

Chapter LVIII

The tidings of my high fortunes having had a heavy fall, had got down to my native place and its neighbourhood, before I got there. I found the Blue Boar in possession of the intelligence, and I found that it made a great change in the Boar's demeanour. Whereas the Boar had cultivated my good opinion with warm assiduity when I was coming into property, the Boar was exceedingly cool on the subject now that I was going out of property.

It was evening when I arrived, much fatigued by the journey I had so often made so easily. The Boar could not put me into my usual bedroom, which was engaged (probably by some one who had expectations), and could only assign me a very indifferent chamber among the pigeons and post-chaises up the yard. But, I had as sound a sleep in that lodging as in the most superior accommodation the Boar could have given me, and the quality of my dreams was about the same as in the best bedroom.

Early in the morning while my breakfast was getting ready, I strolled round by Satis House. There were printed bills on the gate, and on bits of carpet hanging out of the windows, announcing a sale by auction of the Household Furniture and Effects, next week. The House itself was to be sold as old building materials and pulled down. LOT 1 was marked in whitewashed knock-knee letters on the brew house; LOT 2 on that part of the main building which had been so long shut up. Other lots were marked off on other parts of the structure, and the ivy had been torn down to make room for the inscriptions, and much of it trailed low in the dust and was withered already. Stepping in for a moment at the open gate and looking around me with the uncomfortable air of a stranger who had no business there, I saw the auctioneer's clerk walking on the casks and telling them off for the information of a catalogue compiler, pen in hand, who made a temporary desk of the wheeled chair I had so often pushed along to the tune of Old Clem.

When I got back to my breakfast in the Boar's coffee-room, I found Mr Pumblechook conversing with the landlord. Mr Pumblechook (not improved in appearance by his late nocturnal adventure) was waiting for me, and addressed me in the following terms.

'Young man, I am sorry to see you brought low. But what else could be expected! What else could be expected!'

As he extended his hand with a magnificently forgiving air, and as I was broken by illness and unfit to quarrel, I took it.

'William,' said Mr Pumblechook to the waiter, 'put a muffin on table. And has it come to this! Has it come to this!'

I frowningly sat down to my breakfast. Mr Pumblechook stood over me and poured out my tea - before I could touch the teapot - with the air of a benefactor who was resolved to be true to the last.

'William,' said Mr Pumblechook, mournfully, 'put the salt on. In happier times,' addressing me, 'I think you took sugar. And did you take milk? You did. Sugar and milk. William, bring a watercress.'

'Thank you,' said I, shortly, 'but I don't eat watercresses.'

'You don't eat 'em,' returned Mr Pumblechook, sighing and nodding his head several times, as if he might have expected that, and as if abstinence from watercresses were consistent with my downfall. 'True. The simple fruits of the earth. No. You needn't bring any, William.'

I went on with my breakfast, and Mr Pumblechook continued to stand over me, staring fishily and breathing noisily, as he always did.

'Little more than skin and bone!' mused Mr Pumblechook, aloud. 'And yet when he went from here (I may say with my blessing), and I spread afore him my humble store, like the Bee, he was as plump as a Peach!'

This reminded me of the wonderful difference between the servile manner in which he had offered his hand in my new prosperity, saying, 'May I?' and the ostentatious clemency with which he had just now exhibited the same fat five fingers.

'Hah!' he went on, handing me the bread-and-butter. 'And air you a-going to Joseph?'

'In heaven's name,' said I, firing in spite of myself, 'what does it matter to you where I am going? Leave that teapot alone.'

It was the worst course I could have taken, because it gave Pumblechook the opportunity he wanted.

'Yes, young man,' said he, releasing the handle of the article in question, retiring a step or two from my table, and speaking for the behoof of the landlord and waiter at the door, 'I will leave that teapot alone. You are right, young man. For once, you are right. I forgit myself when I take such an interest in your breakfast, as to wish your frame, exhausted by the debilitating effects of prodigygality, to be stimulated by the 'olesome nourishment of your forefathers. And yet,' said Pumblechook, turning to the landlord and waiter, and pointing

me out at arm's length, 'this is him as I ever sported with in his days of happy infancy! Tell me not it cannot be; I tell you this is him!'

A low murmur from the two replied. The waiter appeared to be particularly affected.

'This is him,' said Pumblechook, 'as I have rode in my shaycart. This is him as I have seen brought up by hand. This is him untoe the sister of which I was uncle by marriage, as her name was Georgiana M'ria from her own mother, let him deny it if he can!'

The waiter seemed convinced that I could not deny it, and that it gave the case a black look.

'Young man,' said Pumblechook, screwing his head at me in the old fashion, 'you air a-going to Joseph. What does it matter to me, you ask me, where you air a-going? I say to you, Sir, you air a-going to Joseph.'

The waiter coughed, as if he modestly invited me to get over that.

'Now,' said Pumblechook, and all this with a most exasperating air of saying in the cause of virtue what was perfectly convincing and conclusive, 'I will tell you what to say to Joseph. Here is Squires of the Boar present, known and respected in this town, and here is William, which his father's name was Potkins if I do not deceive myself.'

'You do not, sir,' said William.

'In their presence,' pursued Pumblechook, 'I will tell you, young man, what to say to Joseph. Says you, 'Joseph, I have this day seen my earliest benefactor and the founder of my fortun's. I will name no names, Joseph, but so they are pleased to call him up-town, and I have seen that man.'

'I swear I don't see him here,' said I.

'Say that likewise,' retorted Pumblechook. 'Say you said that, and even Joseph will probably betray surprise.'

'There you quite mistake him,' said I. 'I know better.'

'Says you,' Pumblechook went on, 'Joseph, I have seen that man, and that man bears you no malice and bears me no malice. He knows your character, Joseph, and is well acquainted with your pig-headedness and ignorance; and he knows my character, Joseph, and he knows my want of gratitooode. Yes, Joseph,' says you,' here Pumblechook shook his head and hand at me, 'he knows my total deficiency of common

human gratitude. He knows it, Joseph, as none can. You do not know it, Joseph, having no call to know it, but that man do."

Windy donkey as he was, it really amazed me that he could have the face to talk thus to mine.

'Says you, 'Joseph, he gave me a little message, which I will now repeat. It was, that in my being brought low, he saw the finger of Providence. He knowed that finger when he saw it, Joseph, and he saw it plain. It pnted out this writing, Joseph. Reward of ingratitude to his earliest benefactor, and founder of fortun's. But that man said he did not repent of what he had done, Joseph. Not at all. It was right to do it, it was kind to do it, it was benevolent to do it, and he would do it again.'

'It's pity,' said I, scornfully, as I finished my interrupted breakfast, 'that the man did not say what he had done and would do again.'

'Squires of the Boar!' Pumblechook was now addressing the landlord, 'and William! I have no objections to your mentioning, either up-town or down-town, if such should be your wishes, that it was right to do it, kind to do it, benevolent to do it, and that I would do it again.'

With those words the Impostor shook them both by the hand, with an air, and left the house; leaving me much more astonished than delighted by the virtues of that same indefinite 'it.' I was not long after him in leaving the house too, and when I went down the High-street I saw him holding forth (no doubt to the same effect) at his shop door to a select group, who honoured me with very unfavourable glances as I passed on the opposite side of the way.

But, it was only the pleasanter to turn to Bidy and to Joe, whose great forbearance shone more brightly than before, if that could be, contrasted with this brazen pretender. I went towards them slowly, for my limbs were weak, but with a sense of increasing relief as I drew nearer to them, and a sense of leaving arrogance and untruthfulness further and further behind.

The June weather was delicious. The sky was blue, the larks were soaring high over the green corn, I thought all that country-side more beautiful and peaceful by far than I had ever known it to be yet. Many pleasant pictures of the life that I would lead there, and of the change for the better that would come over my character when I had a guiding spirit at my side whose simple faith and clear home-wisdom I had proved, beguiled my way. They awakened a tender emotion in me; for, my heart was softened by my return, and such a change had come to pass, that I felt like one who was toiling home barefoot from distant travel, and whose wanderings had lasted many years.

The schoolhouse where Biddy was mistress, I had never seen; but, the little roundabout lane by which I entered the village for quietness' sake, took me past it. I was disappointed to find that the day was a holiday; no children were there, and Biddy's house was closed. Some hopeful notion of seeing her busily engaged in her daily duties, before she saw me, had been in my mind and was defeated.

But, the forge was a very short distance off, and I went towards it under the sweet green limes, listening for the clink of Joe's hammer. Long after I ought to have heard it, and long after I had fancied I heard it and found it but a fancy, all was still. The limes were there, and the white thorns were there, and the chestnut-trees were there, and their leaves rustled harmoniously when I stopped to listen; but, the clink of Joe's hammer was not in the midsummer wind.

Almost fearing, without knowing why, to come in view of the forge, I saw it at last, and saw that it was closed. No gleam of fire, no glittering shower of sparks, no roar of bellows; all shut up, and still.

But, the house was not deserted, and the best parlour seemed to be in use, for there were white curtains fluttering in its window, and the window was open and gay with flowers. I went softly towards it, meaning to peep over the flowers, when Joe and Biddy stood before me, arm in arm.

At first Biddy gave a cry, as if she thought it was my apparition, but in another moment she was in my embrace. I wept to see her, and she wept to see me; I, because she looked so fresh and pleasant; she, because I looked so worn and white.

'But dear Biddy, how smart you are!'

'Yes, dear Pip.'

'And Joe, how smart you are!'

'Yes, dear old Pip, old chap.'

I looked at both of them, from one to the other, and then -

'It's my wedding-day,' cried Biddy, in a burst of happiness, 'and I am married to Joel!'

They had taken me into the kitchen, and I had laid my head down on the old deal table. Biddy held one of my hands to her lips, and Joe's restoring touch was on my shoulder. 'Which he warn't strong enough, my dear, fur to be surprised,' said Joe. And Biddy said, 'I ought to have thought of it, dear Joe, but I was too happy.' They were both so

overjoyed to see me, so proud to see me, so touched by my coming to them, so delighted that I should have come by accident to make their day complete!

My first thought was one of great thankfulness that I had never breathed this last baffled hope to Joe. How often, while he was with me in my illness, had it risen to my lips. How irrevocable would have been his knowledge of it, if he had remained with me but another hour!

'Dear Biddy,' said I, 'you have the best husband in the whole world, and if you could have seen him by my bed you would have - But no, you couldn't love him better than you do.'

'No, I couldn't indeed,' said Biddy.

'And, dear Joe, you have the best wife in the whole world, and she will make you as happy as even you deserve to be, you dear, good, noble Joe!'

Joe looked at me with a quivering lip, and fairly put his sleeve before his eyes.

'And Joe and Biddy both, as you have been to church to-day, and are in charity and love with all mankind, receive my humble thanks for all you have done for me and all I have so ill repaid! And when I say that I am going away within the hour, for I am soon going abroad, and that I shall never rest until I have worked for the money with which you have kept me out of prison, and have sent it to you, don't think, dear Joe and Biddy, that if I could repay it a thousand times over, I suppose I could cancel a farthing of the debt I owe you, or that I would do so if I could!'

They were both melted by these words, and both entreated me to say no more.

'But I must say more. Dear Joe, I hope you will have children to love, and that some little fellow will sit in this chimney corner of a winter night, who may remind you of another little fellow gone out of it for ever. Don't tell him, Joe, that I was thankless; don't tell him, Biddy, that I was ungenerous and unjust; only tell him that I honoured you both, because you were both so good and true, and that, as your child, I said it would be natural to him to grow up a much better man than I did.'

'I ain't a-going,' said Joe, from behind his sleeve, 'to tell him nothink o' that natur, Pip. Nor Biddy ain't. Nor yet no one ain't.'

'And now, though I know you have already done it in your own kind hearts, pray tell me, both, that you forgive me! Pray let me hear you say the words, that I may carry the sound of them away with me, and then I shall be able to believe that you can trust me, and think better of me, in the time to come!'

'O dear old Pip, old chap,' said Joe. 'God knows as I forgive you, if I have anythink to forgive!'

'Amen! And God knows I do!' echoed Biddy.

'Now let me go up and look at my old little room, and rest there a few minutes by myself, and then when I have eaten and drunk with you, go with me as far as the finger-post, dear Joe and Biddy, before we say good-bye!'

I sold all I had, and put aside as much as I could, for a composition with my creditors - who gave me ample time to pay them in full - and I went out and joined Herbert. Within a month, I had quitted England, and within two months I was clerk to Clarriker and Co., and within four months I assumed my first undivided responsibility. For, the beam across the parlour ceiling at Mill Pond Bank, had then ceased to tremble under old Bill Barley's growls and was at peace, and Herbert had gone away to marry Clara, and I was left in sole charge of the Eastern Branch until he brought her back.

Many a year went round, before I was a partner in the House; but, I lived happily with Herbert and his wife, and lived frugally, and paid my debts, and maintained a constant correspondence with Biddy and Joe. It was not until I became third in the Firm, that Clarriker betrayed me to Herbert; but, he then declared that the secret of Herbert's partnership had been long enough upon his conscience, and he must tell it. So, he told it, and Herbert was as much moved as amazed, and the dear fellow and I were not the worse friends for the long concealment. I must not leave it to be supposed that we were ever a great house, or that we made mints of money. We were not in a grand way of business, but we had a good name, and worked for our profits, and did very well. We owed so much to Herbert's ever cheerful industry and readiness, that I often wondered how I had conceived that old idea of his inaptitude, until I was one day enlightened by the reflection, that perhaps the inaptitude had never been in him at all, but had been in me.