

14. A TURNPIKE ROAD

'We be thinking of coming to London ourselves soon,' said Sol, a carpenter and joiner by trade, as he walked along at Christopher's left hand. 'There's so much more chance for a man up the country. Now, if you was me, how should you set about getting a job, sir?'

'What can you do?' said Christopher.

'Well, I am a very good staircase hand; and I have been called neat at sash-frames; and I can knock together doors and shutters very well; and I can do a little at the cabinet-making. I don't mind framing a roof, neither, if the rest be busy; and I am always ready to fill up my time at planing floor-boards by the foot.'

'And I can mix and lay flat tints,' said Dan, who was a house painter, 'and pick out mouldings, and grain in every kind of wood you can mention--oak, maple, walnut, satinwood, cherry-tree--'

'You can both do too much to stand the least chance of being allowed to do anything in a city, where limitation is all the rule in labour. To have any success, Sol, you must be a man who can thoroughly look at a door to see what ought to be done to it, but as to looking at a window, that's not your line; or a person who, to the remotest particular, understands turning a screw, but who does not profess any knowledge of

how to drive a nail. Dan must know how to paint blue to a marvel, but must be quite in the dark about painting green. If you stick to some such principle of specialty as this, you may get employment in London.'

'Ha-ha-ha!' said Dan, striking at a stone in the road with the stout green hazel he carried. 'A wink is as good as a nod: thank'ee--we'll mind all that now.'

'If we do come,' said Sol, 'we shall not mix up with Mrs. Petherwin at all.'

'O indeed!'

'O no. (Perhaps you think it odd that we call her "Mrs. Petherwin," but that's by agreement as safer and better than Berta, because we be such rough chaps you see, and she's so lofty.) 'Twould demean her to claim kin wi' her in London--two journeymen like we, that know nothing besides our trades.'

'Not at all,' said Christopher, by way of chiming in in the friendliest manner. 'She would be pleased to see any straightforward honest man and brother, I should think, notwithstanding that she has moved in other society for a time.'

'Ah, you don't know Berta!' said Dan, looking as if he did.

'How--in what way do you mean?' said Christopher uneasily.

'So lofty--so very lofty! Isn't she, Sol? Why she'll never stir out from mother's till after dark, and then her day begins; and she'll traipse about under the trees, and never go into the high-road, so that nobody in the way of gentle-people shall run up against her and know her living in such a little small hut after biding in a big mansion-place. There, we don't find fault wi' her about it: we like her just the same, though she don't speak to us in the street; for a feller must be a fool to make a piece of work about a woman's pride, when 'tis his own sister, and hang upon her and bother her when he knows 'tis for her good that he should not. Yes, her life has been quare enough. I hope she enjoys it, but for my part I like plain sailing. None of your ups and downs for me. There, I suppose 'twas her nater to want to look into the world a bit.'

'Father and mother kept Berta to school, you understand, sir,' explained the more thoughtful Sol, 'because she was such a quick child, and they always had a notion of making a governess of her. Sums? If you said to that child, "Berta, 'levenpence-three-farthings a day, how much a year?" she would tell 'ee in three seconds out of her own little head. And that hard sum about the herrings she had done afore she was nine.'

'True, she had,' said Dan. 'And we all know that to do that is to do something that's no nonsense.'

'What is the sum?' Christopher inquired.

'What--not know the sum about the herrings?' said Dan, spreading his gaze all over Christopher in amazement.

'Never heard of it,' said Christopher.

'Why down in these parts just as you try a man's soul by the Ten Commandments, you try his head by that there sum--hey, Sol?'

'Ay, that we do.'

'A herring and a half for three-halfpence, how many can ye get for 'levenpence: that's the feller; and a mortal teaser he is, I assure 'ee. Our parson, who's not altogether without sense o' week days, said one afternoon, "If cunning can be found in the multiplication table at all, Chickereel, 'tis in connection with that sum." Well, Berta was so clever in arithmetic that she was asked to teach summing at Miss Courtley's, and there she got to like foreign tongues more than ciphering, and at last she hated ciphering, and took to books entirely. Mother and we were very proud of her at that time: not that we be stuck-up people at all--be we, Sol?'

'Not at all; nobody can say that we be that, though there's more of it in the country than there should be by all account.'

'You'd be surprised to see how vain the girls about here be getting.'

Little rascals, why they won't curtsy to the loftiest lady in the land; no, not if you were to pay 'em to do it. Now, the men be different. Any man will touch his hat for a pint of beer. But then, of course, there's some difference between the two. Touching your hat is a good deal less to do than bending your knees, as Berta used to say, when she was blowed up for not doing it. She was always one of the independent sort--you never seed such a maid as she was! Now, Picotee was quite the other way.'

'Has Picotee left Sandbourne entirely?'

'O no; she is home for the holidays. Well, Mr. Julian, our road parts from yours just here, unless you walk into the next town along with us. But I suppose you get across to this station and go by rail?'

'I am obliged to go that way for my portmanteau,' said Christopher, 'or I should have been pleased to walk further. Shall I see you in Sandbourne to-morrow? I hope so.'

'Well, no. 'Tis hardly likely that you will see us--hardly. We know how unpleasant it is for a high sort of man to have rough chaps like us hailing him, so we think it best not to meet you--thank you all the same. So if you should run up against us in the street, we should be just as well pleased by your taking no notice, if you wouldn't mind. 'Twill save so much awkwardness--being in our working clothes. 'Tis always the plan that Mrs. Petherwin and we agree to act upon, and we find it best for

both. I hope you take our meaning right, and as no offence, Mr. Julian.'

'And do you do the same with Picotee?'

'O Lord, no--'tisn't a bit of use to try. That's the worst of Picotee--there's no getting rid of her. The more in the rough we be the more she'll stick to us; and if we say she shan't come, she'll bide and fret about it till we be forced to let her.'

Christopher laughed, and promised, on condition that they would retract the statement about their not being proud; and then he wished his friends good-night.