

CHAPTER 27

TOMMY TRADDLES



It may have been in consequence of Mrs. Crupp's advice, and, perhaps, for no better reason than because there was a certain similarity in the sound of the word skittles and Traddles, that it came into my head, next day, to go and look after Traddles. The time he had mentioned was more than out, and he lived in a little street near the Veterinary College at Camden Town, which was principally tenanted, as one of our clerks who lived in that direction informed me, by gentlemen students, who bought live donkeys, and made experiments on those quadrupeds in their private apartments. Having obtained from this clerk a direction to the academic grove in question, I set out, the same afternoon, to visit my old schoolfellow.

I found that the street was not as desirable a one as I could have wished it to be, for the sake of Traddles. The inhabitants appeared to have a propensity to throw any little trifles they were not in want of, into the road: which not only made it rank and sloppy, but untidy too, on account of the cabbage-leaves. The refuse was not wholly vegetable either, for I myself saw a shoe, a doubled-up saucepan, a black bonnet, and an umbrella, in various stages of decomposition, as I was looking out for the number I wanted.

The general air of the place reminded me forcibly of the days when I lived with Mr. and Mrs. Micawber. An indescribable character of faded gentility that attached to the house I sought, and made it unlike all the other houses in the street – though they were all built on one monotonous pattern, and looked like the early copies of a blundering boy who was learning to make houses, and had not yet got out of his cramped brick-and-mortar pothooks – reminded me still more of Mr. and Mrs. Micawber. Happening to arrive at the door as it was opened to the afternoon milkman, I was reminded of Mr. and Mrs. Micawber more forcibly yet.

'Now,' said the milkman to a very youthful servant girl. 'Has that there little bill of mine been heard on?'

‘Oh, master says he’ll attend to it immediate,’ was the reply. ‘Because,’ said the milkman, going on as if he had received no answer, and speaking, as I judged from his tone, rather for the edification of somebody within the house, than of the youthful servant – an impression which was strengthened by his manner of glaring down the passage – ‘because that there little bill has been running so long, that I begin to believe it’s run away altogether, and never won’t be heard of. Now, I’m not a going to stand it, you know!’ said the milkman, still throwing his voice into the house, and glaring down the passage.

As to his dealing in the mild article of milk, by the by, there never was a greater anomaly. His deportment would have been fierce in a butcher or a brandy-merchant.

The voice of the youthful servant became faint, but she seemed to me, from the action of her lips, again to murmur that it would be attended to immediate.

‘I tell you what,’ said the milkman, looking hard at her for the first time, and taking her by the chin, ‘are you fond of milk?’

‘Yes, I likes it,’ she replied.

‘Good,’ said the milkman. ‘Then you won’t have none tomorrow. D’ye hear? Not a fragment of milk you won’t have tomorrow.’

I thought she seemed, upon the whole, relieved by the prospect of having any today. The milkman, after shaking his head at her darkly, released her chin, and with anything rather than good-will opened his can, and deposited the usual quantity in the family jug. This done, he went away, muttering, and uttered the cry of his trade next door, in a vindictive shriek.

‘Does Mr. Traddles live here?’ I then inquired.

A mysterious voice from the end of the passage replied ‘Yes.’ Upon which the youthful servant replied ‘Yes.’

‘Is he at home?’ said I.

Again the mysterious voice replied in the affirmative, and again the servant echoed it. Upon this, I walked in, and in pursuance of the servant’s directions walked upstairs; conscious, as I passed the back parlour-door, that I was surveyed by a mysterious eye, probably belonging to the mysterious voice.

When I got to the top of the stairs – the house was only a story high above the ground floor – Traddles was on the landing to meet me. He was delighted to see me, and gave me welcome, with great heartiness, to his little room. It was in the front of the house, and extremely neat, though sparsely furnished. It was his only room, I saw; for there was a

sofa-bedstead in it, and his blacking-brushes and blacking were among his books – on the top shelf, behind a dictionary. His table was covered with papers, and he was hard at work in an old coat. I looked at nothing, that I know of, but I saw everything, even to the prospect of a church upon his china inkstand, as I sat down – and this, too, was a faculty confirmed in me in the old Micawber times. Various ingenious arrangements he had made, for the disguise of his chest of drawers, and the accommodation of his boots, his shaving-glass, and so forth, particularly impressed themselves upon me, as evidences of the same Traddles who used to make models of elephants' dens in writing-paper to put flies in; and to comfort himself under ill usage, with the memorable works of art I have so often mentioned.

In a corner of the room was something neatly covered up with a large white cloth. I could not make out what that was.

'Traddles,' said I, shaking hands with him again, after I had sat down, 'I am delighted to see you.'

'I am delighted to see *you*, Copperfield,' he returned. 'I am very glad indeed to see you. It was because I was thoroughly glad to see you when we met in Ely Place, and was sure you were thoroughly glad to see me, that I gave you this address instead of my address at chambers.'

'Oh! You have chambers?' said I.

'Why, I have the fourth of a room and a passage, and the fourth of a clerk,' returned Traddles. 'Three others and myself unite to have a set of chambers – to look business-like – and we quarter the clerk too. Half-a-crown a week he costs me.'

His old simple character and good temper, and something of his old unlucky fortune also, I thought, smiled at me in the smile with which he made this explanation.

'It's not because I have the least pride, Copperfield, you understand,' said Traddles, 'that I don't usually give my address here. It's only on account of those who come to me, who might not like to come here. For myself, I am fighting my way on in the world against difficulties, and it would be ridiculous if I made a pretence of doing anything else.'

'You are reading for the bar, Mr. Waterbrook informed me?' said I.

'Why, yes,' said Traddles, rubbing his hands slowly over one another. 'I am reading for the bar. The fact is, I have just begun to keep my terms, after rather a long delay. It's some time since I was articled, but the payment of that hundred pounds was a great pull. A great pull!' said Traddles, with a wince, as if he had had a tooth out.

‘Do you know what I can’t help thinking of, Traddles, as I sit here looking at you?’ I asked him.

‘No,’ said he.

‘That sky-blue suit you used to wear.’

‘Lord, to be sure!’ cried Traddles, laughing. ‘Tight in the arms and legs, you know? Dear me! Well! Those were happy times, weren’t they?’

‘I think our schoolmaster might have made them happier, without doing any harm to any of us, I acknowledge,’ I returned.

‘Perhaps he might,’ said Traddles. ‘But dear me, there was a good deal of fun going on. Do you remember the nights in the bedroom? When we used to have the suppers? And when you used to tell the stories? Ha, ha, ha! And do you remember when I got caned for crying about Mr. Mell? Old Creakle! I should like to see him again, too!’

‘He was a brute to you, Traddles,’ said I, indignantly; for his good humour made me feel as if I had seen him beaten but yesterday.

‘Do you think so?’ returned Traddles. ‘Really? Perhaps he was rather. But it’s all over, a long while. Old Creakle!’

‘You were brought up by an uncle, then?’ said I.

‘Of course I was!’ said Traddles. ‘The one I was always going to write to. And always didn’t, eh! Ha, ha, ha! Yes, I had an uncle then. He died soon after I left school.’

‘Indeed!’

‘Yes. He was a retired – what do you call it! – draper – cloth-merchant – and had made me his heir. But he didn’t like me when I grew up.’

‘Do you really mean that?’ said I. He was so composed, that I fancied he must have some other meaning.

‘Oh dear, yes, Copperfield! I mean it,’ replied Traddles. ‘It was an unfortunate thing, but he didn’t like me at all. He said I wasn’t at all what he expected, and so he married his housekeeper.’

‘And what did you do?’ I asked.

‘I didn’t do anything in particular,’ said Traddles. ‘I lived with them, waiting to be put out in the world, until his gout unfortunately flew to his stomach – and so he died, and so she married a young man, and so I wasn’t provided for.’

‘Did you get nothing, Traddles, after all?’

‘Oh dear, yes!’ said Traddles. ‘I got fifty pounds. I had never been brought up to any profession, and at first I was at a loss what to do for myself. However, I began, with the assistance of the son of a professional man, who had been to Salem House – Yawler, with his nose on one side. Do you recollect him?’

No. He had not been there with me; all the noses were straight in my day.

‘It don’t matter,’ said Traddles. ‘I began, by means of his assistance, to copy law writings. That didn’t answer very well; and then I began to state cases for them, and make abstracts, and that sort of work. For I am a plodding kind of fellow, Copperfield, and had learnt the way of doing such things pithily. Well! That put it in my head to enter myself as a law student; and that ran away with all that was left of the fifty pounds. Yawler recommended me to one or two other offices, however – Mr. Waterbrook’s for one – and I got a good many jobs. I was fortunate enough, too, to become acquainted with a person in the publishing way, who was getting up an Encyclopaedia, and he set me to work; and, indeed’ (glancing at his table), ‘I am at work for him at this minute. I am not a bad compiler, Copperfield,’ said Traddles, preserving the same air of cheerful confidence in all he said, ‘but I have no invention at all; not a particle. I suppose there never was a young man with less originality than I have.’

As Traddles seemed to expect that I should assent to this as a matter of course, I nodded; and he went on, with the same sprightly patience – I can find no better expression – as before.

‘So, by little and little, and not living high, I managed to scrape up the hundred pounds at last,’ said Traddles; ‘and thank Heaven that’s paid – though it was – though it certainly was,’ said Traddles, wincing again as if he had had another tooth out, ‘a pull. I am living by the sort of work I have mentioned, still, and I hope, one of these days, to get connected with some newspaper: which would almost be the making of my fortune. Now, Copperfield, you are so exactly what you used to be, with that agreeable face, and it’s so pleasant to see you, that I sha’n’t conceal anything. Therefore you must know that I am engaged.’

Engaged! Oh, Dora!

‘She is a curate’s daughter,’ said Traddles; ‘one of ten, down in Devonshire. Yes!’ For he saw me glance, involuntarily, at the prospect on the inkstand. ‘That’s the church! You come round here to the left, out of this gate,’ tracing his finger along the inkstand, ‘and exactly where I hold this pen, there stands the house – facing, you understand, towards the church.’

The delight with which he entered into these particulars, did not fully present itself to me until afterwards; for my selfish thoughts were making a ground-plan of Mr. Spenlow’s house and garden at the same moment.

‘She is such a dear girl!’ said Traddles; ‘a little older than me, but the dearest girl! I told you I was going out of town? I have been down there. I walked there, and I walked back, and I had the most delightful time! I dare say ours is likely to be a rather long engagement, but our motto is “Wait and hope!” We always say that. “Wait and hope,” we always say. And she would wait, Copperfield, till she was sixty – any age you can mention – for me!’

Traddles rose from his chair, and, with a triumphant smile, put his hand upon the white cloth I had observed.

‘However,’ he said, ‘it’s not that we haven’t made a beginning towards housekeeping. No, no; we have begun. We must get on by degrees, but we have begun. Here,’ drawing the cloth off with great pride and care, ‘are two pieces of furniture to commence with. This flower-pot and stand, she bought herself. You put that in a parlour window,’ said Traddles, falling a little back from it to survey it with the greater admiration, ‘with a plant in it, and – and there you are! This little round table with the marble top (it’s two feet ten in circumference), I bought. You want to lay a book down, you know, or somebody comes to see you or your wife, and wants a place to stand a cup of tea upon, and – and there you are again!’ said Traddles. ‘It’s an admirable piece of workmanship – firm as a rock!’

I praised them both, highly, and Traddles replaced the covering as carefully as he had removed it.

‘It’s not a great deal towards the furnishing,’ said Traddles, ‘but it’s something. The table-cloths, and pillow-cases, and articles of that kind, are what discourage me most, Copperfield. So does the ironmongery – candle-boxes, and gridirons, and that sort of necessaries – because those things tell, and mount up. However, “wait and hope!” And I assure you she’s the dearest girl!’

‘I am quite certain of it,’ said I.

‘In the meantime,’ said Traddles, coming back to his chair; ‘and this is the end of my prosing about myself, I get on as well as I can. I don’t make much, but I don’t spend much. In general, I board with the people downstairs, who are very agreeable people indeed. Both Mr. and Mrs. Micawber have seen a good deal of life, and are excellent company.’

‘My dear Traddles!’ I quickly exclaimed. ‘What are you talking about?’ Traddles looked at me, as if he wondered what I was talking about.

‘Mr. and Mrs. Micawber!’ I repeated. ‘Why, I am intimately acquainted with them!’

An opportune double knock at the door, which I knew well from old

experience in Windsor Terrace, and which nobody but Mr. Micawber could ever have knocked at that door, resolved any doubt in my mind as to their being my old friends. I begged Traddles to ask his landlord to walk up. Traddles accordingly did so, over the banister; and Mr. Micawber, not a bit changed – his tights, his stick, his shirt-collar, and his eye-glass, all the same as ever – came into the room with a genteel and youthful air.

‘I beg your pardon, Mr. Traddles,’ said Mr. Micawber, with the old roll in his voice, as he checked himself in humming a soft tune. ‘I was not aware that there was any individual, alien to this tenement, in your sanctum.’

Mr. Micawber slightly bowed to me, and pulled up his shirt-collar.

‘How do you do, Mr. Micawber?’ said I.

‘Sir,’ said Mr. Micawber, ‘you are exceedingly obliging. I am *in statu quo*.’

‘And Mrs. Micawber?’ I pursued.

‘Sir,’ said Mr. Micawber, ‘she is also, thank God, *in statu quo*.’

‘And the children, Mr. Micawber?’

‘Sir,’ said Mr. Micawber, ‘I rejoice to reply that they are, likewise, in the enjoyment of salubrity.’

All this time, Mr. Micawber had not known me in the least, though he had stood face to face with me. But now, seeing me smile, he examined my features with more attention, fell back, cried, ‘Is it possible! Have I the pleasure of again beholding Copperfield!’ and shook me by both hands with the utmost fervour.

‘Good Heaven, Mr. Traddles!’ said Mr. Micawber, ‘to think that I should find you acquainted with the friend of my youth, the companion of earlier days! My dear!’ calling over the banisters to Mrs. Micawber, while Traddles looked (with reason) not a little amazed at this description of me. ‘Here is a gentleman in Mr. Traddles’s apartment, whom he wishes to have the pleasure of presenting to you, my love!’

Mr. Micawber immediately reappeared, and shook hands with me again.

‘And how is our good friend the Doctor, Copperfield?’ said Mr. Micawber, ‘and all the circle at Canterbury?’

‘I have none but good accounts of them,’ said I.

‘I am most delighted to hear it,’ said Mr. Micawber. ‘It was at Canterbury where we last met. Within the shadow, I may figuratively say, of that religious edifice immortalized by Chaucer, which was anciently the resort of Pilgrims from the remotest corners of – in short,’ said Mr. Micawber, ‘in the immediate neighbourhood of the Cathedral.’

I replied that it was. Mr. Micawber continued talking as volubly as he could; but not, I thought, without showing, by some marks of concern in his countenance, that he was sensible of sounds in the next room, as of Mrs. Micawber washing her hands, and hurriedly opening and shutting drawers that were uneasy in their action.

‘You find us, Copperfield,’ said Mr. Micawber, with one eye on Traddles, ‘at present established, on what may be designated as a small and unassuming scale; but, you are aware that I have, in the course of my career, surmounted difficulties, and conquered obstacles. You are no stranger to the fact, that there have been periods of my life, when it has been requisite that I should pause, until certain expected events should turn up; when it has been necessary that I should fall back, before making what I trust I shall not be accused of presumption in terming – a spring. The present is one of those momentous stages in the life of man. You find me, fallen back, *for* a spring; and I have every reason to believe that a vigorous leap will shortly be the result.’ I was expressing my satisfaction, when Mrs. Micawber came in; a little more slatternly than she used to be, or so she seemed now, to my unaccustomed eyes, but still with some preparation of herself for company, and with a pair of brown gloves on.

‘My dear,’ said Mr. Micawber, leading her towards me, ‘here is a gentleman of the name of Copperfield, who wishes to renew his acquaintance with you.’

It would have been better, as it turned out, to have led gently up to this announcement, for Mrs. Micawber, being in a delicate state of health, was overcome by it, and was taken so unwell, that Mr. Micawber was obliged, in great trepidation, to run down to the water-butts in the backyard, and draw a basinful to lave her brow with. She presently revived, however, and was really pleased to see me. We had half-an-hour’s talk, altogether; and I asked her about the twins, who, she said, were ‘grown great creatures’; and after Master and Miss Micawber, whom she described as ‘absolute giants’, but they were not produced on that occasion.

Mr. Micawber was very anxious that I should stay to dinner. I should not have been averse to do so, but that I imagined I detected trouble, and calculation relative to the extent of the cold meat, in Mrs. Micawber’s eye. I therefore pleaded another engagement; and observing that Mrs. Micawber’s spirits were immediately lightened, I resisted all persuasion to forego it.

But I told Traddles, and Mr. and Mrs. Micawber, that before I could think of leaving, they must appoint a day when they would come and

dine with me. The occupations to which Traddles stood pledged, rendered it necessary to fix a somewhat distant one; but an appointment was made for the purpose, that suited us all, and then I took my leave. Mr. Micawber, under pretence of showing me a nearer way than that by which I had come, accompanied me to the corner of the street; being anxious (he explained to me) to say a few words to an old friend, in confidence.

‘My dear Copperfield,’ said Mr. Micawber, ‘I need hardly tell you that to have beneath our roof, under existing circumstances, a mind like that which gleams – if I may be allowed the expression – which gleams – in your friend Traddles, is an unspeakable comfort. With a washerwoman, who exposes hard-bake for sale in her parlour-window, dwelling next door, and a Bow-street officer residing over the way, you may imagine that his society is a source of consolation to myself and to Mrs. Micawber. I am at present, my dear Copperfield, engaged in the sale of corn upon commission. It is not an avocation of a remunerative description – in other words, it does not pay – and some temporary embarrassments of a pecuniary nature have been the consequence. I am, however, delighted to add that I have now an immediate prospect of something turning up (I am not at liberty to say in what direction), which I trust will enable me to provide, permanently, both for myself and for your friend Traddles, in whom I have an unaffected interest. You may, perhaps, be prepared to hear that Mrs. Micawber is in a state of health which renders it not wholly improbable that an addition may be ultimately made to those pledges of affection which – in short, to the infantine group. Mrs. Micawber’s family have been so good as to express their dissatisfaction at this state of things. I have merely to observe, that I am not aware that it is any business of theirs, and that I repel that exhibition of feeling with scorn, and with defiance!’

Mr. Micawber then shook hands with me again, and left me.