeated, when my distress was very sharp and hard to bear; I say them now for others; but I cannot urge them for myself. You spoke to me after you had seen and watched me day by day. There was great consideration in that. You might have spoken, perhaps, more kindly; you might have tried to invite my confidence by greater gentleness; but the end would have been the same.'

He shook his head in doubt, and not without some inward self-reproach.

'How can I hope,' she said, 'that your interposition would have prevailed with me, when I know how obdurate I was! I never thought at all; dear Mr Chuzzlewit, I never thought at all; I had no thought, no heart, no care to find one; at that time. It has grown out of my trouble. I have felt it in my trouble. I wouldn't recall my trouble such as it is and has been - and it is light in comparison with trials which hundreds of good people suffer every day, I know - I wouldn't recall it to-morrow, if I could. It has been my friend, for without it no one could have changed me; nothing could have changed me. Do not mistrust me because of these tears; I cannot help them. I am grateful for it, in my soul. Indeed I am!'

'Indeed she is!' said Mrs Todgers. 'I believe it, sir.'

'And so do I!' said Mr Chuzzlewit. 'Now, attend to me, my dear. Your late husband's estate, if not wasted by the confession of a large debt to the broken office (which document, being useless to the runaways, has been sent over to England by them; not so much for the sake of the creditors as for the gratification of their dislike to him, whom they suppose to be still living), will be seized upon by law; for it is not exempt, as I learn, from the claims of those who have suffered by the fraud in which he was engaged. Your father's property was all, or nearly all, embarked in the same transaction. If there be any left, it will be seized on, in like manner. There is no home THERE.'

'I couldn't return to him,' she said, with an instinctive reference to his having forced her marriage on. 'I could not return to him.'

'I know it,' Mr Chuzzlewit resumed; 'and I am here because I know it. Come with me! From all who are about me, you are certain (I have ascertained it) of a generous welcome. But until your health is re-established, and you are sufficiently composed to bear that welcome, you shall have your abode in any quiet retreat of your own choosing, near London; not so far removed but that this kind-hearted lady may still visit you as often as she pleases. You have suffered much; but you are young, and have a brighter and a better future stretching out before you. Come with me. Your sister is careless of you, I know. She hurries on and publishes her marriage, in a spirit which (to say no more of it) is barely decent, is unsisterly, and bad. Leave the house before her guests arrive. She means to give you pain. Spare her the offence, and come with me!'

Mrs Todgers, though most unwilling to part with her, added her persuasions. Even poor old Chuffey (of course included in the project) added his. She hurriedly attired herself, and was ready to depart, when Miss Pecksniff dashed into the room.

Miss Pecksniff dashed in so suddenly, that she was placed in an embarrassing position. For though she had completed her bridal toilette as to her head, on which she wore a bridal bonnet with orange flowers, she had not completed it as to her skirts, which displayed no choicer decoration than a dimity bedgown. She had dashed in, in fact, about half-way through, to console her sister, in her affliction, with a sight of the aforesaid bonnet; and being quite unconscious of the presence of a visitor, until she found Mr Chuzzlewit standing face to face with her, her surprise was an uncomfortable one.

'So, young lady!' said the old man, eyeing her with strong disfavour. 'You are to be married to-day!'

'Yes, sir,' returned Miss Pecksniff, modestly. 'I am. I - my dress is rather - really, Mrs Todgers!'

'Your delicacy,' said old Martin, 'is troubled, I perceive. I am not surprised to find it so. You have chosen the period of your marriage unfortunately.'

'I beg your pardon, Mr Chuzzlewit,' retorted Cherry; very red and angry in a moment; 'but if you have anything to say on that subject, I must beg to refer you to Augustus. You will scarcely think it manly, I hope, to force an argument on me, when Augustus is at all times ready to discuss it with you. I have nothing to do with any deceptions that may have been practiced on my parent,' said Miss Pecksniff, pointedly; 'and as I wish to be on good terms with everybody at such a time, I should have been glad if you would have favoured us with your company at breakfast. But I will not ask you as it is; seeing that you have been prepossessed and set against me in another quarter. I hope I have my natural affections for another quarter, and my natural pity for another quarter; but I cannot always submit to be subservient to it, Mr Chuzzlewit. That would be a little too much. I trust I have more respect for myself, as well as for the man who claims me as his Bride.'

'Your sister, meeting - as I think; not as she says, for she has said nothing about it - with little consideration from you, is going away with me,' said Mr Chuzzlewit.

'I am very happy to find that she has some good fortune at last,' returned Miss Pecksniff, tossing her head. 'I congratulate her, I am sure. I am not surprised that this event should be painful to her - painful to her - but I can't help that, Mr Chuzzlewit. It's not my fault.' 'Come, Miss Pecksniff!' said the old man, quietly. 'I should like to see a better parting between you. I should like to see a better parting on your side, in such circumstances. It would make me your friend. You may want a friend one day or other.'

'Every relation of life, Mr Chuzzlewit, begging your pardon; and every friend in life,' returned Miss Pecksniff, with dignity, 'is now bound up and cemented in Augustus. So long as Augustus is my own, I cannot want a friend. When you speak of friends, sir, I must beg, once for all, to refer you to Augustus. That is my impression of the religious ceremony in which I am so soon to take a part at that altar to which Augustus will conduct me. I bear no malice at any time, much less in a moment of triumph, towards any one; much less towards my sister. On the contrary, I congratulate her. If you didn't hear me say so, I am not to blame. And as I owe it to Augustus, to be punctual on an occasion when he may naturally be supposed to be - to be impatient - really, Mrs Todgers! - I must beg your leave, sir, to retire.'

After these words the bridal bonnet disappeared; with as much state as the dimity bedgown left in it.

Old Martin gave his arm to the younger sister without speaking; and led her out. Mrs Todgers, with her holiday garments fluttering in the wind, accompanied them to the carriage, clung round Merry's neck at parting, and ran back to her own dingy house, crying the whole way. She had a lean, lank body, Mrs Todgers, but a well-conditioned soul within. Perhaps the good Samaritan was lean and lank, and found it hard to live. Who knows!

Mr Chuzzlewit followed her so closely with his eyes, that, until she had shut her own door, they did not encounter Mr Tapley's face.

'Why, Mark!' he said, as soon as he observed it, 'what's the matter?'

'The wonderfulest ewent, sir!' returned Mark, pumping at his voice in a most laborious manner, and hardly able to articulate with all his efforts. 'A coincidence as never was equalled! I'm blessed if here ain't two old neighbours of ourn, sir!'

'What neighbours?' cried old Martin, looking out of window. 'Where?'

'I was a-walkin' up and down not five yards from this spot,' said Mr Tapley, breathless, 'and they come upon me like their own ghosts, as I thought they was! It's the wonderfulest ewent that ever happened. Bring a feather, somebody, and knock me down with it!'

'What do you mean!' exclaimed old Martin, quite as much excited by the spectacle of Mark's excitement as that strange person was himself. 'Neighbours, where?'

'Here, sir!' replied Mr Tapley. 'Here in the city of London! Here upon these very stones! Here they are, sir! Don't I know 'em? Lord love their welcome faces, don't I know 'em!'

With which ejaculations Mr Tapley not only pointed to a decent-looking man and woman standing by, but commenced embracing them alternately, over and over again, in Monument Yard.

'Neighbours, WHERE? old Martin shouted; almost maddened by his ineffectual efforts to get out at the coach-door.

'Neighbours in America! Neighbours in Eden!' cried Mark. 'Neighbours in the swamp, neighbours in the bush, neighbours in the fever. Didn't she nurse us! Didn't he help us! Shouldn't we both have died without 'em! Haven't they come a-strugglin' back, without a single child for their consolation! And talk to me of neighbours!'

Away he went again, in a perfectly wild state, hugging them, and skipping round them, and cutting in between them, as if he were performing some frantic and outlandish dance.

Mr Chuzzlewit no sooner gathered who these people were, than he burst open the coach-door somehow or other, and came tumbling out among them; and as if the lunacy of Mr Tapley were contagious, he immediately began to shake hands too, and exhibit every demonstration of the liveliest joy.

'Get up, behind!' he said. 'Get up in the rumble. Come along with me! Go you on the box, Mark. Home! Home!'

'Home!' cried Mr Tapley, seizing the old man's hand in a burst of enthusiasm. 'Exactly my opinion, sir. Home for ever! Excuse the liberty, sir, I can't help it. Success to the Jolly Tapley! There's nothin' in the house they shan't have for the askin' for, except a bill. Home to be sure! Hurrah!'

Home they rolled accordingly, when he had got the old man in again, as fast as they could go; Mark abating nothing of his fervour by the way, by allowing it to vent itself as unrestrainedly as if he had been on Salisbury Plain.

And now the wedding party began to assemble at Todgers's. Mr Jinkins, the only boarder invited, was on the ground first. He wore a white favour in his button-hole, and a bran new extra super double-milled blue saxony dress coat (that was its description in the bill), with a variety of tortuous embellishments about the pockets, invented by the artist to do honour to the day. The miserable Augustus no longer felt strongly even on the subject of Jinkins. He hadn't strength of mind enough to do it. 'Let him come!' he had said, in answer to Miss Pecksniff, when she urged the point. 'Let him come! He has ever been my rock ahead through life. 'Tis meet he should be there. Ha, ha! Oh, yes! let Jinkins come!'

Jinkins had come with all the pleasure in life, and there he was. For some few minutes he had no companion but the breakfast, which was set forth in the drawing-room, with unusual taste and ceremony. But Mrs Todgers soon joined him; and the bachelor cousin, the hairy young gentleman, and Mr and Mrs Spottletoe, arrived in quick succession.

Mr Spottletoe honoured Jinkins with an encouraging bow. 'Glad to know you, sir,' he said. 'Give you joy!' Under the impression that Jinkins was the happy man.

Mr Jinkins explained. He was merely doing the honours for his friend Moddle, who had ceased to reside in the house, and had not yet arrived.

'Not arrived, sir!' exclaimed Spottletoe, in a great heat.

'Not yet,' said Mr Jinkins.

'Upon my soul!' cried Spottletoe. 'He begins well! Upon my life and honour this young man begins well! But I should very much like to know how it is that every one who comes into contact with this family is guilty of some gross insult to it. Death! Not arrived yet. Not here to receive us!'

The nephew with the outline of a countenance, suggested that perhaps he had ordered a new pair of boots, and they hadn't come home.

'Don't talk to me of Boots, sir!' retorted Spottletoe, with immense indignation. 'He is bound to come here in his slippers then; he is bound to come here barefoot. Don't offer such a wretched and evasive plea to me on behalf of your friend, as Boots, sir.'

'He is not MY friend,' said the nephew. 'I never saw him.'

'Very well, sir,' returned the fiery Spottletoe. 'Then don't talk to me!'

The door was thrown open at this juncture, and Miss Pecksniff entered, tottering, and supported by her three bridesmaids. The strong-minded woman brought up the rear; having waited outside until now, for the purpose of spoiling the effect.

'How do you do, ma'am!' said Spottletoe to the strong-minded woman in a tone of defiance. 'I believe you see Mrs Spottletoe, ma'am?'

The strong-minded woman with an air of great interest in Mrs Spottletoe's health, regretted that she was not more easily seen. Nature erring, in that lady's case, upon the slim side.

'Mrs Spottletoe is at least more easily seen than the bridegroom, ma'am,' returned that lady's husband. 'That is, unless he has confined his attentions to any particular part or branch of this family, which would be quite in keeping with its usual proceedings.'

'If you allude to me, sir - ' the strong-minded woman began.

'Pray,' interposed Miss Pecksniff, 'do not allow Augustus, at this awful moment of his life and mine, to be the means of disturbing that

harmony which it is ever Augustus's and my wish to maintain. Augustus has not been introduced to any of my relations now present. He preferred not.'

'Why, then, I venture to assert,' cried Mr Spottletoe, 'that the man who aspires to join this family, and 'prefers not' to be introduced to its members, is an impertinent Puppy. That is my opinion of HIM!'

The strong-minded woman remarked with great suavity, that she was afraid he must be. Her three daughters observed aloud that it was 'Shameful!'

'You do not know Augustus,' said Miss Pecksniff, tearfully, 'indeed you do not know him. Augustus is all mildness and humility. Wait till you see Augustus, and I am sure he will conciliate your affections.'

'The question arises,' said Spottletoe, folding his arms: 'How long we are to wait. I am not accustomed to wait; that's the fact. And I want to know how long we are expected to wait.'

'Mrs Todgers!' said Charity, 'Mr Jinkins! I am afraid there must be some mistake. I think Augustus must have gone straight to the Altar!'

As such a thing was possible, and the church was close at hand, Mr Jinkins ran off to see, accompanied by Mr George Chuzzlewit the bachelor cousin, who preferred anything to the aggravation of sitting near the breakfast, without being able to eat it. But they came back with no other tidings than a familiar message from the clerk, importing that if they wanted to be married that morning they had better look sharp, as the curate wasn't going to wait there all day.

The bride was now alarmed; seriously alarmed. Good Heavens, what could have happened! Augustus! Dear Augustus!

Mr Jinkins volunteered to take a cab, and seek him at the newly-furnished house. The strong-minded woman administered comfort to Miss Pecksniff. 'It was a specimen of what she had to expect. It would do her good. It would dispel the romance of the affair.' The red-nosed daughters also administered the kindest comfort. 'Perhaps he'd come,' they said. The sketchy nephew hinted that he might have fallen off a bridge. The wrath of Mr Spottletoe resisted all the entreaties of his wife. Everybody spoke at once, and Miss Pecksniff, with clasped hands, sought consolation everywhere and found it nowhere, when Jinkins, having met the postman at the door, came back with a letter, which he put into her hand.

Miss Pecksniff opened it, uttered a piercing shriek, threw it down upon the ground, and fainted away.

They picked it up; and crowding round, and looking over one another's shoulders, read, in the words and dashes following, this communication:

'OFF GRAVESEND.

'CLIPPER SCHOONER, CUPID

'Wednesday night

'EVER INJURED MISS PECKSNIFF - Ere this reaches you, the undersigned will be - if not a corpse - on the way to Van Dieman's Land. Send not in pursuit. I never will be taken alive!

'The burden - 300 tons per register - forgive, if in my distraction, I allude to the ship - on my mind - has been truly dreadful. Frequently - when you have sought to soothe my brow with kisses - has self-destruction flashed across me. Frequently - incredible as it may seem - have I abandoned the idea.

'I love another. She is Another's. Everything appears to be somebody else's. Nothing in the world is mine - not even my Situation - which I have forfeited - by my rash conduct - in running away.

'If you ever loved me, hear my last appeal! The last appeal of a miserable and blighted exile. Forward the inclosed - it is the key of my desk - to the office - by hand. Please address to Bobbs and Cholberry - I mean to Chobbs and Bolberry - but my mind is totally unhinged. I left a penknife - with a buckhorn handle - in your work-box. It will repay the messenger. May it make him happier than ever it did me!

'Oh, Miss Pecksniff, why didn't you leave me alone! Was it not cruel, CRUEL! Oh, my goodness, have you not been a witness of my feelings - have you not seen them flowing from my eyes - did you not, yourself, reproach me with weeping more than usual on that dreadful night when last we met - in that house - where I once was peaceful - though blighted - in the society of Mrs Todgers!

'But it was written - in the Talmud - that you should involve yourself in the inscrutable and gloomy Fate which it is my mission to accomplish, and which wreathes itself - e'en now - about in temples. I will not reproach, for I have wronged you. May the Furniture make some amends!

'Farewell! Be the proud bride of a ducal coronet, and forget me! Long may it be before you know the anguish with which I now subscribe myself - amid the tempestuous howlings of the - sailors,

'Unalterably,

'Never yours,

'AUGUSTUS.'

They thought as little of Miss Pecksniff, while they greedily perused this letter, as if she were the very last person on earth whom it concerned. But Miss Pecksniff really had fainted away. The bitterness of her mortification; the bitterness of having summoned witnesses, and such witnesses, to behold it; the bitterness of knowing that the strong-minded women and the red-nosed daughters towered triumphant in this hour of their anticipated overthrow; was too much to be borne. Miss Pecksniff had fainted away in earnest.

What sounds are these that fall so grandly on the ear! What darkening room is this!

And that mild figure seated at an organ, who is he! Ah Tom, dear Tom, old friend!

Thy head is prematurely grey, though Time has passed thee and our old association, Tom. But, in those sounds with which it is thy wont to bear the twilight company, the music of thy heart speaks out - the story of thy life relates itself.

Thy life is tranquil, calm, and happy, Tom. In the soft strain which ever and again comes stealing back upon the ear, the memory of thine old love may find a voice perhaps; but it is a pleasant, softened, whispering memory, like that in which we sometimes hold the dead, and does not pain or grieve thee, God be thanked.

Touch the notes lightly, Tom, as lightly as thou wilt, but never will thine hand fall half so lightly on that Instrument as on the head of thine old tyrant brought down very, very low; and never will it make as hollow a response to any touch of thine, as he does always.

For a drunken, begging, squalid, letter-writing man, called Pecksniff, with a shrewish daughter, haunts thee, Tom; and when he makes appeals to thee for cash, reminds thee that he built thy fortunes better than his own; and when he spends it, entertains the alehouse company with tales of thine ingratitude and his munificence towards thee once upon a time; and then he shows his elbows worn in holes, and puts his soleless shoes up on a bench, and begs his auditors look there, while thou art comfortably housed and clothed. All known to thee, and yet all borne with, Tom!

So, with a smile upon thy face, thou passest gently to another measure - to a quicker and more joyful one - and little feet are used to dance about thee at the sound, and bright young eyes to glance up into thine. And there is one slight creature, Tom - her child; not Ruth's - whom thine eyes follow in the romp and dance; who, wondering sometimes to see thee look so thoughtful, runs to climb up on thy knee, and put her cheek to thine; who loves thee, Tom, above the rest, if that can be; and falling sick once, chose thee for her nurse, and never knew impatience, Tom, when thou wert by her side.

Thou glidest, now, into a graver air; an air devoted to old friends and bygone times; and in thy lingering touch upon the keys, and the rich swelling of the mellow harmony, they rise before thee. The spirit of that old man dead, who delighted to anticipate thy wants, and never ceased to honour thee, is there, among the rest; repeating, with a face composed and calm, the words he said to thee upon his bed, and blessing thee!

And coming from a garden, Tom, bestrewn with flowers by children's hands, thy sister, little Ruth, as light of foot and heart as in old days, sits down beside thee. From the Present, and the Past, with which she is so tenderly entwined in all thy thoughts, thy strain soars onward to the Future. As it resounds within thee and without, the noble music, rolling round ye both, shuts out the grosser prospect of an earthly parting, and uplifts ye both to Heaven!

The End