

Chapter 35

IT was the first time that a grave had opened in my road of life, and the gap it made in the smooth ground was wonderful. The figure of my sister in her chair by the kitchen fire, haunted me night and day. That the place could possibly be, without her, was something my mind seemed unable to compass; and whereas she had seldom or never been in my thoughts of late, I had now the strangest ideas that she was coming towards me in the street, or that she would presently knock at the door. In my rooms too, with which she had never been at all associated, there was at once the blankness of death and a perpetual suggestion of the sound of her voice or the turn of her face or figure, as if she were still alive and had been often there.

Whatever my fortunes might have been, I could scarcely have recalled my sister with much tenderness. But I suppose there is a shock of regret which may exist without much tenderness. Under its influence (and perhaps to make up for the want of the softer feeling) I was seized with a violent indignation against the assailant from whom she had suffered so much; and I felt that on sufficient proof I could have revengefully pursued Orlick, or any one else, to the last extremity.

Having written to Joe, to offer consolation, and to assure him that I should come to the funeral, I passed the intermediate days in the curious state of mind I have glanced at. I went down early in the morning, and alighted at the Blue Boar in good time to walk over to the forge.

It was fine summer weather again, and, as I walked along, the times when I was a little helpless creature, and my sister did not spare me, vividly returned. But they returned with a gentle tone upon them that softened even the edge of Tickler. For now, the very breath of the beans and clover whispered to my heart that the day must come when it would be well for my memory that others walking in the sunshine should be softened as they thought of me.

At last I came within sight of the house, and saw that Trabb and Co. had put in a funereal execution and taken possession. Two dismally absurd persons, each ostentatiously exhibiting a crutch done up in a black bandage -- as if that instrument could possibly communicate any comfort to anybody -- were posted at the front door; and in one of them I recognized a postboy discharged from the Boar for turning a young couple into a sawpit on their bridal morning, in consequence of intoxication rendering it necessary for him to ride his horse clasped round the neck with both arms. All the children of the village, and most of the women, were admiring these sable warders and the closed windows of the house and forge; and as I came up, one of the two warders (the postboy) knocked at the door -- implying that I was far too much exhausted by grief, to have strength remaining to knock for myself.

Another sable warder (a carpenter, who had once eaten two geese for a wager) opened the door, and showed me into the best parlour. Here, Mr Trabb had taken unto himself the best table, and had got all the leaves up, and was holding a kind of black Bazaar, with the aid of a quantity of black pins. At the moment of my arrival, he had just finished putting somebody's hat into black long-clothes, like an African baby; so he held out his hand for mine. But I, misled by the action, and confused by the occasion, shook hands with him with every testimony of warm affection.

Poor dear Joe, entangled in a little black cloak tied in a large bow under his chin, was seated apart at the upper end of the room; where, as chief mourner, he had evidently been stationed by Trabb. When I bent down and said to him, 'Dear Joe, how are you?' he said, 'Pip, old chap, you knowed her when she were a fine figure of a --' and clasped my hand and said no more.

Biddy, looking very neat and modest in her black dress, went quietly here and there, and was very helpful. When I had spoken to Biddy as I thought it not a time for talking I went and sat down near Joe, and there began to wonder in what part of the house it -- she -- my sister -- was. The air of the parlour being faint with the smell of sweet cake, I looked about for the table of refreshments; it was scarcely visible until one had got accustomed to the gloom, but there was a cut-up plum-cake upon it, and there were cut-up oranges, and sandwiches, and biscuits, and two decanters that I knew very well as ornaments, but had never seen used in all my life; one full of port, and one of sherry. Standing at this table, I became conscious of the servile Pumblechook in a black cloak and several yards of hatband, who was alternately stuffing himself, and making obsequious movements to catch my attention. The moment he succeeded, he came over to me (breathing sherry and crumbs), and said in a subdued voice, 'May I, dear sir?' and did. I then descried Mr and Mrs Hubble; the last-named in a decent speechless paroxysm in a corner. We were all going to 'follow,' and were all in course of being tied up separately (by Tmbb) into ridiculous bundles.

'Which I meantersay, Pip,' Joe whispered me, as we were being what Mr Trabb called 'formed' in the parlour, two and two -- and it was dreadfully like a preparation for some grim kind of dance; 'which I meantersay, sir, as I would in preference have carried her to the church myself, along with three or four friendly ones wot come to it with willing harts and arms, but it were considered wot the neighbours would look down on such and would be of opinions as it were wanting in respect.'

'Pocket-handkerchiefs out, all!' cried Mr Trabb at this point, in a depressed business-like voice. 'Pocket-handkerchiefs out! We are ready!'

So, we all put our pocket-handkerchiefs to our faces, as if our noses were bleeding, and filed out two and two; Joe and I; Biddy and Pumblechook; Mr and Mrs Hubble. The remains of my poor sister had been brought round by the kitchen door, and, it being a point of Undertaking ceremony that the six bearers must be stifled and blinded under a horrible black velvet housing with a white border, the whole looked like a blind monster with twelve human legs, shuffling and blundering along, under the guidance of two keepers -- the postboy and his comrade.

The neighbourhood, however, highly approved of these arrangements, and we were much admired as we went through the village; the more youthful and vigorous part of the community making dashes now and then to cut us off, and lying in wait to intercept us at points of vantage. At such times the more exuberant among them called out in an excited manner on our emergence round some corner of expectancy, 'Here they come!' 'Here they are!' and we were all but cheered. In this progress I was much annoyed by the abject Pumblechook, who, being behind me, persisted all the way as a delicate attention in arranging my streaming hatband, and smoothing my cloak. My thoughts were further distracted by the excessive pride of Mr and Mrs Hubble, who were surpassingly conceited and vainglorious in being members of so distinguished a procession.

And now, the range of marshes lay clear before us, with the sails of the ships on the river growing out of it; and we went into the churchyard, close to the graves of my unknown parents, Philip Pirrip, late of this parish, and Also Georgiana, Wife of the Above. And there, my sister was laid quietly in the earth while the larks sang high above it, and the light wind strewed it with beautiful shadows of clouds and trees.

Of the conduct of the worldly-minded Pumblechook while this was doing, I desire to say no more than it was all addressed to me; and that even when those noble passages

were read which remind humanity how it brought nothing into the world and can take nothing out, and how it fleeth like a shadow and never continueth long in one stay, I heard him cough a reservation of the case of a young gentleman who came unexpectedly into large property. When we got back, he had the hardihood to tell me that he wished my sister could have known I had done her so much honour, and to hint that she would have considered it reasonably purchased at the price of her death. After that, he drank all the rest of the sherry, and Mr Hubble drank the port, and the two talked (which I have since observed to be customary in such cases) as if they were of quite another race from the deceased, and were notoriously immortal. Finally, he went away with Mr and Mrs Hubble -- to make an evening of it, I felt sure, and to tell the Jolly Bargemen that he was the founder of my fortunes and my earliest bene- factor.

When they were all gone, and when Trabb and his men -- but not his boy: I looked for him -- had crammed their mummery into bags, and were gone too, the house felt wholesomer. Soon after- wards, Biddy, Joe, and I, had a cold dinner together; but we dined in the best parlour, not in the old kitchen, and Joe was so exceed- ingly particular what he did with his knife and fork and the salt- cellar and what not, that there was great restraint upon us. But after dinner, when I made him take his pipe, and when I had loitered with him about the forge, and when we sat down together on the great block of stone outside it, we got on better. I noticed that after the funeral Joe changed his clothes so far, as to make a com- promise between his Sunday dress and working dress: in which the dear fellow looked natural, and like the Man he was.

He was very much pleased by my asking if I might sleep in my own little room, and I was pleased too; for, I felt that I had done rather a great thing in making the request. When the shadows of evening were closing in, I took an opportunity of getting into the garden with Biddy for a little talk.

‘Biddy,’ said I, ‘I think you might have written to me about these sad matters.’

‘Do you, Mr Pip?’ said Biddy. ‘I should have written if I had thought that.’

‘Don’t suppose that I mean to be unkind, Biddy, when I say I consider that you ought to have thought that.’

‘Do you, Mr Pip?’

She was so quiet, and had such an orderly, good, and pretty way with her, that I did not like the thought of making her cry again. After looking a little at her downcast eyes as she walked beside me, I gave up that point.

‘I suppose it will be difficult for you to remain here now, Biddy dear?’

‘Oh! I can’t do so, Mr Pip,’ said Biddy, in a tone of regret, but still of quiet conviction. ‘I have been speaking to Mrs Hubble, and I am going to her to-morrow. I hope we shall be able to take some care of Mr Gargery, together, until he settles down.’

‘How are you going to live, Biddy? If you want any mo --’

‘How am I going to live?’ repeated Biddy, striking in, with a momentary flush upon her face. ‘I’ll tell you, Mr Pip. I am going to try to get the place of mistress in the new school nearly finished here. I can be well recommended by all the neighbours, and I hope I can be industrious and patient, and teach myself while I teach others. You know, Mr Pip,’ pursued Biddy, with a smile, as she raised her eyes to my face, ‘the new schools are not like the old, but I learnt a good deal from you after that time, and have had time since then to improve.’

‘I think you would always improve, Biddy, under any circum- stances.’

‘Ah! Except in my bad side of human nature,’ murmured Biddy.

It was not so much a reproach, as an irresistible thinking aloud. Well! I thought I would give up that point too. So, I walked a little further with Biddy, looking silently at her downcast eyes.

‘I have not heard the particulars of my sister’s death, Biddy.’

‘They are very slight, poor thing. She had been in one of her bad states -- though they had got better of late, rather than worse -- for four days, when she came out of it in the evening, just at tea- time, and said quite plainly, “Joe.” As she had never said any word for a long while, I ran and fetched in Mr Gargery from the forge. She made signs to me that she wanted him to sit down close to her, and wanted me to put her arms round his neck. So I put them round his neck, and she laid her head down on his shoulder quite content and satisfied. And so she presently said “Joe” again, and once “Pardon,” and once “Pip.” And so she never lifted her head up any more, and it was just an hour later when we laid it down on her own bed, because we found she was gone.’

Biddy cried; the darkening garden, and the lane, and the stars that were coming out, were blurred in my own sight.

‘Nothing was ever discovered, Biddy?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Do you know what is become of Orlick?’

‘I should think from the colour of his clothes that he is working in the quarries.’

‘Of course you have seen him then? -- Why are you looking at that dark tree in the lane?’

‘I saw him there, on the night she died.’

‘That was not the last time either, Biddy?’

‘No; I have seen him there, since we have been walking here. -- It is of no use,’ said Biddy, laying her hand upon my arm, as I was for running out, ‘you know I would not deceive you; he was not there a minute, and he is gone.’

It revived my utmost indignation to find that she was still pursued by this fellow, and I felt inveterate against him. I told her so, and told her that I would spend any money or take any pains to drive him out of that country. By degrees she led me into more temperate talk, and she told me how Joe loved me, and how Joe never complained of anything -- she didn’t say, of me; she had no need; I knew what she meant -- but ever did his duty in his way of life, with a strong hand, a quiet tongue, and a gentle heart.

‘Indeed, it would be hard to say too much for him,’ said I; ‘and Biddy, we must often speak of these things, for of course I shall be often down here now. I am not going to

leave poor Joe alone.'

Biddy said never a single word.

'Biddy, don't you hear me?'

'Yes, Mr Pip.'

'Not to mention your calling me Mr Pip -- which appears to me to be in bad taste, Biddy -- what do you mean?'

'What do I mean?' asked Biddy, timidly.

'Biddy,' said I, in a virtuoualy self-asserting manner, 'I must request to know what you mean by this?'

'By this?' said Biddy.

'Now, don't echo,' I retorted. 'You used not to echo, Biddy.'

'Used not!' said Biddy. 'O Mr Pip! Used!'

Well! I rather thought I would give up that point too. After another silent turn in the garden, I fell back on the main position.

'Biddy,' said I, 'I made a remark respecting my coming down here often, to see Joe, which you received with a marked silence. Have the goodness, Biddy, to tell me why.'

'Are you quite sure, then, that you W I L L come to see him often?' asked Biddy, stopping in the narrow garden walk, and looking at me under the stars with a clear and honest eye.

'Oh dear me!' said I, as if I found myself compelled to give up Biddy in despair. 'This really is a very bad side of human nature! Don't say any more, if you please, Biddy. This shocks me very much.'

For which cogent reason I kept Biddy at a distance during supper, and, when I went up to my own old little room, took as stately a leave of her as I could, in my murmuring soul, deem reconcilable with the churchyard and the event of the day. As often as I was restless in the night, and that was every quarter of an hour, I reflected what an unkindness, what an injury, what an injustice, Biddy had done me.

Early in the morning, I was to go. Early in the morning, I was out, and looking in, unseen, at one of the wooden windows of the forge. There I stood, for minutes, looking at Joe, already at work with a glow of health and strength upon his face that made it show as if the bright sun of the life in store for him were shining on it.

'Good-bye, dear Joe! -- No, don't wipe it off -- for God's sake, give me your blackened hand! -- I shall be down soon, and often.'

'Never too soon, sir,' said Joe, 'and never too often, Pip!'

Biddy was waiting for me at the kitchen door, with a mug of new milk and a crust of bread. 'Biddy,' said I, when I gave her my hand at parting, 'I am not angry, but I am hurt.'

'No, don't be hurt,' she pleaded quite pathetically; 'let only me be hurt, if I have been ungenerous.'

Once more, the mists were rising as I walked away. If they dis- closed to me, as I suspect they did, that I should not come back, and that Biddy was quite right, all I can say is -- they were quite right too.