

DICKENS CHARLES

BARNABY RUDGE: A
TALE OF THE RIOTS OF
'EIGHTY

Charles Dickens
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PREFACE

The late Mr Waterton having, some time ago, expressed his opinion that ravens are gradually becoming extinct in England, I offered the few following words about my experience of these birds.

The raven in this story is a compound of two great originals, of whom I was, at different times, the proud possessor. The first was in the bloom of his youth, when he was discovered in a modest retirement in London, by a friend of mine, and given to me. He had from the first, as Sir Hugh Evans says of Anne Page, 'good gifts', which he improved by study and attention in a most exemplary manner. He slept in a stable – generally on horseback – and so terrified a Newfoundland dog by his preternatural sagacity, that he has been known, by the mere superiority of his genius, to walk off unmolested with the dog's dinner, from before his face. He was rapidly rising in acquirements and virtues, when, in an evil hour, his stable was newly painted. He observed the workmen closely, saw that they were careful of the paint, and

immediately burned to possess it. On their going to dinner, he ate up all they had left behind, consisting of a pound or two of white lead; and this youthful indiscretion terminated in death.

While I was yet inconsolable for his loss, another friend of mine in Yorkshire discovered an older and more gifted raven at a village public-house, which he prevailed upon the landlord to part with for a consideration, and sent up to me. The first act of this Sage, was, to administer to the effects of his predecessor, by disinterring all the cheese and halfpence he had buried in the garden – a work of immense labour and research, to which he devoted all the energies of his mind. When he had achieved this task, he applied himself to the acquisition of stable language, in which he soon became such an adept, that he would perch outside my window and drive imaginary horses with great skill, all day. Perhaps even I never saw him at his best, for his former master sent his duty with him, ‘and if I wished the bird to come out very strong, would I be so good as to show him a drunken man’ – which I never did, having (unfortunately) none but sober people at hand.

But I could hardly have respected him more, whatever the stimulating influences of this sight might have been. He had not the least respect, I am sorry to say, for me in return, or for anybody but the cook; to whom he was attached – but only, I fear, as a Policeman might have been. Once, I met him unexpectedly, about half-a-mile from my house, walking down the middle of a public street, attended by a pretty large crowd,

and spontaneously exhibiting the whole of his accomplishments. His gravity under those trying circumstances, I can never forget, nor the extraordinary gallantry with which, refusing to be brought home, he defended himself behind a pump, until overpowered by numbers. It may have been that he was too bright a genius to live long, or it may have been that he took some pernicious substance into his bill, and thence into his maw – which is not improbable, seeing that he new-pointed the greater part of the garden-wall by digging out the mortar, broke countless squares of glass by scraping away the putty all round the frames, and tore up and swallowed, in splinters, the greater part of a wooden staircase of six steps and a landing – but after some three years he too was taken ill, and died before the kitchen fire. He kept his eye to the last upon the meat as it roasted, and suddenly turned over on his back with a sepulchral cry of ‘Cuckoo!’ Since then I have been ravenless.

No account of the Gordon Riots having been to my knowledge introduced into any Work of Fiction, and the subject presenting very extraordinary and remarkable features, I was led to project this Tale.

It is unnecessary to say, that those shameful tumults, while they reflect indelible disgrace upon the time in which they occurred, and all who had act or part in them, teach a good lesson. That what we falsely call a religious cry is easily raised by men who have no religion, and who in their daily practice set at nought the commonest principles of right and wrong; that it

is begotten of intolerance and persecution; that it is senseless, besotted, inveterate and unmerciful; all History teaches us. But perhaps we do not know it in our hearts too well, to profit by even so humble an example as the 'No Popery' riots of Seventeen Hundred and Eighty.

However imperfectly those disturbances are set forth in the following pages, they are impartially painted by one who has no sympathy with the Romish Church, though he acknowledges, as most men do, some esteemed friends among the followers of its creed.

In the description of the principal outrages, reference has been had to the best authorities of that time, such as they are; the account given in this Tale, of all the main features of the Riots, is substantially correct.

Mr Dennis's allusions to the flourishing condition of his trade in those days, have their foundation in Truth, and not in the Author's fancy. Any file of old Newspapers, or odd volume of the Annual Register, will prove this with terrible ease.

Even the case of Mary Jones, dwelt upon with so much pleasure by the same character, is no effort of invention. The facts were stated, exactly as they are stated here, in the House of Commons. Whether they afforded as much entertainment to the merry gentlemen assembled there, as some other most affecting circumstances of a similar nature mentioned by Sir Samuel Romilly, is not recorded.

That the case of Mary Jones may speak the more emphatically

for itself, I subjoin it, as related by SIR WILLIAM MEREDITH in a speech in Parliament, 'on Frequent Executions', made in 1777.

'Under this act,' the Shop-lifting Act, 'one Mary Jones was executed, whose case I shall just mention; it was at the time when press warrants were issued, on the alarm about Falkland Islands. The woman's husband was pressed, their goods seized for some debts of his, and she, with two small children, turned into the streets a-begging. It is a circumstance not to be forgotten, that she was very young (under nineteen), and most remarkably handsome. She went to a linen-draper's shop, took some coarse linen off the counter, and slipped it under her cloak; the shopman saw her, and she laid it down: for this she was hanged. Her defence was (I have the trial in my pocket), "that she had lived in credit, and wanted for nothing, till a press-gang came and stole her husband from her; but since then, she had no bed to lie on; nothing to give her children to eat; and they were almost naked; and perhaps she might have done something wrong, for she hardly knew what she did." The parish officers testified the truth of this story; but it seems, there had been a good deal of shop-lifting about Ludgate; an example was thought necessary; and this woman was hanged for the comfort and satisfaction of shopkeepers in Ludgate Street. When brought to receive sentence, she behaved in such a frantic manner, as proved her mind to be in a distracted and desponding state; and the child was sucking at her breast when she set out for Tyburn.'

Chapter 1

the year 1775, there stood upon the borders of Epping Forest, at a distance of about twelve miles from London – measuring from the Standard in Cornhill, or rather from the spot on or near to which the Standard used to be in days of yore – a house of public entertainment called the Maypole; which fact was demonstrated to all such travellers as could neither read nor write (and at that time a vast number both of travellers and stay-at-homes were in this condition) by the emblem reared on the roadside over against the house, which, if not of those goodly proportions that Maypoles were wont to present in olden times, was a fair young ash, thirty feet in height, and straight as any arrow that ever English yeoman drew.

The Maypole – by which term from henceforth is meant the house, and not its sign – the Maypole was an old building, with more gable ends than a lazy man would care to count on a sunny day; huge zig-zag chimneys, out of which it seemed as though even smoke could not choose but come in more than naturally fantastic shapes, imparted to it in its tortuous progress; and vast stables, gloomy, ruinous, and empty. The place was said to have been built in the days of King Henry the Eighth; and there was a legend, not only that Queen Elizabeth had slept there one night while upon a hunting excursion, to wit, in a certain oak-panelled room with a deep bay window, but that next morning, while

standing on a mounting block before the door with one foot in the stirrup, the virgin monarch had then and there boxed and cuffed an unlucky page for some neglect of duty. The matter-of-fact and doubtful folks, of whom there were a few among the Maypole customers, as unluckily there always are in every little community, were inclined to look upon this tradition as rather apocryphal; but, whenever the landlord of that ancient hostelry appealed to the mounting block itself as evidence, and triumphantly pointed out that there it stood in the same place to that very day, the doubters never failed to be put down by a large majority, and all true believers exulted as in a victory.

Whether these, and many other stories of the like nature, were true or untrue, the Maypole was really an old house, a very old house, perhaps as old as it claimed to be, and perhaps older, which will sometimes happen with houses of an uncertain, as with ladies of a certain, age. Its windows were old diamond-pane lattices, its floors were sunken and uneven, its ceilings blackened by the hand of time, and heavy with massive beams. Over the doorway was an ancient porch, quaintly and grotesquely carved; and here on summer evenings the more favoured customers smoked and drank – ay, and sang many a good song too, sometimes – reposing on two grim-looking high-backed settles, which, like the twin dragons of some fairy tale, guarded the entrance to the mansion.

In the chimneys of the disused rooms, swallows had built their nests for many a long year, and from earliest spring to

latest autumn whole colonies of sparrows chirped and twittered in the eaves. There were more pigeons about the dreary stable-yard and out-buildings than anybody but the landlord could reckon up. The wheeling and circling flights of runts, fantails, tumblers, and pouters, were perhaps not quite consistent with the grave and sober character of the building, but the monotonous cooing, which never ceased to be raised by some among them all day long, suited it exactly, and seemed to lull it to rest. With its overhanging stories, drowsy little panes of glass, and front bulging out and projecting over the pathway, the old house looked as if it were nodding in its sleep. Indeed, it needed no very great stretch of fancy to detect in it other resemblances to humanity. The bricks of which it was built had originally been a deep dark red, but had grown yellow and discoloured like an old man's skin; the sturdy timbers had decayed like teeth; and here and there the ivy, like a warm garment to comfort it in its age, wrapt its green leaves closely round the time-worn walls.

It was a hale and hearty age though, still: and in the summer or autumn evenings, when the glow of the setting sun fell upon the oak and chestnut trees of the adjacent forest, the old house, partaking of its lustre, seemed their fit companion, and to have many good years of life in him yet.

The evening with which we have to do, was neither a summer nor an autumn one, but the twilight of a day in March, when the wind howled dismally among the bare branches of the trees, and rumbling in the wide chimneys and driving the rain against

the windows of the Maypole Inn, gave such of its frequenters as chanced to be there at the moment an undeniable reason for prolonging their stay, and caused the landlord to prophesy that the night would certainly clear at eleven o'clock precisely, – which by a remarkable coincidence was the hour at which he always closed his house.

The name of him upon whom the spirit of prophecy thus descended was John Willet, a burly, large-headed man with a fat face, which betokened profound obstinacy and slowness of apprehension, combined with a very strong reliance upon his own merits. It was John Willet's ordinary boast in his more placid moods that if he were slow he was sure; which assertion could, in one sense at least, be by no means gainsaid, seeing that he was in everything unquestionably the reverse of fast, and withal one of the most dogged and positive fellows in existence – always sure that what he thought or said or did was right, and holding it as a thing quite settled and ordained by the laws of nature and Providence, that anybody who said or did or thought otherwise must be inevitably and of necessity wrong.

Mr Willet walked slowly up to the window, flattened his fat nose against the cold glass, and shading his eyes that his sight might not be affected by the ruddy glow of the fire, looked abroad. Then he walked slowly back to his old seat in the chimney-corner, and, composing himself in it with a slight shiver, such as a man might give way to and so acquire an additional relish for the warm blaze, said, looking round upon his guests:

‘It’ll clear at eleven o’clock. No sooner and no later. Not before and not arterwards.’

‘How do you make out that?’ said a little man in the opposite corner. ‘The moon is past the full, and she rises at nine.’

John looked sedately and solemnly at his questioner until he had brought his mind to bear upon the whole of his observation, and then made answer, in a tone which seemed to imply that the moon was peculiarly his business and nobody else’s:

‘Never you mind about the moon. Don’t you trouble yourself about her. You let the moon alone, and I’ll let you alone.’

‘No offence I hope?’ said the little man.

Again John waited leisurely until the observation had thoroughly penetrated to his brain, and then replying, ‘No offence as YET,’ applied a light to his pipe and smoked in placid silence; now and then casting a sidelong look at a man wrapped in a loose riding-coat with huge cuffs ornamented with tarnished silver lace and large metal buttons, who sat apart from the regular frequenters of the house, and wearing a hat flapped over his face, which was still further shaded by the hand on which his forehead rested, looked unsociable enough.

There was another guest, who sat, booted and spurred, at some distance from the fire also, and whose thoughts – to judge from his folded arms and knitted brows, and from the untasted liquor before him – were occupied with other matters than the topics under discussion or the persons who discussed them. This was a young man of about eight-and-twenty, rather above the

middle height, and though of somewhat slight figure, gracefully and strongly made. He wore his own dark hair, and was accoutred in a riding dress, which together with his large boots (resembling in shape and fashion those worn by our Life Guardsmen at the present day), showed indisputable traces of the bad condition of the roads. But travel-stained though he was, he was well and even richly attired, and without being overdressed looked a gallant gentleman.

Lying upon the table beside him, as he had carelessly thrown them down, were a heavy riding-whip and a slouched hat, the latter worn no doubt as being best suited to the inclemency of the weather. There, too, were a pair of pistols in a holster-case, and a short riding-cloak. Little of his face was visible, except the long dark lashes which concealed his downcast eyes, but an air of careless ease and natural gracefulness of demeanour pervaded the figure, and seemed to comprehend even those slight accessories, which were all handsome, and in good keeping.

Towards this young gentleman the eyes of Mr Willet wandered but once, and then as if in mute inquiry whether he had observed his silent neighbour. It was plain that John and the young gentleman had often met before. Finding that his look was not returned, or indeed observed by the person to whom it was addressed, John gradually concentrated the whole power of his eyes into one focus, and brought it to bear upon the man in the flapped hat, at whom he came to stare in course of time with an intensity so remarkable, that it affected his fireside cronies,

who all, as with one accord, took their pipes from their lips, and stared with open mouths at the stranger likewise.

The sturdy landlord had a large pair of dull fish-like eyes, and the little man who had hazarded the remark about the moon (and who was the parish-clerk and bell-ringer of Chigwell, a village hard by) had little round black shiny eyes like beads; moreover this little man wore at the knees of his rusty black breeches, and on his rusty black coat, and all down his long flapped waistcoat, little queer buttons like nothing except his eyes; but so like them, that as they twinkled and glistened in the light of the fire, which shone too in his bright shoe-buckles, he seemed all eyes from head to foot, and to be gazing with every one of them at the unknown customer. No wonder that a man should grow restless under such an inspection as this, to say nothing of the eyes belonging to short Tom Cobb the general chandler and post-office keeper, and long Phil Parkes the ranger, both of whom, infected by the example of their companions, regarded him of the flapped hat no less attentively.

The stranger became restless; perhaps from being exposed to this raking fire of eyes, perhaps from the nature of his previous meditations – most probably from the latter cause, for as he changed his position and looked hastily round, he started to find himself the object of such keen regard, and darted an angry and suspicious glance at the fireside group. It had the effect of immediately diverting all eyes to the chimney, except those of John Willet, who finding himself as it were, caught in the fact,

and not being (as has been already observed) of a very ready nature, remained staring at his guest in a particularly awkward and disconcerted manner.

‘Well?’ said the stranger.

Well. There was not much in well. It was not a long speech. ‘I thought you gave an order,’ said the landlord, after a pause of two or three minutes for consideration.

The stranger took off his hat, and disclosed the hard features of a man of sixty or thereabouts, much weatherbeaten and worn by time, and the naturally harsh expression of which was not improved by a dark handkerchief which was bound tightly round his head, and, while it served the purpose of a wig, shaded his forehead, and almost hid his eyebrows. If it were intended to conceal or divert attention from a deep gash, now healed into an ugly seam, which when it was first inflicted must have laid bare his cheekbone, the object was but indifferently attained, for it could scarcely fail to be noted at a glance. His complexion was of a cadaverous hue, and he had a grizzly jagged beard of some three weeks’ date. Such was the figure (very meanly and poorly clad) that now rose from the seat, and stalking across the room sat down in a corner of the chimney, which the politeness or fears of the little clerk very readily assigned to him.

‘A highwayman!’ whispered Tom Cobb to Parkes the ranger.

‘Do you suppose highwaymen don’t dress handsomer than that?’ replied Parkes. ‘It’s a better business than you think for, Tom, and highwaymen don’t need or use to be shabby, take my

word for it.’

Meanwhile the subject of their speculations had done due honour to the house by calling for some drink, which was promptly supplied by the landlord’s son Joe, a broad-shouldered strapping young fellow of twenty, whom it pleased his father still to consider a little boy, and to treat accordingly. Stretching out his hands to warm them by the blazing fire, the man turned his head towards the company, and after running his eye sharply over them, said in a voice well suited to his appearance:

‘What house is that which stands a mile or so from here?’

‘Public-house?’ said the landlord, with his usual deliberation.

‘Public-house, father!’ exclaimed Joe, ‘where’s the public-house within a mile or so of the Maypole? He means the great house – the Warren – naturally and of course. The old red brick house, sir, that stands in its own grounds – ?’

‘Aye,’ said the stranger.

‘And that fifteen or twenty years ago stood in a park five times as broad, which with other and richer property has bit by bit changed hands and dwindled away – more’s the pity!’ pursued the young man.

‘Maybe,’ was the reply. ‘But my question related to the owner. What it has been I don’t care to know, and what it is I can see for myself.’

The heir-apparent to the Maypole pressed his finger on his lips, and glancing at the young gentleman already noticed, who had changed his attitude when the house was first mentioned,

replied in a lower tone:

‘The owner’s name is Haredale, Mr Geoffrey Haredale, and’ – again he glanced in the same direction as before – ‘and a worthy gentleman too – hem!’

Paying as little regard to this admonitory cough, as to the significant gesture that had preceded it, the stranger pursued his questioning.

‘I turned out of my way coming here, and took the footpath that crosses the grounds. Who was the young lady that I saw entering a carriage? His daughter?’

‘Why, how should I know, honest man?’ replied Joe, contriving in the course of some arrangements about the hearth, to advance close to his questioner and pluck him by the sleeve, ‘I didn’t see the young lady, you know. Whew! There’s the wind again – AND rain – well it IS a night!’

Rough weather indeed!’ observed the strange man.

‘You’re used to it?’ said Joe, catching at anything which seemed to promise a diversion of the subject.

‘Pretty well,’ returned the other. ‘About the young lady – has Mr Haredale a daughter?’

‘No, no,’ said the young fellow fretfully, ‘he’s a single gentleman – he’s – be quiet, can’t you, man? Don’t you see this talk is not relished yonder?’

Regardless of this whispered remonstrance, and affecting not to hear it, his tormentor provokingly continued:

‘Single men have had daughters before now. Perhaps she may

be his daughter, though he is not married.'

'What do you mean?' said Joe, adding in an undertone as he approached him again, 'You'll come in for it presently, I know you will!'

'I mean no harm' – returned the traveller boldly, 'and have said none that I know of. I ask a few questions – as any stranger may, and not unnaturally – about the inmates of a remarkable house in a neighbourhood which is new to me, and you are as aghast and disturbed as if I were talking treason against King George. Perhaps you can tell me why, sir, for (as I say) I am a stranger, and this is Greek to me?'

The latter observation was addressed to the obvious cause of Joe Willet's discomposure, who had risen and was adjusting his riding-cloak preparatory to sallying abroad. Briefly replying that he could give him no information, the young man beckoned to Joe, and handing him a piece of money in payment of his reckoning, hurried out attended by young Willet himself, who taking up a candle followed to light him to the house-door.

While Joe was absent on this errand, the elder Willet and his three companions continued to smoke with profound gravity, and in a deep silence, each having his eyes fixed on a huge copper boiler that was suspended over the fire. After some time John Willet slowly shook his head, and thereupon his friends slowly shook theirs; but no man withdrew his eyes from the boiler, or altered the solemn expression of his countenance in the slightest degree.

At length Joe returned – very talkative and conciliatory, as though with a strong presentiment that he was going to be found fault with.

‘Such a thing as love is!’ he said, drawing a chair near the fire, and looking round for sympathy. ‘He has set off to walk to London, – all the way to London. His nag gone lame in riding out here this blessed afternoon, and comfortably littered down in our stable at this minute; and he giving up a good hot supper and our best bed, because Miss Haredale has gone to a masquerade up in town, and he has set his heart upon seeing her! I don’t think I could persuade myself to do that, beautiful as she is, – but then I’m not in love (at least I don’t think I am) and that’s the whole difference.’

‘He is in love then?’ said the stranger.

‘Rather,’ replied Joe. ‘He’ll never be more in love, and may very easily be less.’

‘Silence, sir!’ cried his father.

‘What a chap you are, Joe!’ said Long Parkes.

‘Such a inconsiderate lad!’ murmured Tom Cobb.

‘Putting himself forward and wringing the very nose off his own father’s face!’ exclaimed the parish-clerk, metaphorically.

‘What HAVE I done?’ reasoned poor Joe.

‘Silence, sir!’ returned his father, ‘what do you mean by talking, when you see people that are more than two or three times your age, sitting still and silent and not dreaming of saying a word?’

‘Why that’s the proper time for me to talk, isn’t it?’ said Joe rebelliously.

‘The proper time, sir!’ retorted his father, ‘the proper time’s no time.’

‘Ah to be sure!’ muttered Parkes, nodding gravely to the other two who nodded likewise, observing under their breaths that that was the point.

‘The proper time’s no time, sir,’ repeated John Willet; ‘when I was your age I never talked, I never wanted to talk. I listened and improved myself that’s what I did.’

‘And you’d find your father rather a tough customer in argeyment, Joe, if anybody was to try and tackle him,’ said Parkes.

‘For the matter o’ that, Phil!’ observed Mr Willet, blowing a long, thin, spiral cloud of smoke out of the corner of his mouth, and staring at it abstractedly as it floated away; ‘For the matter o’ that, Phil, argeyment is a gift of Natur. If Natur has gifted a man with powers of argeyment, a man has a right to make the best of ‘em, and has not a right to stand on false delicacy, and deny that he is so gifted; for that is a turning of his back on Natur, a flouting of her, a slighting of her precious caskets, and a proving of one’s self to be a swine that isn’t worth her scattering pearls before.’

The landlord pausing here for a very long time, Mr Parkes naturally concluded that he had brought his discourse to an end; and therefore, turning to the young man with some austerity,

exclaimed:

‘You hear what your father says, Joe? You wouldn’t much like to tackle him in argeyment, I’m thinking, sir.’

‘IF,’ said John Willet, turning his eyes from the ceiling to the face of his interrupter, and uttering the monosyllable in capitals, to apprise him that he had put in his oar, as the vulgar say, with unbecoming and irreverent haste; ‘IF, sir, Natur has fixed upon me the gift of argeyment, why should I not own to it, and rather glory in the same? Yes, sir, I AM a tough customer that way. You are right, sir. My toughness has been proved, sir, in this room many and many a time, as I think you know; and if you don’t know,’ added John, putting his pipe in his mouth again, ‘so much the better, for I an’t proud and am not going to tell you.’

A general murmur from his three cronies, and a general shaking of heads at the copper boiler, assured John Willet that they had had good experience of his powers and needed no further evidence to assure them of his superiority. John smoked with a little more dignity and surveyed them in silence.

‘It’s all very fine talking,’ muttered Joe, who had been fidgeting in his chair with divers uneasy gestures. ‘But if you mean to tell me that I’m never to open my lips – ’

‘Silence, sir!’ roared his father. ‘No, you never are. When your opinion’s wanted, you give it. When you’re spoke to, you speak. When your opinion’s not wanted and you’re not spoke to, don’t you give an opinion and don’t you speak. The world’s undergone a nice alteration since my time, certainly. My belief is that there

an't any boys left – that there isn't such a thing as a boy – that there's nothing now between a male baby and a man – and that all the boys went out with his blessed Majesty King George the Second.'

'That's a very true observation, always excepting the young princes,' said the parish-clerk, who, as the representative of church and state in that company, held himself bound to the nicest loyalty. 'If it's godly and righteous for boys, being of the ages of boys, to behave themselves like boys, then the young princes must be boys and cannot be otherwise.'

'Did you ever hear tell of mermaids, sir?' said Mr Willet.

'Certainly I have,' replied the clerk.

'Very good,' said Mr Willet. 'According to the constitution of mermaids, so much of a mermaid as is not a woman must be a fish. According to the constitution of young princes, so much of a young prince (if anything) as is not actually an angel, must be godly and righteous. Therefore if it's becoming and godly and righteous in the young princes (as it is at their ages) that they should be boys, they are and must be boys, and cannot by possibility be anything else.'

This elucidation of a knotty point being received with such marks of approval as to put John Willet into a good humour, he contented himself with repeating to his son his command of silence, and addressing the stranger, said:

'If you had asked your questions of a grown-up person – of me or any of these gentlemen – you'd have had some satisfaction,

and wouldn't have wasted breath. Miss Haredale is Mr Geoffrey Haredale's niece.'

'Is her father alive?' said the man, carelessly.

'No,' rejoined the landlord, 'he is not alive, and he is not dead

–'

'Not dead!' cried the other.

'Not dead in a common sort of way,' said the landlord.

The cronies nodded to each other, and Mr Parkes remarked in an undertone, shaking his head meanwhile as who should say, 'let no man contradict me, for I won't believe him,' that John Willet was in amazing force to-night, and fit to tackle a Chief Justice.

The stranger suffered a short pause to elapse, and then asked abruptly, 'What do you mean?'

'More than you think for, friend,' returned John Willet. 'Perhaps there's more meaning in them words than you suspect.'

'Perhaps there is,' said the strange man, gruffly; 'but what the devil do you speak in such mysteries for? You tell me, first, that a man is not alive, nor yet dead – then, that he's not dead in a common sort of way – then, that you mean a great deal more than I think for. To tell you the truth, you may do that easily; for so far as I can make out, you mean nothing. What DO you mean, I ask again?'

'That,' returned the landlord, a little brought down from his dignity by the stranger's surliness, 'is a Maypole story, and has been any time these four-and-twenty years. That story is Solomon Daisy's story. It belongs to the house; and nobody but

Solomon Daisy has ever told it under this roof, or ever shall – that’s more.’

The man glanced at the parish-clerk, whose air of consciousness and importance plainly betokened him to be the person referred to, and, observing that he had taken his pipe from his lips, after a very long whiff to keep it alight, and was evidently about to tell his story without further solicitation, gathered his large coat about him, and shrinking further back was almost lost in the gloom of the spacious chimney-corner, except when the flame, struggling from under a great faggot, whose weight almost crushed it for the time, shot upward with a strong and sudden glare, and illumining his figure for a moment, seemed afterwards to cast it into deeper obscurity than before.

By this flickering light, which made the old room, with its heavy timbers and panelled walls, look as if it were built of polished ebony – the wind roaring and howling without, now rattling the latch and creaking the hinges of the stout oaken door, and now driving at the casement as though it would beat it in – by this light, and under circumstances so auspicious, Solomon Daisy began his tale:

‘It was Mr Reuben Haredale, Mr Geoffrey’s elder brother – ’

Here he came to a dead stop, and made so long a pause that even John Willet grew impatient and asked why he did not proceed.

‘Cobb,’ said Solomon Daisy, dropping his voice and appealing to the post-office keeper; ‘what day of the month is this?’

‘The nineteenth.’

‘Of March,’ said the clerk, bending forward, ‘the nineteenth of March; that’s very strange.’

In a low voice they all acquiesced, and Solomon went on:

‘It was Mr Reuben Haredale, Mr Geoffrey’s elder brother, that twenty-two years ago was the owner of the Warren, which, as Joe has said – not that you remember it, Joe, for a boy like you can’t do that, but because you have often heard me say so – was then a much larger and better place, and a much more valuable property than it is now. His lady was lately dead, and he was left with one child – the Miss Haredale you have been inquiring about – who was then scarcely a year old.’

Although the speaker addressed himself to the man who had shown so much curiosity about this same family, and made a pause here as if expecting some exclamation of surprise or encouragement, the latter made no remark, nor gave any indication that he heard or was interested in what was said. Solomon therefore turned to his old companions, whose noses were brightly illuminated by the deep red glow from the bowls of their pipes; assured, by long experience, of their attention, and resolved to show his sense of such indecent behaviour.

‘Mr Haredale,’ said Solomon, turning his back upon the strange man, ‘left this place when his lady died, feeling it lonely like, and went up to London, where he stopped some months; but finding that place as lonely as this – as I suppose and have always heard say – he suddenly came back again with his little

girl to the Warren, bringing with him besides, that day, only two women servants, and his steward, and a gardener.’

Mr Daisy stopped to take a whiff at his pipe, which was going out, and then proceeded – at first in a snuffling tone, occasioned by keen enjoyment of the tobacco and strong pulling at the pipe, and afterwards with increasing distinctness:

‘ – Bringing with him two women servants, and his steward, and a gardener. The rest stopped behind up in London, and were to follow next day. It happened that that night, an old gentleman who lived at Chigwell Row, and had long been poorly, deceased, and an order came to me at half after twelve o’clock at night to go and toll the passing-bell.’

There was a movement in the little group of listeners, sufficiently indicative of the strong repugnance any one of them would have felt to have turned out at such a time upon such an errand. The clerk felt and understood it, and pursued his theme accordingly.

‘It WAS a dreary thing, especially as the grave-digger was laid up in his bed, from long working in a damp soil and sitting down to take his dinner on cold tombstones, and I was consequently under obligation to go alone, for it was too late to hope to get any other companion. However, I wasn’t unprepared for it; as the old gentleman had often made it a request that the bell should be tolled as soon as possible after the breath was out of his body, and he had been expected to go for some days. I put as good a face upon it as I could, and muffling myself up (for it was mortal

cold), started out with a lighted lantern in one hand and the key of the church in the other.’

At this point of the narrative, the dress of the strange man rustled as if he had turned himself to hear more distinctly. Slightly pointing over his shoulder, Solomon elevated his eyebrows and nodded a silent inquiry to Joe whether this was the case. Joe shaded his eyes with his hand and peered into the corner, but could make out nothing, and so shook his head.

‘It was just such a night as this; blowing a hurricane, raining heavily, and very dark – I often think now, darker than I ever saw it before or since; that may be my fancy, but the houses were all close shut and the folks in doors, and perhaps there is only one other man who knows how dark it really was. I got into the church, chained the door back so that it should keep ajar – for, to tell the truth, I didn’t like to be shut in there alone – and putting my lantern on the stone seat in the little corner where the bell-ropes is, sat down beside it to trim the candle.

‘I sat down to trim the candle, and when I had done so I could not persuade myself to get up again, and go about my work. I don’t know how it was, but I thought of all the ghost stories I had ever heard, even those that I had heard when I was a boy at school, and had forgotten long ago; and they didn’t come into my mind one after another, but all crowding at once, like. I recollected one story there was in the village, how that on a certain night in the year (it might be that very night for anything I knew), all the dead people came out of the ground and sat at the heads of

their own graves till morning. This made me think how many people I had known, were buried between the church-door and the churchyard gate, and what a dreadful thing it would be to have to pass among them and know them again, so earthy and unlike themselves. I had known all the niches and arches in the church from a child; still, I couldn't persuade myself that those were their natural shadows which I saw on the pavement, but felt sure there were some ugly figures hiding among 'em and peeping out. Thinking on in this way, I began to think of the old gentleman who was just dead, and I could have sworn, as I looked up the dark chancel, that I saw him in his usual place, wrapping his shroud about him and shivering as if he felt it cold. All this time I sat listening and listening, and hardly dared to breathe. At length I started up and took the bell-rope in my hands. At that minute there rang – not that bell, for I had hardly touched the rope – but another!

‘I heard the ringing of another bell, and a deep bell too, plainly. It was only for an instant, and even then the wind carried the sound away, but I heard it. I listened for a long time, but it rang no more. I had heard of corpse candles, and at last I persuaded myself that this must be a corpse bell tolling of itself at midnight for the dead. I tolled my bell – how, or how long, I don't know – and ran home to bed as fast as I could touch the ground.

‘I was up early next morning after a restless night, and told the story to my neighbours. Some were serious and some made light of it; I don't think anybody believed it real. But, that morning,

Mr Reuben Haredale was found murdered in his bedchamber; and in his hand was a piece of the cord attached to an alarm-bell outside the roof, which hung in his room and had been cut asunder, no doubt by the murderer, when he seized it.

‘That was the bell I heard.

‘A bureau was found opened, and a cash-box, which Mr Haredale had brought down that day, and was supposed to contain a large sum of money, was gone. The steward and gardener were both missing and both suspected for a long time, but they were never found, though hunted far and wide. And far enough they might have looked for poor Mr Rudge the steward, whose body – scarcely to be recognised by his clothes and the watch and ring he wore – was found, months afterwards, at the bottom of a piece of water in the grounds, with a deep gash in the breast where he had been stabbed with a knife. He was only partly dressed; and people all agreed that he had been sitting up reading in his own room, where there were many traces of blood, and was suddenly fallen upon and killed before his master.

Everybody now knew that the gardener must be the murderer, and though he has never been heard of from that day to this, he will be, mark my words. The crime was committed this day two-and-twenty years – on the nineteenth of March, one thousand seven hundred and fifty-three. On the nineteenth of March in some year – no matter when – I know it, I am sure of it, for we have always, in some strange way or other, been brought back to the subject on that day ever since – on the nineteenth of March

in some year, sooner or later, that man will be discovered.'

Chapter 2

‘A strange story!’ said the man who had been the cause of the narration. – ‘Stranger still if it comes about as you predict. Is that all?’

A question so unexpected, nettled Solomon Daisy not a little. By dint of relating the story very often, and ornamenting it (according to village report) with a few flourishes suggested by the various hearers from time to time, he had come by degrees to tell it with great effect; and ‘Is that all?’ after the climax, was not what he was accustomed to.

‘Is that all?’ he repeated, ‘yes, that’s all, sir. And enough too, I think.’

‘I think so too. My horse, young man! He is but a hack hired from a roadside posting house, but he must carry me to London to-night.’

‘To-night!’ said Joe.

‘To-night,’ returned the other. ‘What do you stare at? This tavern would seem to be a house of call for all the gaping idlers of the neighbourhood!’

At this remark, which evidently had reference to the scrutiny he had undergone, as mentioned in the foregoing chapter, the eyes of John Willet and his friends were diverted with marvellous rapidity to the copper boiler again. Not so with Joe, who, being a mettlesome fellow, returned the stranger’s angry glance with a

steady look, and rejoined:

‘It is not a very bold thing to wonder at your going on to-night. Surely you have been asked such a harmless question in an inn before, and in better weather than this. I thought you mightn’t know the way, as you seem strange to this part.’

‘The way – ’ repeated the other, irritably.

‘Yes. DO you know it?’

‘I’ll – humph! – I’ll find it,’ replied the man, waving his hand and turning on his heel. ‘Landlord, take the reckoning here.’

John Willet did as he was desired; for on that point he was seldom slow, except in the particulars of giving change, and testing the goodness of any piece of coin that was proffered to him, by the application of his teeth or his tongue, or some other test, or in doubtful cases, by a long series of tests terminating in its rejection. The guest then wrapped his garments about him so as to shelter himself as effectually as he could from the rough weather, and without any word or sign of farewell betook himself to the stableyard. Here Joe (who had left the room on the conclusion of their short dialogue) was protecting himself and the horse from the rain under the shelter of an old penthouse roof.

‘He’s pretty much of my opinion,’ said Joe, patting the horse upon the neck. ‘I’ll wager that your stopping here to-night would please him better than it would please me.’

‘He and I are of different opinions, as we have been more than once on our way here,’ was the short reply.

‘So I was thinking before you came out, for he has felt your

spurs, poor beast.'

The stranger adjusted his coat-collar about his face, and made no answer.

'You'll know me again, I see,' he said, marking the young fellow's earnest gaze, when he had sprung into the saddle.

'The man's worth knowing, master, who travels a road he don't know, mounted on a jaded horse, and leaves good quarters to do it on such a night as this.'

'You have sharp eyes and a sharp tongue, I find.'

'Both I hope by nature, but the last grows rusty sometimes for want of using.'

'Use the first less too, and keep their sharpness for your sweethearts, boy,' said the man.

So saying he shook his hand from the bridle, struck him roughly on the head with the butt end of his whip, and galloped away; dashing through the mud and darkness with a headlong speed, which few badly mounted horsemen would have cared to venture, even had they been thoroughly acquainted with the country; and which, to one who knew nothing of the way he rode, was attended at every step with great hazard and danger.

The roads, even within twelve miles of London, were at that time ill paved, seldom repaired, and very badly made. The way this rider traversed had been ploughed up by the wheels of heavy waggons, and rendered rotten by the frosts and thaws of the preceding winter, or possibly of many winters. Great holes and gaps had been worn into the soil, which, being now filled with

water from the late rains, were not easily distinguishable even by day; and a plunge into any one of them might have brought down a surer-footed horse than the poor beast now urged forward to the utmost extent of his powers. Sharp flints and stones rolled from under his hoofs continually; the rider could scarcely see beyond the animal's head, or farther on either side than his own arm would have extended. At that time, too, all the roads in the neighbourhood of the metropolis were infested by footpads or highwaymen, and it was a night, of all others, in which any evil-disposed person of this class might have pursued his unlawful calling with little fear of detection.

Still, the traveller dashed forward at the same reckless pace, regardless alike of the dirt and wet which flew about his head, the profound darkness of the night, and the probability of encountering some desperate characters abroad. At every turn and angle, even where a deviation from the direct course might have been least expected, and could not possibly be seen until he was close upon it, he guided the bridle with an unerring hand, and kept the middle of the road. Thus he sped onward, raising himself in the stirrups, leaning his body forward until it almost touched the horse's neck, and flourishing his heavy whip above his head with the fervour of a madman.

There are times when, the elements being in unusual commotion, those who are bent on daring enterprises, or agitated by great thoughts, whether of good or evil, feel a mysterious sympathy with the tumult of nature, and are roused into

corresponding violence. In the midst of thunder, lightning, and storm, many tremendous deeds have been committed; men, self-possessed before, have given a sudden loose to passions they could no longer control. The demons of wrath and despair have striven to emulate those who ride the whirlwind and direct the storm; and man, lashed into madness with the roaring winds and boiling waters, has become for the time as wild and merciless as the elements themselves.

Whether the traveller was possessed by thoughts which the fury of the night had heated and stimulated into a quicker current, or was merely impelled by some strong motive to reach his journey's end, on he swept more like a hunted phantom than a man, nor checked his pace until, arriving at some cross roads, one of which led by a longer route to the place whence he had lately started, he bore down so suddenly upon a vehicle which was coming towards him, that in the effort to avoid it he well-nigh pulled his horse upon his haunches, and narrowly escaped being thrown.

'Yoho!' cried the voice of a man. 'What's that? Who goes there?'

'A friend!' replied the traveller.

'A friend!' repeated the voice. 'Who calls himself a friend and rides like that, abusing Heaven's gifts in the shape of horseflesh, and endangering, not only his own neck (which might be no great matter) but the necks of other people?'

'You have a lantern there, I see,' said the traveller dismounting,

‘lend it me for a moment. You have wounded my horse, I think, with your shaft or wheel.’

‘Wounded him!’ cried the other, ‘if I haven’t killed him, it’s no fault of yours. What do you mean by galloping along the king’s highway like that, eh?’

‘Give me the light,’ returned the traveller, snatching it from his hand, ‘and don’t ask idle questions of a man who is in no mood for talking.’

‘If you had said you were in no mood for talking before, I should perhaps have been in no mood for lighting,’ said the voice. ‘Hows’ever as it’s the poor horse that’s damaged and not you, one of you is welcome to the light at all events – but it’s not the crusty one.’

The traveller returned no answer to this speech, but holding the light near to his panting and reeking beast, examined him in limb and carcass. Meanwhile, the other man sat very composedly in his vehicle, which was a kind of chaise with a depository for a large bag of tools, and watched his proceedings with a careful eye.

The looker-on was a round, red-faced, sturdy yeoman, with a double chin, and a voice husky with good living, good sleeping, good humour, and good health. He was past the prime of life, but Father Time is not always a hard parent, and, though he tarries for none of his children, often lays his hand lightly upon those who have used him well; making them old men and women inexorably enough, but leaving their hearts and spirits young and in full

vigour. With such people the grey head is but the impression of the old fellow's hand in giving them his blessing, and every wrinkle but a notch in the quiet calendar of a well-spent life.

The person whom the traveller had so abruptly encountered was of this kind: bluff, hale, hearty, and in a green old age: at peace with himself, and evidently disposed to be so with all the world. Although muffled up in divers coats and handkerchiefs – one of which, passed over his crown, and tied in a convenient crease of his double chin, secured his three-cornered hat and bob-wig from blowing off his head – there was no disguising his plump and comfortable figure; neither did certain dirty finger-marks upon his face give it any other than an odd and comical expression, through which its natural good humour shone with undiminished lustre.

‘He is not hurt,’ said the traveller at length, raising his head and the lantern together.

‘You have found that out at last, have you?’ rejoined the old man. ‘My eyes have seen more light than yours, but I wouldn’t change with you.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Mean! I could have told you he wasn’t hurt, five minutes ago. Give me the light, friend; ride forward at a gentler pace; and good night.’

In handing up the lantern, the man necessarily cast its rays full on the speaker's face. Their eyes met at the instant. He suddenly dropped it and crushed it with his foot.

‘Did you never see a locksmith before, that you start as if you had come upon a ghost?’ cried the old man in the chaise, ‘or is this,’ he added hastily, thrusting his hand into the tool basket and drawing out a hammer, ‘a scheme for robbing me? I know these roads, friend. When I travel them, I carry nothing but a few shillings, and not a crown’s worth of them. I tell you plainly, to save us both trouble, that there’s nothing to be got from me but a pretty stout arm considering my years, and this tool, which, mayhap from long acquaintance with, I can use pretty briskly. You shall not have it all your own way, I promise you, if you play at that game. With these words he stood upon the defensive.

‘I am not what you take me for, Gabriel Varden,’ replied the other.

‘Then what and who are you?’ returned the locksmith. ‘You know my name, it seems. Let me know yours.’

‘I have not gained the information from any confidence of yours, but from the inscription on your cart which tells it to all the town,’ replied the traveller.

‘You have better eyes for that than you had for your horse, then,’ said Varden, descending nimbly from his chaise; ‘who are you? Let me see your face.’

While the locksmith alighted, the traveller had regained his saddle, from which he now confronted the old man, who, moving as the horse moved in chafing under the tightened rein, kept close beside him.

‘Let me see your face, I say.’

‘Stand off!’

‘No masquerading tricks,’ said the locksmith, ‘and tales at the club to-morrow, how Gabriel Varden was frightened by a surly voice and a dark night. Stand – let me see your face.’

Finding that further resistance would only involve him in a personal struggle with an antagonist by no means to be despised, the traveller threw back his coat, and stooping down looked steadily at the locksmith.

Perhaps two men more powerfully contrasted, never opposed each other face to face. The ruddy features of the locksmith so set off and heightened the excessive paleness of the man on horseback, that he looked like a bloodless ghost, while the moisture, which hard riding had brought out upon his skin, hung there in dark and heavy drops, like dews of agony and death. The countenance of the old locksmith lighted up with the smile of one expecting to detect in this unpromising stranger some latent roguery of eye or lip, which should reveal a familiar person in that arch disguise, and spoil his jest. The face of the other, sullen and fierce, but shrinking too, was that of a man who stood at bay; while his firmly closed jaws, his puckered mouth, and more than all a certain stealthy motion of the hand within his breast, seemed to announce a desperate purpose very foreign to acting, or child’s play.

Thus they regarded each other for some time, in silence.

‘Humph!’ he said when he had scanned his features; ‘I don’t know you.’

‘Don’t desire to?’ – returned the other, muffling himself as before.

‘I don’t,’ said Gabriel; ‘to be plain with you, friend, you don’t carry in your countenance a letter of recommendation.’

‘It’s not my wish,’ said the traveller. ‘My humour is to be avoided.’

‘Well,’ said the locksmith bluntly, ‘I think you’ll have your humour.’

‘I will, at any cost,’ rejoined the traveller. ‘In proof of it, lay this to heart – that you were never in such peril of your life as you have been within these few moments; when you are within five minutes of breathing your last, you will not be nearer death than you have been to-night!’

‘Aye!’ said the sturdy locksmith.

‘Aye! and a violent death.’

‘From whose hand?’

‘From mine,’ replied the traveller.

With that he put spurs to his horse, and rode away; at first plashing heavily through the mire at a smart trot, but gradually increasing in speed until the last sound of his horse’s hoofs died away upon the wind; when he was again hurrying on at the same furious gallop, which had been his pace when the locksmith first encountered him.

Gabriel Varden remained standing in the road with the broken lantern in his hand, listening in stupefied silence until no sound reached his ear but the moaning of the wind, and the fast-falling

rain; when he struck himself one or two smart blows in the breast by way of rousing himself, and broke into an exclamation of surprise.

‘What in the name of wonder can this fellow be! a madman? a highwayman? a cut-throat? If he had not scoured off so fast, we’d have seen who was in most danger, he or I. I never nearer death than I have been to-night! I hope I may be no nearer to it for a score of years to come – if so, I’ll be content to be no farther from it. My stars! – a pretty brag this to a stout man – pooh, pooh!’

Gabriel resumed his seat, and looked wistfully up the road by which the traveller had come; murmuring in a half whisper:

‘The Maypole – two miles to the Maypole. I came the other road from the Warren after a long day’s work at locks and bells, on purpose that I should not come by the Maypole and break my promise to Martha by looking in – there’s resolution! It would be dangerous to go on to London without a light; and it’s four miles, and a good half mile besides, to the Halfway-House; and between this and that is the very place where one needs a light most. Two miles to the Maypole! I told Martha I wouldn’t; I said I wouldn’t, and I didn’t – there’s resolution!’

Repeating these two last words very often, as if to compensate for the little resolution he was going to show by piquing himself on the great resolution he had shown, Gabriel Varden quietly turned back, determining to get a light at the Maypole, and to take nothing but a light.

When he got to the Maypole, however, and Joe, responding to his well-known hail, came running out to the horse's head, leaving the door open behind him, and disclosing a delicious perspective of warmth and brightness – when the ruddy gleam of the fire, streaming through the old red curtains of the common room, seemed to bring with it, as part of itself, a pleasant hum of voices, and a fragrant odour of steaming grog and rare tobacco, all steeped as it were in the cheerful glow – when the shadows, flitting across the curtain, showed that those inside had risen from their snug seats, and were making room in the snuggest corner (how well he knew that corner!) for the honest locksmith, and a broad glare, suddenly streaming up, bespoke the goodness of the crackling log from which a brilliant train of sparks was doubtless at that moment whirling up the chimney in honour of his coming – when, superadded to these enticements, there stole upon him from the distant kitchen a gentle sound of frying, with a musical clatter of plates and dishes, and a savoury smell that made even the boisterous wind a perfume – Gabriel felt his firmness oozing rapidly away. He tried to look stoically at the tavern, but his features would relax into a look of fondness. He turned his head the other way, and the cold black country seemed to frown him off, and drive him for a refuge into its hospitable arms.

‘The merciful man, Joe,’ said the locksmith, ‘is merciful to his beast. I’ll get out for a little while.’

And how natural it was to get out! And how unnatural it

seemed for a sober man to be plodding wearily along through miry roads, encountering the rude buffets of the wind and pelting of the rain, when there was a clean floor covered with crisp white sand, a well swept hearth, a blazing fire, a table decorated with white cloth, bright pewter flagons, and other tempting preparations for a well-cooked meal – when there were these things, and company disposed to make the most of them, all ready to his hand, and entreating him to enjoyment!

Chapter 3

Such were the locksmith's thoughts when first seated in the snug corner, and slowly recovering from a pleasant defect of vision – pleasant, because occasioned by the wind blowing in his eyes – which made it a matter of sound policy and duty to himself, that he should take refuge from the weather, and tempted him, for the same reason, to aggravate a slight cough, and declare he felt but poorly. Such were still his thoughts more than a full hour afterwards, when, supper over, he still sat with shining jovial face in the same warm nook, listening to the cricket-like chirrup of little Solomon Daisy, and bearing no unimportant or slightly respected part in the social gossip round the Maypole fire.

‘I wish he may be an honest man, that’s all,’ said Solomon, winding up a variety of speculations relative to the stranger, concerning whom Gabriel had compared notes with the company, and so raised a grave discussion; ‘I wish he may be an honest man.’

‘So we all do, I suppose, don’t we?’ observed the locksmith.

‘I don’t,’ said Joe.

‘No!’ cried Gabriel.

‘No. He struck me with his whip, the coward, when he was mounted and I afoot, and I should be better pleased that he turned out what I think him.’

‘And what may that be, Joe?’

‘No good, Mr Varden. You may shake your head, father, but I say no good, and will say no good, and I would say no good a hundred times over, if that would bring him back to have the drubbing he deserves.’

‘Hold your tongue, sir,’ said John Willet.

‘I won’t, father. It’s all along of you that he ventured to do what he did. Seeing me treated like a child, and put down like a fool, HE plucks up a heart and has a fling at a fellow that he thinks – and may well think too – hasn’t a grain of spirit. But he’s mistaken, as I’ll show him, and as I’ll show all of you before long.’

‘Does the boy know what he’s a saying of!’ cried the astonished John Willet.

‘Father,’ returned Joe, ‘I know what I say and mean, well – better than you do when you hear me. I can bear with you, but I cannot bear the contempt that your treating me in the way you do, brings upon me from others every day. Look at other young men of my age. Have they no liberty, no will, no right to speak? Are they obliged to sit mumchance, and to be ordered about till they are the laughing-stock of young and old? I am a bye-word all over Chigwell, and I say – and it’s fairer my saying so now, than waiting till you are dead, and I have got your money – I say, that before long I shall be driven to break such bounds, and that when I do, it won’t be me that you’ll have to blame, but your own self, and no other.’

John Willet was so amazed by the exasperation and boldness

of his hopeful son, that he sat as one bewildered, staring in a ludicrous manner at the boiler, and endeavouring, but quite ineffectually, to collect his tardy thoughts, and invent an answer. The guests, scarcely less disturbed, were equally at a loss; and at length, with a variety of muttered, half-expressed condolences, and pieces of advice, rose to depart; being at the same time slightly muddled with liquor.

The honest locksmith alone addressed a few words of coherent and sensible advice to both parties, urging John Willet to remember that Joe was nearly arrived at man's estate, and should not be ruled with too tight a hand, and exhorting Joe himself to bear with his father's caprices, and rather endeavour to turn them aside by temperate remonstrance than by ill-timed rebellion. This advice was received as such advice usually is. On John Willet it made almost as much impression as on the sign outside the door, while Joe, who took it in the best part, avowed himself more obliged than he could well express, but politely intimated his intention nevertheless of taking his own course uninfluenced by anybody.

'You have always been a very good friend to me, Mr Varden,' he said, as they stood without, in the porch, and the locksmith was equipping himself for his journey home; 'I take it very kind of you to say all this, but the time's nearly come when the Maypole and I must part company.'

'Roving stones gather no moss, Joe,' said Gabriel.

'Nor milestones much,' replied Joe. 'I'm little better than one

here, and see as much of the world.'

'Then, what would you do, Joe?' pursued the locksmith, stroking his chin reflectively. 'What could you be? Where could you go, you see?'

'I must trust to chance, Mr Varden.'

'A bad thing to trust to, Joe. I don't like it. I always tell my girl when we talk about a husband for her, never to trust to chance, but to make sure beforehand that she has a good man and true, and then chance will neither make her nor break her. What are you fidgiting about there, Joe? Nothing gone in the harness, I hope?'

'No no,' said Joe – finding, however, something very engrossing to do in the way of strapping and buckling – 'Miss Dolly quite well?'

'Hearty, thankye. She looks pretty enough to be well, and good too.'

'She's always both, sir' —

'So she is, thank God!'

'I hope,' said Joe after some hesitation, 'that you won't tell this story against me – this of my having been beat like the boy they'd make of me – at all events, till I have met this man again and settled the account. It'll be a better story then.'

'Why who should I tell it to?' returned Gabriel. 'They know it here, and I'm not likely to come across anybody else who would care about it.'

'That's true enough,' said the young fellow with a sigh. 'I quite

forgot that. Yes, that's true!

So saying, he raised his face, which was very red, – no doubt from the exertion of strapping and buckling as aforesaid, – and giving the reins to the old man, who had by this time taken his seat, sighed again and bade him good night.

‘Good night!’ cried Gabriel. ‘Now think better of what we have just been speaking of; and don't be rash, there's a good fellow! I have an interest in you, and wouldn't have you cast yourself away. Good night!’

Returning his cheery farewell with cordial goodwill, Joe Willet lingered until the sound of wheels ceased to vibrate in his ears, and then, shaking his head mournfully, re-entered the house.

Gabriel Varden went his way towards London, thinking of a great many things, and most of all of flaming terms in which to relate his adventure, and so account satisfactorily to Mrs Varden for visiting the Maypole, despite certain solemn covenants between himself and that lady. Thinking begets, not only thought, but drowsiness occasionally, and the more the locksmith thought, the more sleepy he became.

A man may be very sober – or at least firmly set upon his legs on that neutral ground which lies between the confines of perfect sobriety and slight tipsiness – and yet feel a strong tendency to mingle up present circumstances with others which have no manner of connection with them; to confound all consideration of persons, things, times, and places; and to jumble his disjointed

thoughts together in a kind of mental kaleidoscope, producing combinations as unexpected as they are transitory. This was Gabriel Varden's state, as, nodding in his dog sleep, and leaving his horse to pursue a road with which he was well acquainted, he got over the ground unconsciously, and drew nearer and nearer home. He had roused himself once, when the horse stopped until the turnpike gate was opened, and had cried a lusty 'good night!' to the toll-keeper; but then he awoke out of a dream about picking a lock in the stomach of the Great Mogul, and even when he did wake, mixed up the turnpike man with his mother-in-law who had been dead twenty years. It is not surprising, therefore, that he soon relapsed, and jogged heavily along, quite insensible to his progress.

And, now, he approached the great city, which lay outstretched before him like a dark shadow on the ground, reddening the sluggish air with a deep dull light, that told of labyrinths of public ways and shops, and swarms of busy people. Approaching nearer and nearer yet, this halo began to fade, and the causes which produced it slowly to develop themselves. Long lines of poorly lighted streets might be faintly traced, with here and there a lighter spot, where lamps were clustered round a square or market, or round some great building; after a time these grew more distinct, and the lamps themselves were visible; slight yellow specks, that seemed to be rapidly snuffed out, one by one, as intervening obstacles hid them from the sight. Then, sounds arose – the striking of church clocks, the distant bark of

dogs, the hum of traffic in the streets; then outlines might be traced – tall steeples looming in the air, and piles of unequal roofs oppressed by chimneys; then, the noise swelled into a louder sound, and forms grew more distinct and numerous still, and London – visible in the darkness by its own faint light, and not by that of Heaven – was at hand.

The locksmith, however, all unconscious of its near vicinity, still jogged on, half sleeping and half waking, when a loud cry at no great distance ahead, roused him with a start.

For a moment or two he looked about him like a man who had been transported to some strange country in his sleep, but soon recognising familiar objects, rubbed his eyes lazily and might have relapsed again, but that the cry was repeated – not once or twice or thrice, but many times, and each time, if possible, with increased vehemence. Thoroughly aroused, Gabriel, who was a bold man and not easily daunted, made straight to the spot, urging on his stout little horse as if for life or death.

The matter indeed looked sufficiently serious, for, coming to the place whence the cries had proceeded, he descried the figure of a man extended in an apparently lifeless state upon the pathway, and, hovering round him, another person with a torch in his hand, which he waved in the air with a wild impatience, redoubling meanwhile those cries for help which had brought the locksmith to the spot.

‘What’s here to do?’ said the old man, alighting. ‘How’s this – what – Barnaby?’

The bearer of the torch shook his long loose hair back from his eyes, and thrusting his face eagerly into that of the locksmith, fixed upon him a look which told his history at once.

‘You know me, Barnaby?’ said Varden.

He nodded – not once or twice, but a score of times, and that with a fantastic exaggeration which would have kept his head in motion for an hour, but that the locksmith held up his finger, and fixing his eye sternly upon him caused him to desist; then pointed to the body with an inquiring look.

‘There’s blood upon him,’ said Barnaby with a shudder. ‘It makes me sick!’

‘How came it there?’ demanded Varden.

‘Steel, steel, steel!’ he replied fiercely, imitating with his hand the thrust of a sword.

‘Is he robbed?’ said the locksmith.

Barnaby caught him by the arm, and nodded ‘Yes;’ then pointed towards the city.

‘Oh!’ said the old man, bending over the body and looking round as he spoke into Barnaby’s pale face, strangely lighted up by something that was NOT intellect. ‘The robber made off that way, did he? Well, well, never mind that just now. Hold your torch this way – a little farther off – so. Now stand quiet, while I try to see what harm is done.’

With these words, he applied himself to a closer examination of the prostrate form, while Barnaby, holding the torch as he had been directed, looked on in silence, fascinated by interest

or curiosity, but repelled nevertheless by some strong and secret horror which convulsed him in every nerve.

As he stood, at that moment, half shrinking back and half bending forward, both his face and figure were full in the strong glare of the link, and as distinctly revealed as though it had been broad day. He was about three-and-twenty years old, and though rather spare, of a fair height and strong make. His hair, of which he had a great profusion, was red, and hanging in disorder about his face and shoulders, gave to his restless looks an expression quite unearthly – enhanced by the paleness of his complexion, and the glassy lustre of his large protruding eyes. Startling as his aspect was, the features were good, and there was something even plaintive in his wan and haggard aspect. But, the absence of the soul is far more terrible in a living man than in a dead one; and in this unfortunate being its noblest powers were wanting.

His dress was of green, clumsily trimmed here and there – apparently by his own hands – with gaudy lace; brightest where the cloth was most worn and soiled, and poorest where it was at the best. A pair of tawdry ruffles dangled at his wrists, while his throat was nearly bare. He had ornamented his hat with a cluster of peacock's feathers, but they were limp and broken, and now trailed negligently down his back. Girt to his side was the steel hilt of an old sword without blade or scabbard; and some particoloured ends of ribands and poor glass toys completed the ornamental portion of his attire. The fluttered and confused disposition of all the motley scraps that formed

his dress, bespoke, in a scarcely less degree than his eager and unsettled manner, the disorder of his mind, and by a grotesque contrast set off and heightened the more impressive wildness of his face.

‘Barnaby,’ said the locksmith, after a hasty but careful inspection, ‘this man is not dead, but he has a wound in his side, and is in a fainting-fit.’

‘I know him, I know him!’ cried Barnaby, clapping his hands.

‘Know him?’ repeated the locksmith.

‘Hush!’ said Barnaby, laying his fingers upon his lips. ‘He went out to-day a wooing. I wouldn’t for a light guinea that he should never go a wooing again, for, if he did, some eyes would grow dim that are now as bright as – see, when I talk of eyes, the stars come out! Whose eyes are they? If they are angels’ eyes, why do they look down here and see good men hurt, and only wink and sparkle all the night?’

‘Now Heaven help this silly fellow,’ murmured the perplexed locksmith; ‘can he know this gentleman? His mother’s house is not far off; I had better see if she can tell me who he is. Barnaby, my man, help me to put him in the chaise, and we’ll ride home together.’

‘I can’t touch him!’ cried the idiot falling back, and shuddering as with a strong spasm; ‘he’s bloody!’

‘It’s in his nature, I know,’ muttered the locksmith, ‘it’s cruel to ask him, but I must have help. Barnaby – good Barnaby – dear Barnaby – if you know this gentleman, for the sake of his life

and everybody's life that loves him, help me to raise him and lay him down.'

'Cover him then, wrap him close – don't let me see it – smell it – hear the word. Don't speak the word – don't!'

'No, no, I'll not. There, you see he's covered now. Gently. Well done, well done!'

They placed him in the carriage with great ease, for Barnaby was strong and active, but all the time they were so occupied he shivered from head to foot, and evidently experienced an ecstasy of terror.

This accomplished, and the wounded man being covered with Varden's own greatcoat which he took off for the purpose, they proceeded onward at a brisk pace: Barnaby gaily counting the stars upon his fingers, and Gabriel inwardly congratulating himself upon having an adventure now, which would silence Mrs Varden on the subject of the Maypole, for that night, or there was no faith in woman.

Chapter 4

In the venerable suburb – it was a suburb once – of Clerkenwell, towards that part of its confines which is nearest to the Charter House, and in one of those cool, shady streets, of which a few, widely scattered and dispersed, yet remain in such old parts of the metropolis, – each tenement quietly vegetating like an ancient citizen who long ago retired from business, and dozing on in its infirmity until in course of time it tumbles down, and is replaced by some extravagant young heir, flaunting in stucco and ornamental work, and all the vanities of modern days, – in this quarter, and in a street of this description, the business of the present chapter lies.

At the time of which it treats, though only six-and-sixty years ago, a very large part of what is London now had no existence. Even in the brains of the wildest speculators, there had sprung up no long rows of streets connecting Highgate with Whitechapel, no assemblages of palaces in the swampy levels, nor little cities in the open fields. Although this part of town was then, as now, parcelled out in streets, and plentifully peopled, it wore a different aspect. There were gardens to many of the houses, and trees by the pavement side; with an air of freshness breathing up and down, which in these days would be sought in vain. Fields were nigh at hand, through which the New River took its winding course, and where there was merry haymaking in the summer

time. Nature was not so far removed, or hard to get at, as in these days; and although there were busy trades in Clerkenwell, and working jewellers by scores, it was a purer place, with farm-houses nearer to it than many modern Londoners would readily believe, and lovers' walks at no great distance, which turned into squalid courts, long before the lovers of this age were born, or, as the phrase goes, thought of.

In one of these streets, the cleanest of them all, and on the shady side of the way – for good housewives know that sunlight damages their cherished furniture, and so choose the shade rather than its intrusive glare – there stood the house with which we have to deal. It was a modest building, not very straight, not large, not tall; not bold-faced, with great staring windows, but a shy, blinking house, with a conical roof going up into a peak over its garret window of four small panes of glass, like a cocked hat on the head of an elderly gentleman with one eye. It was not built of brick or lofty stone, but of wood and plaster; it was not planned with a dull and wearisome regard to regularity, for no one window matched the other, or seemed to have the slightest reference to anything besides itself.

The shop – for it had a shop – was, with reference to the first floor, where shops usually are; and there all resemblance between it and any other shop stopped short and ceased. People who went in and out didn't go up a flight of steps to it, or walk easily in upon a level with the street, but dived down three steep stairs, as into a cellar. Its floor was paved with stone and brick, as

that of any other cellar might be; and in lieu of window framed and glazed it had a great black wooden flap or shutter, nearly breast high from the ground, which turned back in the day-time, admitting as much cold air as light, and very often more. Behind this shop was a wainscoted parlour, looking first into a paved yard, and beyond that again into a little terrace garden, raised some feet above it. Any stranger would have supposed that this wainscoted parlour, saving for the door of communication by which he had entered, was cut off and detached from all the world; and indeed most strangers on their first entrance were observed to grow extremely thoughtful, as weighing and pondering in their minds whether the upper rooms were only approachable by ladders from without; never suspecting that two of the most unassuming and unlikely doors in existence, which the most ingenious mechanic on earth must of necessity have supposed to be the doors of closets, opened out of this room – each without the smallest preparation, or so much as a quarter of an inch of passage – upon two dark winding flights of stairs, the one upward, the other downward, which were the sole means of communication between that chamber and the other portions of the house.

With all these oddities, there was not a neater, more scrupulously tidy, or more punctiliously ordered house, in Clerkenwell, in London, in all England. There were not cleaner windows, or whiter floors, or brighter Stoves, or more highly shining articles of furniture in old mahogany; there was not more

rubbing, scrubbing, burnishing and polishing, in the whole street put together. Nor was this excellence attained without some cost and trouble and great expenditure of voice, as the neighbours were frequently reminded when the good lady of the house overlooked and assisted in its being put to rights on cleaning days – which were usually from Monday morning till Saturday night, both days inclusive.

Leaning against the door-post of this, his dwelling, the locksmith stood early on the morning after he had met with the wounded man, gazing disconsolately at a great wooden emblem of a key, painted in vivid yellow to resemble gold, which dangled from the house-front, and swung to and fro with a mournful creaking noise, as if complaining that it had nothing to unlock. Sometimes, he looked over his shoulder into the shop, which was so dark and dingy with numerous tokens of his trade, and so blackened by the smoke of a little forge, near which his 'prentice was at work, that it would have been difficult for one unused to such espials to have distinguished anything but various tools of uncouth make and shape, great bunches of rusty keys, fragments of iron, half-finished locks, and such like things, which garnished the walls and hung in clusters from the ceiling.

After a long and patient contemplation of the golden key, and many such backward glances, Gabriel stepped into the road, and stole a look at the upper windows. One of them chanced to be thrown open at the moment, and a roguish face met his; a face lighted up by the loveliest pair of sparkling eyes that

ever locksmith looked upon; the face of a pretty, laughing, girl; dimpled and fresh, and healthful – the very impersonation of good-humour and blooming beauty.

‘Hush!’ she whispered, bending forward and pointing archly to the window underneath. ‘Mother is still asleep.’

‘Still, my dear,’ returned the locksmith in the same tone. ‘You talk as if she had been asleep all night, instead of little more than half an hour. But I’m very thankful. Sleep’s a blessing – no doubt about it.’ The last few words he muttered to himself.

‘How cruel of you to keep us up so late this morning, and never tell us where you were, or send us word!’ said the girl.

‘Ah Dolly, Dolly!’ returned the locksmith, shaking his head, and smiling, ‘how cruel of you to run upstairs to bed! Come down to breakfast, madcap, and come down lightly, or you’ll wake your mother. She must be tired, I am sure – I am.’

Keeping these latter words to himself, and returning his daughter’s nod, he was passing into the workshop, with the smile she had awakened still beaming on his face, when he just caught sight of his ‘prentice’s brown paper cap ducking down to avoid observation, and shrinking from the window back to its former place, which the wearer no sooner reached than he began to hammer lustily.

‘Listening again, Simon!’ said Gabriel to himself. ‘That’s bad. What in the name of wonder does he expect the girl to say, that I always catch him listening when SHE speaks, and never at any other time! A bad habit, Sim, a sneaking, underhanded way. Ah!’

you may hammer, but you won't beat that out of me, if you work at it till your time's up!

So saying, and shaking his head gravely, he re-entered the workshop, and confronted the subject of these remarks.

'There's enough of that just now,' said the locksmith. 'You needn't make any more of that confounded clatter. Breakfast's ready.'

'Sir,' said Sim, looking up with amazing politeness, and a peculiar little bow cut short off at the neck, 'I shall attend you immediately.'

'I suppose,' muttered Gabriel, 'that's out of the 'Prentice's Garland or the 'Prentice's Delight, or the 'Prentice's Warbler, or the Prentice's Guide to the Gallows, or some such improving textbook. Now he's going to beautify himself – here's a precious locksmith!'

Quite unconscious that his master was looking on from the dark corner by the parlour door, Sim threw off the paper cap, sprang from his seat, and in two extraordinary steps, something between skating and minuet dancing, bounded to a washing place at the other end of the shop, and there removed from his face and hands all traces of his previous work – practising the same step all the time with the utmost gravity. This done, he drew from some concealed place a little scrap of looking-glass, and with its assistance arranged his hair, and ascertained the exact state of a little carbuncle on his nose. Having now completed his toilet, he placed the fragment of mirror on a low bench, and looked

over his shoulder at so much of his legs as could be reflected in that small compass, with the greatest possible complacency and satisfaction.

Sim, as he was called in the locksmith's family, or Mr Simon Tappertit, as he called himself, and required all men to style him out of doors, on holidays, and Sundays out, – was an old-fashioned, thin-faced, sleek-haired, sharp-nosed, small-eyed little fellow, very little more than five feet high, and thoroughly convinced in his own mind that he was above the middle size; rather tall, in fact, than otherwise. Of his figure, which was well enough formed, though somewhat of the leanest, he entertained the highest admiration; and with his legs, which, in knee-breeches, were perfect curiosities of littleness, he was enraptured to a degree amounting to enthusiasm. He also had some majestic, shadowy ideas, which had never been quite fathomed by his intimate friends, concerning the power of his eye. Indeed he had been known to go so far as to boast that he could utterly quell and subdue the haughtiest beauty by a simple process, which he termed 'eyeing her over;' but it must be added, that neither of this faculty, nor of the power he claimed to have, through the same gift, of vanquishing and heaving down dumb animals, even in a rabid state, had he ever furnished evidence which could be deemed quite satisfactory and conclusive.

It may be inferred from these premises, that in the small body of Mr Tappertit there was locked up an ambitious and aspiring soul. As certain liquors, confined in casks too cramped

in their dimensions, will ferment, and fret, and chafe in their imprisonment, so the spiritual essence or soul of Mr Tappertit would sometimes fume within that precious cask, his body, until, with great foam and froth and splutter, it would force a vent, and carry all before it. It was his custom to remark, in reference to any one of these occasions, that his soul had got into his head; and in this novel kind of intoxication many scrapes and mishaps befell him, which he had frequently concealed with no small difficulty from his worthy master.

Sim Tappertit, among the other fancies upon which his before-mentioned soul was for ever feasting and regaling itself (and which fancies, like the liver of Prometheus, grew as they were fed upon), had a mighty notion of his order; and had been heard by the servant-maid openly expressing his regret that the ‘prentices no longer carried clubs wherewith to mace the citizens: that was his strong expression. He was likewise reported to have said that in former times a stigma had been cast upon the body by the execution of George Barnwell, to which they should not have basely submitted, but should have demanded him of the legislature – temperately at first; then by an appeal to arms, if necessary – to be dealt with as they in their wisdom might think fit. These thoughts always led him to consider what a glorious engine the ‘prentices might yet become if they had but a master spirit at their head; and then he would darkly, and to the terror of his hearers, hint at certain reckless fellows that he knew of, and at a certain Lion Heart ready to become their captain, who,

once afoot, would make the Lord Mayor tremble on his throne.

In respect of dress and personal decoration, Sim Tappertit was no less of an adventurous and enterprising character. He had been seen, beyond dispute, to pull off ruffles of the finest quality at the corner of the street on Sunday nights, and to put them carefully in his pocket before returning home; and it was quite notorious that on all great holiday occasions it was his habit to exchange his plain steel knee-buckles for a pair of glittering paste, under cover of a friendly post, planted most conveniently in that same spot. Add to this that he was in years just twenty, in his looks much older, and in conceit at least two hundred; that he had no objection to be jested with, touching his admiration of his master's daughter; and had even, when called upon at a certain obscure tavern to pledge the lady whom he honoured with his love, toasted, with many winks and leers, a fair creature whose Christian name, he said, began with a D – ; – and as much is known of Sim Tappertit, who has by this time followed the locksmith in to breakfast, as is necessary to be known in making his acquaintance.

It was a substantial meal; for, over and above the ordinary tea equipage, the board creaked beneath the weight of a jolly round of beef, a ham of the first magnitude, and sundry towers of buttered Yorkshire cake, piled slice upon slice in most alluring order. There was also a goodly jug of well-browned clay, fashioned into the form of an old gentleman, not by any means unlike the locksmith, atop of whose bald head was a

fine white froth answering to his wig, indicative, beyond dispute, of sparkling home-brewed ale. But, better far than fair home-brewed, or Yorkshire cake, or ham, or beef, or anything to eat or drink that earth or air or water can supply, there sat, presiding over all, the locksmith's rosy daughter, before whose dark eyes even beef grew insignificant, and malt became as nothing.

Fathers should never kiss their daughters when young men are by. It's too much. There are bounds to human endurance. So thought Sim Tappertit when Gabriel drew those rosy lips to his – those lips within Sim's reach from day to day, and yet so far off. He had a respect for his master, but he wished the Yorkshire cake might choke him.

'Father,' said the locksmith's daughter, when this salute was over, and they took their seats at table, 'what is this I hear about last night?'

'All true, my dear; true as the Gospel, Doll.'

'Young Mr Chester robbed, and lying wounded in the road, when you came up!'

'Ay – Mr Edward. And beside him, Barnaby, calling for help with all his might. It was well it happened as it did; for the road's a lonely one, the hour was late, and, the night being cold, and poor Barnaby even less sensible than usual from surprise and fright, the young gentleman might have met his death in a very short time.'

'I dread to think of it!' cried his daughter with a shudder. 'How did you know him?'

‘Know him!’ returned the locksmith. ‘I didn’t know him – how could I? I had never seen him, often as I had heard and spoken of him. I took him to Mrs Rudge’s; and she no sooner saw him than the truth came out.’

‘Miss Emma, father – If this news should reach her, enlarged upon as it is sure to be, she will go distracted.’

‘Why, lookye there again, how a man suffers for being good-natured,’ said the locksmith. ‘Miss Emma was with her uncle at the masquerade at Carlisle House, where she had gone, as the people at the Warren told me, sorely against her will. What does your blockhead father when he and Mrs Rudge have laid their heads together, but goes there when he ought to be abed, makes interest with his friend the doorkeeper, slips him on a mask and domino, and mixes with the masquers.’

‘And like himself to do so!’ cried the girl, putting her fair arm round his neck, and giving him a most enthusiastic kiss.

‘Like himself!’ repeated Gabriel, affecting to grumble, but evidently delighted with the part he had taken, and with her praise. ‘Very like himself – so your mother said. However, he mingled with the crowd, and prettily worried and badgered he was, I warrant you, with people squeaking, “Don’t you know me?” and “I’ve found you out,” and all that kind of nonsense in his ears. He might have wandered on till now, but in a little room there was a young lady who had taken off her mask, on account of the place being very warm, and was sitting there alone.’

‘And that was she?’ said his daughter hastily.

‘And that was she,’ replied the locksmith; ‘and I no sooner whispered to her what the matter was – as softly, Doll, and with nearly as much art as you could have used yourself – than she gives a kind of scream and faints away.’

‘What did you do – what happened next?’ asked his daughter. ‘Why, the masks came flocking round, with a general noise and hubbub, and I thought myself in luck to get clear off, that’s all,’ rejoined the locksmith. ‘What happened when I reached home you may guess, if you didn’t hear it. Ah! Well, it’s a poor heart that never rejoices. – Put Toby this way, my dear.’

This Toby was the brown jug of which previous mention has been made. Applying his lips to the worthy old gentleman’s benevolent forehead, the locksmith, who had all this time been ravaging among the eatables, kept them there so long, at the same time raising the vessel slowly in the air, that at length Toby stood on his head upon his nose, when he smacked his lips, and set him on the table again with fond reluctance.

Although Sim Tappertit had taken no share in this conversation, no part of it being addressed to him, he had not been wanting in such silent manifestations of astonishment, as he deemed most compatible with the favourable display of his eyes. Regarding the pause which now ensued, as a particularly advantageous opportunity for doing great execution with them upon the locksmith’s daughter (who he had no doubt was looking at him in mute admiration), he began to screw and twist his face, and especially those features, into such extraordinary, hideous,

and unparalleled contortions, that Gabriel, who happened to look towards him, was stricken with amazement.

‘Why, what the devil’s the matter with the lad?’ cried the locksmith. ‘Is he choking?’

‘Who?’ demanded Sim, with some disdain.

‘Who? Why, you,’ returned his master. ‘What do you mean by making those horrible faces over your breakfast?’

‘Faces are matters of taste, sir,’ said Mr Tappertit, rather discomfited; not the less so because he saw the locksmith’s daughter smiling.

‘Sim,’ rejoined Gabriel, laughing heartily. ‘Don’t be a fool, for I’d rather see you in your senses. These young fellows,’ he added, turning to his daughter, ‘are always committing some folly or another. There was a quarrel between Joe Willet and old John last night though I can’t say Joe was much in fault either. He’ll be missing one of these mornings, and will have gone away upon some wild-goose errand, seeking his fortune. – Why, what’s the matter, Doll? YOU are making faces now. The girls are as bad as the boys every bit!’

‘It’s the tea,’ said Dolly, turning alternately very red and very white, which is no doubt the effect of a slight scald – ‘so very hot.’

Mr Tappertit looked immensely big at a quartern loaf on the table, and breathed hard.

‘Is that all?’ returned the locksmith. ‘Put some more milk in it. – Yes, I am sorry for Joe, because he is a likely young fellow, and gains upon one every time one sees him. But he’ll start off,

you'll find. Indeed he told me as much himself!

'Indeed!' cried Dolly in a faint voice. 'In-deed!'

'Is the tea tickling your throat still, my dear?' said the locksmith.

But, before his daughter could make him any answer, she was taken with a troublesome cough, and it was such a very unpleasant cough, that, when she left off, the tears were starting in her bright eyes. The good-natured locksmith was still patting her on the back and applying such gentle restoratives, when a message arrived from Mrs Varden, making known to all whom it might concern, that she felt too much indisposed to rise after her great agitation and anxiety of the previous night; and therefore desired to be immediately accommodated with the little black teapot of strong mixed tea, a couple of rounds of buttered toast, a middling-sized dish of beef and ham cut thin, and the Protestant Manual in two volumes post octavo. Like some other ladies who in remote ages flourished upon this globe, Mrs Varden was most devout when most ill-tempered. Whenever she and her husband were at unusual variance, then the Protestant Manual was in high feather.

Knowing from experience what these requests portended, the triumvirate broke up; Dolly, to see the orders executed with all despatch; Gabriel, to some out-of-door work in his little chaise; and Sim, to his daily duty in the workshop, to which retreat he carried the big look, although the loaf remained behind.

Indeed the big look increased immensely, and when he had

tied his apron on, became quite gigantic. It was not until he had several times walked up and down with folded arms, and the longest strides he could take, and had kicked a great many small articles out of his way, that his lip began to curl. At length, a gloomy derision came upon his features, and he smiled; uttering meanwhile with supreme contempt the monosyllable 'Joe!'

'I eyed her over, while he talked about the fellow,' he said, 'and that was of course the reason of her being confused. Joe!'

He walked up and down again much quicker than before, and if possible with longer strides; sometimes stopping to take a glance at his legs, and sometimes to jerk out, and cast from him, another 'Joe!' In the course of a quarter of an hour or so he again assumed the paper cap and tried to work. No. It could not be done.

'I'll do nothing to-day,' said Mr Tappertit, dashing it down again, 'but grind. I'll grind up all the tools. Grinding will suit my present humour well. Joe!'

Whirr-r-r-r. The grindstone was soon in motion; the sparks were flying off in showers. This was the occupation for his heated spirit.

Whirr-r-r-r-r-r-r.

'Something will come of this!' said Mr Tappertit, pausing as if in triumph, and wiping his heated face upon his sleeve. 'Something will come of this. I hope it mayn't be human gore!'

Whirr-r-r-r-r-r-r-r.

Chapter 5

As soon as the business of the day was over, the locksmith sallied forth, alone, to visit the wounded gentleman and ascertain the progress of his recovery. The house where he had left him was in a by-street in Southwark, not far from London Bridge; and thither he hied with all speed, bent upon returning with as little delay as might be, and getting to bed betimes.

The evening was boisterous – scarcely better than the previous night had been. It was not easy for a stout man like Gabriel to keep his legs at the street corners, or to make head against the high wind, which often fairly got the better of him, and drove him back some paces, or, in defiance of all his energy, forced him to take shelter in an arch or doorway until the fury of the gust was spent. Occasionally a hat or wig, or both, came spinning and trundling past him, like a mad thing; while the more serious spectacle of falling tiles and slates, or of masses of brick and mortar or fragments of stone-coping rattling upon the pavement near at hand, and splitting into fragments, did not increase the pleasure of the journey, or make the way less dreary.

‘A trying night for a man like me to walk in!’ said the locksmith, as he knocked softly at the widow’s door. ‘I’d rather be in old John’s chimney-corner, faith!’

‘Who’s there?’ demanded a woman’s voice from within. Being answered, it added a hasty word of welcome, and the door was

quickly opened.

She was about forty – perhaps two or three years older – with a cheerful aspect, and a face that had once been pretty. It bore traces of affliction and care, but they were of an old date, and Time had smoothed them. Any one who had bestowed but a casual glance on Barnaby might have known that this was his mother, from the strong resemblance between them; but where in his face there was wildness and vacancy, in hers there was the patient composure of long effort and quiet resignation.

One thing about this face was very strange and startling. You could not look upon it in its most cheerful mood without feeling that it had some extraordinary capacity of expressing terror. It was not on the surface. It was in no one feature that it lingered. You could not take the eyes or mouth, or lines upon the cheek, and say, if this or that were otherwise, it would not be so. Yet there it always lurked – something for ever dimly seen, but ever there, and never absent for a moment. It was the faintest, palest shadow of some look, to which an instant of intense and most unutterable horror only could have given birth; but indistinct and feeble as it was, it did suggest what that look must have been, and fixed it in the mind as if it had had existence in a dream.

More faintly imaged, and wanting force and purpose, as it were, because of his darkened intellect, there was this same stamp upon the son. Seen in a picture, it must have had some legend with it, and would have haunted those who looked upon the canvas. They who knew the Maypole story, and could

remember what the widow was, before her husband's and his master's murder, understood it well. They recollected how the change had come, and could call to mind that when her son was born, upon the very day the deed was known, he bore upon his wrist what seemed a smear of blood but half washed out.

'God save you, neighbour!' said the locksmith, as he followed her, with the air of an old friend, into a little parlour where a cheerful fire was burning.

'And you,' she answered smiling. 'Your kind heart has brought you here again. Nothing will keep you at home, I know of old, if there are friends to serve or comfort, out of doors.'

'Tut, tut,' returned the locksmith, rubbing his hands and warming them. 'You women are such talkers. What of the patient, neighbour?'

'He is sleeping now. He was very restless towards daylight, and for some hours tossed and tumbled sadly. But the fever has left him, and the doctor says he will soon mend. He must not be removed until to-morrow.'

'He has had visitors to-day – humph?' said Gabriel, slyly.

'Yes. Old Mr Chester has been here ever since we sent for him, and had not been gone many minutes when you knocked.'

'No ladies?' said Gabriel, elevating his eyebrows and looking disappointed.

'A letter,' replied the widow.

'Come. That's better than nothing!' replied the locksmith. 'Who was the bearer?'

‘Barnaby, of course.’

‘Barnaby’s a jewel!’ said Varden; ‘and comes and goes with ease where we who think ourselves much wiser would make but a poor hand of it. He is not out wandering, again, I hope?’

‘Thank Heaven he is in his bed; having been up all night, as you know, and on his feet all day. He was quite tired out. Ah, neighbour, if I could but see him oftener so – if I could but tame down that terrible restlessness – ’

‘In good time,’ said the locksmith, kindly, ‘in good time – don’t be down-hearted. To my mind he grows wiser every day.’

The widow shook her head. And yet, though she knew the locksmith sought to cheer her, and spoke from no conviction of his own, she was glad to hear even this praise of her poor benighted son.

‘He will be a ‘cute man yet,’ resumed the locksmith. ‘Take care, when we are growing old and foolish, Barnaby doesn’t put us to the blush, that’s all. But our other friend,’ he added, looking under the table and about the floor – ‘sharpest and cunningest of all the sharp and cunning ones – where’s he?’

‘In Barnaby’s room,’ rejoined the widow, with a faint smile.

‘Ah! He’s a knowing blade!’ said Varden, shaking his head. ‘I should be sorry to talk secrets before him. Oh! He’s a deep customer. I’ve no doubt he can read, and write, and cast accounts if he chooses. What was that? Him tapping at the door?’

‘No,’ returned the widow. ‘It was in the street, I think. Hark! Yes. There again! ‘Tis some one knocking softly at the shutter.

Who can it be!’

They had been speaking in a low tone, for the invalid lay overhead, and the walls and ceilings being thin and poorly built, the sound of their voices might otherwise have disturbed his slumber. The party without, whoever it was, could have stood close to the shutter without hearing anything spoken; and, seeing the light through the chinks and finding all so quiet, might have been persuaded that only one person was there.

‘Some thief or ruffian maybe,’ said the locksmith. ‘Give me the light.’

‘No, no,’ she returned hastily. ‘Such visitors have never come to this poor dwelling. Do you stay here. You’re within call, at the worst. I would rather go myself – alone.’

‘Why?’ said the locksmith, unwillingly relinquishing the candle he had caught up from the table.

‘Because – I don’t know why – because the wish is so strong upon me,’ she rejoined. ‘There again – do not detain me, I beg of you!’

Gabriel looked at her, in great surprise to see one who was usually so mild and quiet thus agitated, and with so little cause. She left the room and closed the door behind her. She stood for a moment as if hesitating, with her hand upon the lock. In this short interval the knocking came again, and a voice close to the window – a voice the locksmith seemed to recollect, and to have some disagreeable association with – whispered ‘Make haste.’

The words were uttered in that low distinct voice which finds

its way so readily to sleepers' ears, and wakes them in a fright. For a moment it startled even the locksmith; who involuntarily drew back from the window, and listened.

The wind rumbling in the chimney made it difficult to hear what passed, but he could tell that the door was opened, that there was the tread of a man upon the creaking boards, and then a moment's silence – broken by a suppressed something which was not a shriek, or groan, or cry for help, and yet might have been either or all three; and the words 'My God!' uttered in a voice it chilled him to hear.

He rushed out upon the instant. There, at last, was that dreadful look – the very one he seemed to know so well and yet had never seen before – upon her face. There she stood, frozen to the ground, gazing with starting eyes, and livid cheeks, and every feature fixed and ghastly, upon the man he had encountered in the dark last night. His eyes met those of the locksmith. It was but a flash, an instant, a breath upon a polished glass, and he was gone.

The locksmith was upon him – had the skirts of his streaming garment almost in his grasp – when his arms were tightly clutched, and the widow flung herself upon the ground before him.

'The other way – the other way,' she cried. 'He went the other way. Turn – turn!'

'The other way! I see him now,' rejoined the locksmith, pointing – 'yonder – there – there is his shadow passing by that

light. What – who is this? Let me go.’

‘Come back, come back!’ exclaimed the woman, clasping him; ‘Do not touch him on your life. I charge you, come back. He carries other lives besides his own. Come back!’

‘What does this mean?’ cried the locksmith.

‘No matter what it means, don’t ask, don’t speak, don’t think about it. He is not to be followed, checked, or stopped. Come back!’

The old man looked at her in wonder, as she writhed and clung about him; and, borne down by her passion, suffered her to drag him into the house. It was not until she had chained and double-locked the door, fastened every bolt and bar with the heat and fury of a maniac, and drawn him back into the room, that she turned upon him, once again, that stony look of horror, and, sinking down into a chair, covered her face, and shuddered, as though the hand of death were on her.

Chapter 6

Beyond all measure astonished by the strange occurrences which had passed with so much violence and rapidity, the locksmith gazed upon the shuddering figure in the chair like one half stupefied, and would have gazed much longer, had not his tongue been loosened by compassion and humanity.

‘You are ill,’ said Gabriel. ‘Let me call some neighbour in.’

‘Not for the world,’ she rejoined, motioning to him with her trembling hand, and holding her face averted. ‘It is enough that you have been by, to see this.’

‘Nay, more than enough – or less,’ said Gabriel.

‘Be it so,’ she returned. ‘As you like. Ask me no questions, I entreat you.’

‘Neighbour,’ said the locksmith, after a pause. ‘Is this fair, or reasonable, or just to yourself? Is it like you, who have known me so long and sought my advice in all matters – like you, who from a girl have had a strong mind and a staunch heart?’

‘I have need of them,’ she replied. ‘I am growing old, both in years and care. Perhaps that, and too much trial, have made them weaker than they used to be. Do not speak to me.’

‘How can I see what I have seen, and hold my peace!’ returned the locksmith. ‘Who was that man, and why has his coming made this change in you?’

She was silent, but held to the chair as though to save herself

from falling on the ground.

‘I take the licence of an old acquaintance, Mary,’ said the locksmith, ‘who has ever had a warm regard for you, and maybe has tried to prove it when he could. Who is this ill-favoured man, and what has he to do with you? Who is this ghost, that is only seen in the black nights and bad weather? How does he know, and why does he haunt this house, whispering through chinks and crevices, as if there was that between him and you, which neither durst so much as speak aloud of? Who is he?’

‘You do well to say he haunts this house,’ returned the widow, faintly. ‘His shadow has been upon it and me, in light and darkness, at noonday and midnight. And now, at last, he has come in the body!’

‘But he wouldn’t have gone in the body,’ returned the locksmith with some irritation, ‘if you had left my arms and legs at liberty. What riddle is this?’

‘It is one,’ she answered, rising as she spoke, ‘that must remain for ever as it is. I dare not say more than that.’

‘Dare not!’ repeated the wondering locksmith.

‘Do not press me,’ she replied. ‘I am sick and faint, and every faculty of life seems dead within me. – No! – Do not touch me, either.’

Gabriel, who had stepped forward to render her assistance, fell back as she made this hasty exclamation, and regarded her in silent wonder.

‘Let me go my way alone,’ she said in a low voice, ‘and let

the hands of no honest man touch mine to-night.’ When she had tottered to the door, she turned, and added with a stronger effort, ‘This is a secret, which, of necessity, I trust to you. You are a true man. As you have ever been good and kind to me, – keep it. If any noise was heard above, make some excuse – say anything but what you really saw, and never let a word or look between us, recall this circumstance. I trust to you. Mind, I trust to you. How much I trust, you never can conceive.’

Casting her eyes upon him for an instant, she withdrew, and left him there alone.

Gabriel, not knowing what to think, stood staring at the door with a countenance full of surprise and dismay. The more he pondered on what had passed, the less able he was to give it any favourable interpretation. To find this widow woman, whose life for so many years had been supposed to be one of solitude and retirement, and who, in her quiet suffering character, had gained the good opinion and respect of all who knew her – to find her linked mysteriously with an ill-omened man, alarmed at his appearance, and yet favouring his escape, was a discovery that pained as much as startled him. Her reliance on his secrecy, and his tacit acquiescence, increased his distress of mind. If he had spoken boldly, persisted in questioning her, detained her when she rose to leave the room, made any kind of protest, instead of silently compromising himself, as he felt he had done, he would have been more at ease.

‘Why did I let her say it was a secret, and she trusted it to

me!’ said Gabriel, putting his wig on one side to scratch his head with greater ease, and looking ruefully at the fire. ‘I have no more readiness than old John himself. Why didn’t I say firmly, “You have no right to such secrets, and I demand of you to tell me what this means,” instead of standing gaping at her, like an old moon-calf as I am! But there’s my weakness. I can be obstinate enough with men if need be, but women may twist me round their fingers at their pleasure.’

He took his wig off outright as he made this reflection, and, warming his handkerchief at the fire began to rub and polish his bald head with it, until it glistened again.

‘And yet,’ said the locksmith, softening under this soothing process, and stopping to smile, ‘it MAY be nothing. Any drunken brawler trying to make his way into the house, would have alarmed a quiet soul like her. But then’ – and here was the vexation – ‘how came it to be that man; how comes he to have this influence over her; how came she to favour his getting away from me; and, more than all, how came she not to say it was a sudden fright, and nothing more? It’s a sad thing to have, in one minute, reason to mistrust a person I have known so long, and an old sweetheart into the bargain; but what else can I do, with all this upon my mind! – Is that Barnaby outside there?’

‘Ay!’ he cried, looking in and nodding. ‘Sure enough it’s Barnaby – how did you guess?’

‘By your shadow,’ said the locksmith.

‘Oho!’ cried Barnaby, glancing over his shoulder, ‘He’s a merry

fellow, that shadow, and keeps close to me, though I AM silly. We have such pranks, such walks, such runs, such gambols on the grass! Sometimes he'll be half as tall as a church steeple, and sometimes no bigger than a dwarf. Now, he goes on before, and now behind, and anon he'll be stealing on, on this side, or on that, stopping whenever I stop, and thinking I can't see him, though I have my eye on him sharp enough. Oh! he's a merry fellow. Tell me – is he silly too? I think he is.'

'Why?' asked Gabriel.

'Because he never tires of mocking me, but does it all day long. – Why don't you come?'

'Where?'

'Upstairs. He wants you. Stay – where's HIS shadow? Come. You're a wise man; tell me that.'

'Beside him, Barnaby; beside him, I suppose,' returned the locksmith.

'No!' he replied, shaking his head. 'Guess again.'

'Gone out a walking, maybe?'

'He has changed shadows with a woman,' the idiot whispered in his ear, and then fell back with a look of triumph. 'Her shadow's always with him, and his with her. That's sport I think, eh?'

'Barnaby,' said the locksmith, with a grave look; 'come hither, lad.'

'I know what you want to say. I know!' he replied, keeping away from him. 'But I'm cunning, I'm silent. I only say so much

to you – are you ready?’ As he spoke, he caught up the light, and waved it with a wild laugh above his head.

‘Softly – gently,’ said the locksmith, exerting all his influence to keep him calm and quiet. ‘I thought you had been asleep.’

‘So I HAVE been asleep,’ he rejoined, with widely-opened eyes. ‘There have been great faces coming and going – close to my face, and then a mile away – low places to creep through, whether I would or no – high churches to fall down from – strange creatures crowded up together neck and heels, to sit upon the bed – that’s sleep, eh?’

‘Dreams, Barnaby, dreams,’ said the locksmith.

‘Dreams!’ he echoed softly, drawing closer to him. ‘Those are not dreams.’

‘What are,’ replied the locksmith, ‘if they are not?’

‘I dreamed,’ said Barnaby, passing his arm through Varden’s, and peering close into his face as he answered in a whisper, ‘I dreamed just now that something – it was in the shape of a man – followed me – came softly after me – wouldn’t let me be – but was always hiding and crouching, like a cat in dark corners, waiting till I should pass; when it crept out and came softly after me. – Did you ever see me run?’

‘Many a time, you know.’

‘You never saw me run as I did in this dream. Still it came creeping on to worry me. Nearer, nearer, nearer – I ran faster – leaped – sprung out of bed, and to the window – and there, in the street below – but he is waiting for us. Are you coming?’

‘What in the street below, Barnaby?’ said Varden, imagining that he traced some connection between this vision and what had actually occurred.

Barnaby looked into his face, muttered incoherently, waved the light above his head again, laughed, and drawing the locksmith’s arm more tightly through his own, led him up the stairs in silence.

They entered a homely bedchamber, garnished in a scanty way with chairs, whose spindle-shanks bespoke their age, and other furniture of very little worth; but clean and neatly kept. Reclining in an easy-chair before the fire, pale and weak from waste of blood, was Edward Chester, the young gentleman who had been the first to quit the Maypole on the previous night, and who, extending his hand to the locksmith, welcomed him as his preserver and friend.

‘Say no more, sir, say no more,’ said Gabriel. ‘I hope I would have done at least as much for any man in such a strait, and most of all for you, sir. A certain young lady,’ he added, with some hesitation, ‘has done us many a kind turn, and we naturally feel – I hope I give you no offence in saying this, sir?’

The young man smiled and shook his head; at the same time moving in his chair as if in pain.

‘It’s no great matter,’ he said, in answer to the locksmith’s sympathising look, ‘a mere uneasiness arising at least as much from being cooped up here, as from the slight wound I have, or from the loss of blood. Be seated, Mr Varden.’

‘If I may make so bold, Mr Edward, as to lean upon your chair,’ returned the locksmith, accommodating his action to his speech, and bending over him, ‘I’ll stand here for the convenience of speaking low. Barnaby is not in his quietest humour to-night, and at such times talking never does him good.’

They both glanced at the subject of this remark, who had taken a seat on the other side of the fire, and, smiling vacantly, was making puzzles on his fingers with a skein of string.

‘Pray, tell me, sir,’ said Varden, dropping his voice still lower, ‘exactly what happened last night. I have my reason for inquiring. You left the Maypole, alone?’

‘And walked homeward alone, until I had nearly reached the place where you found me, when I heard the gallop of a horse.’

‘Behind you?’ said the locksmith.

‘Indeed, yes – behind me. It was a single rider, who soon overtook me, and checking his horse, inquired the way to London.’

‘You were on the alert, sir, knowing how many highwaymen there are, scouring the roads in all directions?’ said Varden.

‘I was, but I had only a stick, having imprudently left my pistols in their holster-case with the landlord’s son. I directed him as he desired. Before the words had passed my lips, he rode upon me furiously, as if bent on trampling me down beneath his horse’s hoofs. In starting aside, I slipped and fell. You found me with this stab and an ugly bruise or two, and without my purse – in which he found little enough for his pains. And now, Mr Varden,’ he

added, shaking the locksmith by the hand, 'saving the extent of my gratitude to you, you know as much as I.'

'Except,' said Gabriel, bending down yet more, and looking cautiously towards their silent neighbour, 'except in respect of the robber himself. What like was he, sir? Speak low, if you please. Barnaby means no harm, but I have watched him oftener than you, and I know, little as you would think it, that he's listening now.'

It required a strong confidence in the locksmith's veracity to lead any one to this belief, for every sense and faculty that Barnaby possessed, seemed to be fixed upon his game, to the exclusion of all other things. Something in the young man's face expressed this opinion, for Gabriel repeated what he had just said, more earnestly than before, and with another glance towards Barnaby, again asked what like the man was.

'The night was so dark,' said Edward, 'the attack so sudden, and he so wrapped and muffled up, that I can hardly say. It seems that –'

'Don't mention his name, sir,' returned the locksmith, following his look towards Barnaby; 'I know HE saw him. I want to know what YOU saw.'

'All I remember is,' said Edward, 'that as he checked his horse his hat was blown off. He caught it, and replaced it on his head, which I observed was bound with a dark handkerchief. A stranger entered the Maypole while I was there, whom I had not seen – for I had sat apart for reasons of my own – and when I rose

to leave the room and glanced round, he was in the shadow of the chimney and hidden from my sight. But, if he and the robber were two different persons, their voices were strangely and most remarkably alike; for directly the man addressed me in the road, I recognised his speech again.'

'It is as I feared. The very man was here to-night,' thought the locksmith, changing colour. 'What dark history is this!'

'Halloa!' cried a hoarse voice in his ear. 'Halloa, halloa, halloa! Bow wow wow. What's the matter here! Hal-loa!'

The speaker – who made the locksmith start as if he had been some supernatural agent – was a large raven, who had perched upon the top of the easy-chair, unseen by him and Edward, and listened with a polite attention and a most extraordinary appearance of comprehending every word, to all they had said up to this point; turning his head from one to the other, as if his office were to judge between them, and it were of the very last importance that he should not lose a word.

'Look at him!' said Varden, divided between admiration of the bird and a kind of fear of him. 'Was there ever such a knowing imp as that! Oh he's a dreadful fellow!'

The raven, with his head very much on one side, and his bright eye shining like a diamond, preserved a thoughtful silence for a few seconds, and then replied in a voice so hoarse and distant, that it seemed to come through his thick feathers rather than out of his mouth.

'Halloa, halloa, halloa! What's the matter here! Keep up your

spirits. Never say die. Bow wow wow. I'm a devil, I'm a devil, I'm a devil. Hurrah!' – And then, as if exulting in his infernal character, he began to whistle.

'I more than half believe he speaks the truth. Upon my word I do,' said Varden. 'Do you see how he looks at me, as if he knew what I was saying?'

To which the bird, balancing himself on tiptoe, as it were, and moving his body up and down in a sort of grave dance, rejoined, 'I'm a devil, I'm a devil, I'm a devil,' and flapped his wings against his sides as if he were bursting with laughter. Barnaby clapped his hands, and fairly rolled upon the ground in an ecstasy of delight.

'Strange companions, sir,' said the locksmith, shaking his head, and looking from one to the other. 'The bird has all the wit.'

'Strange indeed!' said Edward, holding out his forefinger to the raven, who, in acknowledgment of the attention, made a dive at it immediately with his iron bill. 'Is he old?'

'A mere boy, sir,' replied the locksmith. 'A hundred and twenty, or thereabouts. Call him down, Barnaby, my man.'

'Call him!' echoed Barnaby, sitting upright upon the floor, and staring vacantly at Gabriel, as he thrust his hair back from his face. 'But who can make him come! He calls me, and makes me go where he will. He goes on before, and I follow. He's the master, and I'm the man. Is that the truth, Grip?'

The raven gave a short, comfortable, confidential kind of croak; – a most expressive croak, which seemed to say, 'You needn't let these fellows into our secrets. We understand each

other. It's all right.'

'I make HIM come?' cried Barnaby, pointing to the bird. 'Him, who never goes to sleep, or so much as winks! – Why, any time of night, you may see his eyes in my dark room, shining like two sparks. And every night, and all night too, he's broad awake, talking to himself, thinking what he shall do to-morrow, where we shall go, and what he shall steal, and hide, and bury. I make HIM come! Ha ha ha!'

On second thoughts, the bird appeared disposed to come of himself. After a short survey of the ground, and a few sidelong looks at the ceiling and at everybody present in turn, he fluttered to the floor, and went to Barnaby – not in a hop, or walk, or run, but in a pace like that of a very particular gentleman with exceedingly tight boots on, trying to walk fast over loose pebbles. Then, stepping into his extended hand, and condescending to be held out at arm's length, he gave vent to a succession of sounds, not unlike the drawing of some eight or ten dozen of long corks, and again asserted his brimstone birth and parentage with great distinctness.

The locksmith shook his head – perhaps in some doubt of the creature's being really nothing but a bird – perhaps in pity for Barnaby, who by this time had him in his arms, and was rolling about, with him, on the ground. As he raised his eyes from the poor fellow he encountered those of his mother, who had entered the room, and was looking on in silence.

She was quite white in the face, even to her lips, but had wholly

subdued her emotion, and wore her usual quiet look. Varden fancied as he glanced at her that she shrunk from his eye; and that she busied herself about the wounded gentleman to avoid him the better.

It was time he went to bed, she said. He was to be removed to his own home on the morrow, and he had already exceeded his time for sitting up, by a full hour. Acting on this hint, the locksmith prepared to take his leave.

‘By the bye,’ said Edward, as he shook him by the hand, and looked from him to Mrs Rudge and back again, ‘what noise was that below? I heard your voice in the midst of it, and should have inquired before, but our other conversation drove it from my memory. What was it?’

The locksmith looked towards her, and bit his lip. She leant against the chair, and bent her eyes upon the ground. Barnaby too – he was listening.

– ‘Some mad or drunken fellow, sir,’ Varden at length made answer, looking steadily at the widow as he spoke. ‘He mistook the house, and tried to force an entrance.’

She breathed more freely, but stood quite motionless. As the locksmith said ‘Good night,’ and Barnaby caught up the candle to light him down the stairs, she took it from him, and charged him – with more haste and earnestness than so slight an occasion appeared to warrant – not to stir. The raven followed them to satisfy himself that all was right below, and when they reached the street-door, stood on the bottom stair drawing corks out of

number.

With a trembling hand she unfastened the chain and bolts, and turned the key. As she had her hand upon the latch, the locksmith said in a low voice,

‘I have told a lie to-night, for your sake, Mary, and for the sake of bygone times and old acquaintance, when I would scorn to do so for my own. I hope I may have done no harm, or led to none. I can’t help the suspicions you have forced upon me, and I am loth, I tell you plainly, to leave Mr Edward here. Take care he comes to no hurt. I doubt the safety of this roof, and am glad he leaves it so soon. Now, let me go.’

For a moment she hid her face in her hands and wept; but resisting the strong impulse which evidently moved her to reply, opened the door – no wider than was sufficient for the passage of his body – and motioned him away. As the locksmith stood upon the step, it was chained and locked behind him, and the raven, in furtherance of these precautions, barked like a lusty house-dog.

‘In league with that ill-looking figure that might have fallen from a gibbet – he listening and hiding here – Barnaby first upon the spot last night – can she who has always borne so fair a name be guilty of such crimes in secret!’ said the locksmith, musing. ‘Heaven forgive me if I am wrong, and send me just thoughts; but she is poor, the temptation may be great, and we daily hear of things as strange. – Ay, bark away, my friend. If there’s any wickedness going on, that raven’s in it, I’ll be sworn.’

Chapter 7

Mrs Varden was a lady of what is commonly called an uncertain temper – a phrase which being interpreted signifies a temper tolerably certain to make everybody more or less uncomfortable. Thus it generally happened, that when other people were merry, Mrs Varden was dull; and that when other people were dull, Mrs Varden was disposed to be amazingly cheerful. Indeed the worthy housewife was of such a capricious nature, that she not only attained a higher pitch of genius than Macbeth, in respect of her ability to be wise, amazed, temperate and furious, loyal and neutral in an instant, but would sometimes ring the changes backwards and forwards on all possible moods and flights in one short quarter of an hour; performing, as it were, a kind of triple bob major on the peal of instruments in the female belfry, with a skilfulness and rapidity of execution that astonished all who heard her.

It had been observed in this good lady (who did not want for personal attractions, being plump and buxom to look at, though like her fair daughter, somewhat short in stature) that this uncertainty of disposition strengthened and increased with her temporal prosperity; and divers wise men and matrons, on friendly terms with the locksmith and his family, even went so far as to assert, that a tumble down some half-dozen rounds in the world's ladder – such as the breaking of the bank in which her

husband kept his money, or some little fall of that kind – would be the making of her, and could hardly fail to render her one of the most agreeable companions in existence. Whether they were right or wrong in this conjecture, certain it is that minds, like bodies, will often fall into a pimpled ill-conditioned state from mere excess of comfort, and like them, are often successfully cured by remedies in themselves very nauseous and unpalatable.

Mrs Varden's chief aider and abettor, and at the same time her principal victim and object of wrath, was her single domestic servant, one Miss Miggs; or as she was called, in conformity with those prejudices of society which lop and top from poor hand-maidens all such genteel excrescences – Miggs. This Miggs was a tall young lady, very much addicted to pattens in private life; slender and shrewish, of a rather uncomfortable figure, and though not absolutely ill-looking, of a sharp and acid visage. As a general principle and abstract proposition, Miggs held the male sex to be utterly contemptible and unworthy of notice; to be fickle, false, base, sottish, inclined to perjury, and wholly undeserving. When particularly exasperated against them (which, scandal said, was when Sim Tappertit slighted her most) she was accustomed to wish with great emphasis that the whole race of women could but die off, in order that the men might be brought to know the real value of the blessings by which they set so little store; nay, her feeling for her order ran so high, that she sometimes declared, if she could only have good security for a fair, round number – say ten thousand –

of young virgins following her example, she would, to spite mankind, hang, drown, stab, or poison herself, with a joy past all expression.

It was the voice of Miggs that greeted the locksmith, when he knocked at his own house, with a shrill cry of ‘Who’s there?’

‘Me, girl, me,’ returned Gabriel.

‘What, already, sir!’ said Miggs, opening the door with a look of surprise. ‘We were just getting on our nightcaps to sit up, – me and mistress. Oh, she has been SO bad!’

Miggs said this with an air of uncommon candour and concern; but the parlour-door was standing open, and as Gabriel very well knew for whose ears it was designed, he regarded her with anything but an approving look as he passed in.

‘Master’s come home, mim,’ cried Miggs, running before him into the parlour. ‘You was wrong, mim, and I was right. I thought he wouldn’t keep us up so late, two nights running, mim. Master’s always considerate so far. I’m so glad, mim, on your account. I’m a little’ – here Miggs simpered – ‘a little sleepy myself; I’ll own it now, mim, though I said I wasn’t when you asked me. It ain’t of no consequence, mim, of course.’

‘You had better,’ said the locksmith, who most devoutly wished that Barnaby’s raven was at Miggs’s ankles, ‘you had better get to bed at once then.’

‘Thanking you kindly, sir,’ returned Miggs, ‘I couldn’t take my rest in peace, nor fix my thoughts upon my prayers, otherways than that I knew mistress was comfortable in her bed this night;

by rights she ought to have been there, hours ago.'

'You're talkative, mistress,' said Varden, pulling off his greatcoat, and looking at her askew.

'Taking the hint, sir,' cried Miggs, with a flushed face, 'and thanking you for it most kindly, I will make bold to say, that if I give offence by having consideration for my mistress, I do not ask your pardon, but am content to get myself into trouble and to be in suffering.'

Here Mrs Varden, who, with her countenance shrouded in a large nightcap, had been all this time intent upon the Protestant Manual, looked round, and acknowledged Miggs's championship by commanding her to hold her tongue.

Every little bone in Miggs's throat and neck developed itself with a spitefulness quite alarming, as she replied, 'Yes, mim, I will.'

'How do you find yourself now, my dear?' said the locksmith, taking a chair near his wife (who had resumed her book), and rubbing his knees hard as he made the inquiry.

'You're very anxious to know, an't you?' returned Mrs Varden, with her eyes upon the print. 'You, that have not been near me all day, and wouldn't have been if I was dying!'

'My dear Martha - ' said Gabriel.

Mrs Varden turned over to the next page; then went back again to the bottom line over leaf to be quite sure of the last words; and then went on reading with an appearance of the deepest interest and study.

‘My dear Martha,’ said the locksmith, ‘how can you say such things, when you know you don’t mean them? If you were dying! Why, if there was anything serious the matter with you, Martha, shouldn’t I be in constant attendance upon you?’

‘Yes!’ cried Mrs Varden, bursting into tears, ‘yes, you would. I don’t doubt it, Varden. Certainly you would. That’s as much as to tell me that you would be hovering round me like a vulture, waiting till the breath was out of my body, that you might go and marry somebody else.’

Miggs groaned in sympathy – a little short groan, checked in its birth, and changed into a cough. It seemed to say, ‘I can’t help it. It’s wrung from me by the dreadful brutality of that monster master.’

‘But you’ll break my heart one of these days,’ added Mrs Varden, with more resignation, ‘and then we shall both be happy. My only desire is to see Dolly comfortably settled, and when she is, you may settle ME as soon as you like.’

‘Ah!’ cried Miggs – and coughed again.

Poor Gabriel twisted his wig about in silence for a long time, and then said mildly, ‘Has Dolly gone to bed?’

‘Your master speaks to you,’ said Mrs Varden, looking sternly over her shoulder at Miss Miggs in waiting.

‘No, my dear, I spoke to you,’ suggested the locksmith.

‘Did you hear me, Miggs?’ cried the obdurate lady, stamping her foot upon the ground. ‘YOU are beginning to despise me now, are you? But this is example!’

At this cruel rebuke, Miggs, whose tears were always ready, for large or small parties, on the shortest notice and the most reasonable terms, fell a crying violently; holding both her hands tight upon her heart meanwhile, as if nothing less would prevent its splitting into small fragments. Mrs Varden, who likewise possessed that faculty in high perfection, wept too, against Miggs; and with such effect that Miggs gave in after a time, and, except for an occasional sob, which seemed to threaten some remote intention of breaking out again, left her mistress in possession of the field. Her superiority being thoroughly asserted, that lady soon desisted likewise, and fell into a quiet melancholy.

The relief was so great, and the fatiguing occurrences of last night so completely overpowered the locksmith, that he nodded in his chair, and would doubtless have slept there all night, but for the voice of Mrs Varden, which, after a pause of some five minutes, awoke him with a start.

‘If I am ever,’ said Mrs V. – not scolding, but in a sort of monotonous remonstrance – ‘in spirits, if I am ever cheerful, if I am ever more than usually disposed to be talkative and comfortable, this is the way I am treated.’

‘Such spirits as you was in too, mim, but half an hour ago!’ cried Miggs. ‘I never see such company!’

‘Because,’ said Mrs Varden, ‘because I never interfere or interrupt; because I never question where anybody comes or goes; because my whole mind and soul is bent on saving where I can save, and labouring in this house; – therefore, they try me

as they do.’

‘Martha,’ urged the locksmith, endeavouring to look as wakeful as possible, ‘what is it you complain of? I really came home with every wish and desire to be happy. I did, indeed.’

‘What do I complain of!’ retorted his wife. ‘Is it a chilling thing to have one’s husband sulking and falling asleep directly he comes home – to have him freezing all one’s warm-heartedness, and throwing cold water over the fireside? Is it natural, when I know he went out upon a matter in which I am as much interested as anybody can be, that I should wish to know all that has happened, or that he should tell me without my begging and praying him to do it? Is that natural, or is it not?’

‘I am very sorry, Martha,’ said the good-natured locksmith. ‘I was really afraid you were not disposed to talk pleasantly; I’ll tell you everything; I shall only be too glad, my dear.’

‘No, Varden,’ returned his wife, rising with dignity. ‘I dare say – thank you! I’m not a child to be corrected one minute and petted the next – I’m a little too old for that, Varden. Miggs, carry the light. – YOU can be cheerful, Miggs, at least.’

Miggs, who, to this moment, had been in the very depths of compassionate despondency, passed instantly into the liveliest state conceivable, and tossing her head as she glanced towards the locksmith, bore off her mistress and the light together.

‘Now, who would think,’ thought Varden, shrugging his shoulders and drawing his chair nearer to the fire, ‘that that woman could ever be pleasant and agreeable? And yet she can

be. Well, well, all of us have our faults. I'll not be hard upon hers. We have been man and wife too long for that.'

He dozed again – not the less pleasantly, perhaps, for his hearty temper. While his eyes were closed, the door leading to the upper stairs was partially opened; and a head appeared, which, at sight of him, hastily drew back again.

'I wish,' murmured Gabriel, waking at the noise, and looking round the room, 'I wish somebody would marry Miggs. But that's impossible! I wonder whether there's any madman alive, who would marry Miggs!'

This was such a vast speculation that he fell into a doze again, and slept until the fire was quite burnt out. At last he roused himself; and having double-locked the street-door according to custom, and put the key in his pocket, went off to bed.

He had not left the room in darkness many minutes, when the head again appeared, and Sim Tappertit entered, bearing in his hand a little lamp.

'What the devil business has he to stop up so late!' muttered Sim, passing into the workshop, and setting it down upon the forge. 'Here's half the night gone already. There's only one good that has ever come to me, out of this cursed old rusty mechanical trade, and that's this piece of ironmongery, upon my soul!'

As he spoke, he drew from the right hand, or rather right leg pocket of his smalls, a clumsy large-sized key, which he inserted cautiously in the lock his master had secured, and softly opened the door. That done, he replaced his piece of secret workmanship

in his pocket; and leaving the lamp burning, and closing the door carefully and without noise, stole out into the street – as little suspected by the locksmith in his sound deep sleep, as by Barnaby himself in his phantom-haunted dreams.

Chapter 8

Clear of the locksmith's house, Sim Tappertit laid aside his cautious manner, and assuming in its stead that of a ruffling, swaggering, roving blade, who would rather kill a man than otherwise, and eat him too if needful, made the best of his way along the darkened streets.

Half pausing for an instant now and then to smite his pocket and assure himself of the safety of his master key, he hurried on to Barbican, and turning into one of the narrowest of the narrow streets which diverged from that centre, slackened his pace and wiped his heated brow, as if the termination of his walk were near at hand.

It was not a very choice spot for midnight expeditions, being in truth one of more than questionable character, and of an appearance by no means inviting. From the main street he had entered, itself little better than an alley, a low-browed doorway led into a blind court, or yard, profoundly dark, unpaved, and reeking with stagnant odours. Into this ill-favoured pit, the locksmith's vagrant 'prentice groped his way; and stopping at a house from whose defaced and rotten front the rude effigy of a bottle swung to and fro like some gibbeted malefactor, struck thrice upon an iron grating with his foot. After listening in vain for some response to his signal, Mr Tappertit became impatient, and struck the grating thrice again.

A further delay ensued, but it was not of long duration. The ground seemed to open at his feet, and a ragged head appeared.

‘Is that the captain?’ said a voice as ragged as the head.

‘Yes,’ replied Mr Tappertit haughtily, descending as he spoke, ‘who should it be?’

‘It’s so late, we gave you up,’ returned the voice, as its owner stopped to shut and fasten the grating. ‘You’re late, sir.’

‘Lead on,’ said Mr Tappertit, with a gloomy majesty, ‘and make remarks when I require you. Forward!’

This latter word of command was perhaps somewhat theatrical and unnecessary, inasmuch as the descent was by a very narrow, steep, and slippery flight of steps, and any rashness or departure from the beaten track must have ended in a yawning water-butt. But Mr Tappertit being, like some other great commanders, favourable to strong effects, and personal display, cried ‘Forward!’ again, in the hoarsest voice he could assume; and led the way, with folded arms and knitted brows, to the cellar down below, where there was a small copper fixed in one corner, a chair or two, a form and table, a glimmering fire, and a truckle-bed, covered with a ragged patchwork rug.

‘Welcome, noble captain!’ cried a lanky figure, rising as from a nap.

The captain nodded. Then, throwing off his outer coat, he stood composed in all his dignity, and eyed his follower over.

‘What news to-night?’ he asked, when he had looked into his very soul.

‘Nothing particular,’ replied the other, stretching himself – and he was so long already that it was quite alarming to see him do it – ‘how come you to be so late?’

‘No matter,’ was all the captain deigned to say in answer. ‘Is the room prepared?’

‘It is,’ replied the follower.

‘The comrade – is he here?’

‘Yes. And a sprinkling of the others – you hear ‘em?’

‘Playing skittles!’ said the captain moodily. ‘Light-hearted revellers!’

There was no doubt respecting the particular amusement in which these heedless spirits were indulging, for even in the close and stifling atmosphere of the vault, the noise sounded like distant thunder. It certainly appeared, at first sight, a singular spot to choose, for that or any other purpose of relaxation, if the other cellars answered to the one in which this brief colloquy took place; for the floors were of sodden earth, the walls and roof of damp bare brick tapestried with the tracks of snails and slugs; the air was sickening, tainted, and offensive. It seemed, from one strong flavour which was uppermost among the various odours of the place, that it had, at no very distant period, been used as a storehouse for cheeses; a circumstance which, while it accounted for the greasy moisture that hung about it, was agreeably suggestive of rats. It was naturally damp besides, and little trees of fungus sprung from every mouldering corner.

The proprietor of this charming retreat, and owner of the

ragged head before mentioned – for he wore an old tie-wig as bare and frowzy as a stunted hearth-broom – had by this time joined them; and stood a little apart, rubbing his hands, wagging his hoary bristled chin, and smiling in silence. His eyes were closed; but had they been wide open, it would have been easy to tell, from the attentive expression of the face he turned towards them – pale and unwholesome as might be expected in one of his underground existence – and from a certain anxious raising and quivering of the lids, that he was blind.

‘Even Stagg hath been asleep,’ said the long comrade, nodding towards this person.

‘Sound, captain, sound!’ cried the blind man; ‘what does my noble captain drink – is it brandy, rum, usquebaugh? Is it soaked gunpowder, or blazing oil? Give it a name, heart of oak, and we’d get it for you, if it was wine from a bishop’s cellar, or melted gold from King George’s mint.’

‘See,’ said Mr Tappertit haughtily, ‘that it’s something strong, and comes quick; and so long as you take care of that, you may bring it from the devil’s cellar, if you like.’

‘Boldly said, noble captain!’ rejoined the blind man. ‘Spoken like the ‘Prentices’ Glory. Ha, ha! From the devil’s cellar! A brave joke! The captain joketh. Ha, ha, ha!’

‘I’ll tell you what, my fine feller,’ said Mr Tappertit, eyeing the host over as he walked to a closet, and took out a bottle and glass as carelessly as if he had been in full possession of his sight, ‘if you make that row, you’ll find that the captain’s very far from

joking, and so I tell you.’

‘He’s got his eyes on me!’ cried Stagg, stopping short on his way back, and affecting to screen his face with the bottle. ‘I feel ‘em though I can’t see ‘em. Take ‘em off, noble captain. Remove ‘em, for they pierce like gimlets.’

Mr Tappertit smiled grimly at his comrade; and twisting out one more look – a kind of ocular screw – under the influence of which the blind man feigned to undergo great anguish and torture, bade him, in a softened tone, approach, and hold his peace.

‘I obey you, captain,’ cried Stagg, drawing close to him and filling out a bumper without spilling a drop, by reason that he held his little finger at the brim of the glass, and stopped at the instant the liquor touched it, ‘drink, noble governor. Death to all masters, life to all ‘prentices, and love to all fair damsels. Drink, brave general, and warm your gallant heart!’

Mr Tappertit condescended to take the glass from his outstretched hand. Stagg then dropped on one knee, and gently smoothed the calves of his legs, with an air of humble admiration.

‘That I had but eyes!’ he cried, ‘to behold my captain’s symmetrical proportions! That I had but eyes, to look upon these twin invaders of domestic peace!’

‘Get out!’ said Mr Tappertit, glancing downward at his favourite limbs. ‘Go along, will you, Stagg!’

‘When I touch my own afterwards,’ cried the host, smiting them reproachfully, ‘I hate ‘em. Comparatively speaking, they’ve

no more shape than wooden legs, beside these models of my noble captain's.'

'Yours!' exclaimed Mr Tappertit. 'No, I should think not. Don't talk about those precious old toothpicks in the same breath with mine; that's rather too much. Here. Take the glass. Benjamin. Lead on. To business!'

With these words, he folded his arms again; and frowning with a sullen majesty, passed with his companion through a little door at the upper end of the cellar, and disappeared; leaving Stagg to his private meditations.

The vault they entered, strewn with sawdust and dimly lighted, was between the outer one from which they had just come, and that in which the skittle-players were diverting themselves; as was manifested by the increased noise and clamour of tongues, which was suddenly stopped, however, and replaced by a dead silence, at a signal from the long comrade. Then, this young gentleman, going to a little cupboard, returned with a thigh-bone, which in former times must have been part and parcel of some individual at least as long as himself, and placed the same in the hands of Mr Tappertit; who, receiving it as a sceptre and staff of authority, cocked his three-cornered hat fiercely on the top of his head, and mounted a large table, whereon a chair of state, cheerfully ornamented with a couple of skulls, was placed ready for his reception.

He had no sooner assumed this position, than another young gentleman appeared, bearing in his arms a huge clasped book,

who made him a profound obeisance, and delivering it to the long comrade, advanced to the table, and turning his back upon it, stood there Atlas-wise. Then, the long comrade got upon the table too; and seating himself in a lower chair than Mr Tappertit's, with much state and ceremony, placed the large book on the shoulders of their mute companion as deliberately as if he had been a wooden desk, and prepared to make entries therein with a pen of corresponding size.

When the long comrade had made these preparations, he looked towards Mr Tappertit; and Mr Tappertit, flourishing the bone, knocked nine times therewith upon one of the skulls. At the ninth stroke, a third young gentleman emerged from the door leading to the skittle ground, and bowing low, awaited his commands.

‘Prentice!’ said the mighty captain, ‘who waits without?’

The ‘prentice made answer that a stranger was in attendance, who claimed admission into that secret society of ‘Prentice Knights, and a free participation in their rights, privileges, and immunities. Thereupon Mr Tappertit flourished the bone again, and giving the other skull a prodigious rap on the nose, exclaimed ‘Admit him!’ At these dread words the ‘prentice bowed once more, and so withdrew as he had come.

There soon appeared at the same door, two other ‘prentices, having between them a third, whose eyes were bandaged, and who was attired in a bag-wig, and a broad-skirted coat, trimmed with tarnished lace; and who was girded with a sword,

in compliance with the laws of the Institution regulating the introduction of candidates, which required them to assume this courtly dress, and kept it constantly in lavender, for their convenience. One of the conductors of this novice held a rusty blunderbuss pointed towards his ear, and the other a very ancient sabre, with which he carved imaginary offenders as he came along in a sanguinary and anatomical manner.

As this silent group advanced, Mr Tappertit fixed his hat upon his head. The novice then laid his hand upon his breast and bent before him. When he had humbled himself sufficiently, the captain ordered the bandage to be removed, and proceeded to eye him over.

‘Ha!’ said the captain, thoughtfully, when he had concluded this ordeal. ‘Proceed.’

The long comrade read aloud as follows: – ‘Mark Gilbert. Age, nineteen. Bound to Thomas Curzon, hosier, Golden Fleece, Aldgate. Loves Curzon’s daughter. Cannot say that Curzon’s daughter loves him. Should think it probable. Curzon pulled his ears last Tuesday week.’

‘How!’ cried the captain, starting.

‘For looking at his daughter, please you,’ said the novice.

‘Write Curzon down, Denounced,’ said the captain. ‘Put a black cross against the name of Curzon.’

‘So please you,’ said the novice, ‘that’s not the worst – he calls his ‘prentice idle dog, and stops his beer unless he works to his liking. He gives Dutch cheese, too, eating Cheshire, sir, himself;

and Sundays out, are only once a month.’

‘This,’ said Mr Tappert gravely, ‘is a flagrant case. Put two black crosses to the name of Curzon.’

‘If the society,’ said the novice, who was an ill-looking, one-sided, shambling lad, with sunken eyes set close together in his head – ‘if the society would burn his house down – for he’s not insured – or beat him as he comes home from his club at night, or help me to carry off his daughter, and marry her at the Fleet, whether she gave consent or no –’

Mr Tappertit waved his grizzly truncheon as an admonition to him not to interrupt, and ordered three black crosses to the name of Curzon.

‘Which means,’ he said in gracious explanation, ‘vengeance, complete and terrible. ‘Prentice, do you love the Constitution?’

To which the novice (being to that end instructed by his attendant sponsors) replied ‘I do!’

‘The Church, the State, and everything established – but the masters?’ quoth the captain.

Again the novice said ‘I do.’

Having said it, he listened meekly to the captain, who in an address prepared for such occasions, told him how that under that same Constitution (which was kept in a strong box somewhere, but where exactly he could not find out, or he would have endeavoured to procure a copy of it), the ‘prentices had, in times gone by, had frequent holidays of right, broken people’s heads by scores, defied their masters, nay, even achieved some

glorious murders in the streets, which privileges had gradually been wrested from them, and in all which noble aspirations they were now restrained; how the degrading checks imposed upon them were unquestionably attributable to the innovating spirit of the times, and how they united therefore to resist all change, except such change as would restore those good old English customs, by which they would stand or fall. After illustrating the wisdom of going backward, by reference to that sagacious fish, the crab, and the not unfrequent practice of the mule and donkey, he described their general objects; which were briefly vengeance on their Tyrant Masters (of whose grievous and insupportable oppression no 'prentice could entertain a moment's doubt) and the restoration, as aforesaid, of their ancient rights and holidays; for neither of which objects were they now quite ripe, being barely twenty strong, but which they pledged themselves to pursue with fire and sword when needful. Then he described the oath which every member of that small remnant of a noble body took, and which was of a dreadful and impressive kind; binding him, at the bidding of his chief, to resist and obstruct the Lord Mayor, sword-bearer, and chaplain; to despise the authority of the sheriffs; and to hold the court of aldermen as nought; but not on any account, in case the fulness of time should bring a general rising of 'prentices, to damage or in any way disfigure Temple Bar, which was strictly constitutional and always to be approached with reverence. Having gone over these several heads with great eloquence and force, and having further informed

the novice that this society had its origin in his own teeming brain, stimulated by a swelling sense of wrong and outrage, Mr Tappertit demanded whether he had strength of heart to take the mighty pledge required, or whether he would withdraw while retreat was yet in his power.

To this the novice made rejoinder, that he would take the vow, though it should choke him; and it was accordingly administered with many impressive circumstances, among which the lighting up of the two skulls with a candle-end inside of each, and a great many flourishes with the bone, were chiefly conspicuous; not to mention a variety of grave exercises with the blunderbuss and sabre, and some dismal groaning by unseen 'prentices without. All these dark and direful ceremonies being at length completed, the table was put aside, the chair of state removed, the sceptre locked up in its usual cupboard, the doors of communication between the three cellars thrown freely open, and the 'Prentice Knights resigned themselves to merriment.

But Mr Tappertit, who had a soul above the vulgar herd, and who, on account of his greatness, could only afford to be merry now and then, threw himself on a bench with the air of a man who was faint with dignity. He looked with an indifferent eye, alike on skittles, cards, and dice, thinking only of the locksmith's daughter, and the base degenerate days on which he had fallen.

'My noble captain neither games, nor sings, nor dances,' said his host, taking a seat beside him. 'Drink, gallant general!'

Mr Tappertit drained the proffered goblet to the dregs; then

thrust his hands into his pockets, and with a lowering visage walked among the skittles, while his followers (such is the influence of superior genius) restrained the ardent ball, and held his little shins in dumb respect.

‘If I had been born a corsair or a pirate, a brigand, genteel highwayman or patriot – and they’re the same thing,’ thought Mr Tappertit, musing among the nine-pins, ‘I should have been all right. But to drag out a ignoble existence unbeknown to mankind in general – patience! I will be famous yet. A voice within me keeps on whispering Greatness. I shall burst out one of these days, and when I do, what power can keep me down? I feel my soul getting into my head at the idea. More drink there!’

‘The novice,’ pursued Mr Tappertit, not exactly in a voice of thunder, for his tones, to say the truth were rather cracked and shrill – but very impressively, notwithstanding – ‘where is he?’

‘Here, noble captain!’ cried Stagg. ‘One stands beside me who I feel is a stranger.’

‘Have you,’ said Mr Tappertit, letting his gaze fall on the party indicated, who was indeed the new knight, by this time restored to his own apparel; ‘Have you the impression of your street-door key in wax?’

The long comrade anticipated the reply, by producing it from the shelf on which it had been deposited.

‘Good,’ said Mr Tappertit, scrutinising it attentively, while a breathless silence reigned around; for he had constructed secret door-keys for the whole society, and perhaps owed something

of his influence to that mean and trivial circumstance – on such slight accidents do even men of mind depend! – ‘This is easily made. Come hither, friend.’

With that, he beckoned the new knight apart, and putting the pattern in his pocket, motioned to him to walk by his side.

‘And so,’ he said, when they had taken a few turns up and down, you – you love your master’s daughter?’

‘I do,’ said the ‘prentice. ‘Honour bright. No chaff, you know.’

‘Have you,’ rejoined Mr Tappertit, catching him by the wrist, and giving him a look which would have been expressive of the most deadly malevolence, but for an accidental hiccup that rather interfered with it; ‘have you a – a rival?’

‘Not as I know on,’ replied the ‘prentice.

‘If you had now – ’ said Mr Tappertit – ‘what would you – eh? – ’

The ‘prentice looked fierce and clenched his fists.

‘It is enough,’ cried Mr Tappertit hastily, ‘we understand each other. We are observed. I thank you.’

So saying, he cast him off again; and calling the long comrade aside after taking a few hasty turns by himself, bade him immediately write and post against the wall, a notice, proscribing one Joseph Willet (commonly known as Joe) of Chigwell; forbidding all ‘Prentice Knights to succour, comfort, or hold communion with him; and requiring them, on pain of excommunication, to molest, hurt, wrong, annoy, and pick quarrels with the said Joseph, whensoever and wheresoever they,

or any of them, should happen to encounter him.

Having relieved his mind by this energetic proceeding, he condescended to approach the festive board, and warming by degrees, at length deigned to preside, and even to enchant the company with a song. After this, he rose to such a pitch as to consent to regale the society with a hornpipe, which he actually performed to the music of a fiddle (played by an ingenious member) with such surpassing agility and brilliancy of execution, that the spectators could not be sufficiently enthusiastic in their admiration; and their host protested, with tears in his eyes, that he had never truly felt his blindness until that moment.

But the host withdrawing – probably to weep in secret – soon returned with the information that it wanted little more than an hour of day, and that all the cocks in Barbican had already begun to crow, as if their lives depended on it. At this intelligence, the ‘Prentice Knights arose in haste, and marshalling into a line, filed off one by one and dispersed with all speed to their several homes, leaving their leader to pass the grating last.

‘Good night, noble captain,’ whispered the blind man as he held it open for his passage out; ‘Farewell, brave general. Bye, bye, illustrious commander. Good luck go with you for a – conceited, bragging, empty-headed, duck-legged idiot.’

With which parting words, coolly added as he listened to his receding footsteps and locked the grate upon himself, he descended the steps, and lighting the fire below the little copper, prepared, without any assistance, for his daily occupation; which

was to retail at the area-head above pennyworths of broth and soup, and savoury puddings, compounded of such scraps as were to be bought in the heap for the least money at Fleet Market in the evening time; and for the sale of which he had need to have depended chiefly on his private connection, for the court had no thoroughfare, and was not that kind of place in which many people were likely to take the air, or to frequent as an agreeable promenade.

Chapter 9

Chronicler's are privileged to enter where they list, to come and go through keyholes, to ride upon the wind, to overcome, in their soarings up and down, all obstacles of distance, time, and place. Thrice blessed be this last consideration, since it enables us to follow the disdainful Miggs even into the sanctity of her chamber, and to hold her in sweet companionship through the dreary watches of the night!

Miss Miggs, having undone her mistress, as she phrased it (which means, assisted to undress her), and having seen her comfortably to bed in the back room on the first floor, withdrew to her own apartment, in the attic story. Notwithstanding her declaration in the locksmith's presence, she was in no mood for sleep; so, putting her light upon the table and withdrawing the little window curtain, she gazed out pensively at the wild night sky.

Perhaps she wondered what star was destined for her habitation when she had run her little course below; perhaps speculated which of those glimmering spheres might be the natal orb of Mr Tappertit; perhaps marvelled how they could gaze down on that perfidious creature, man, and not sicken and turn green as chemists' lamps; perhaps thought of nothing in particular. Whatever she thought about, there she sat, until her attention, alive to anything connected with the insinuating

‘prentice, was attracted by a noise in the next room to her own – his room; the room in which he slept, and dreamed – it might be, sometimes dreamed of her.

That he was not dreaming now, unless he was taking a walk in his sleep, was clear, for every now and then there came a shuffling noise, as though he were engaged in polishing the whitewashed wall; then a gentle creaking of his door; then the faintest indication of his stealthy footsteps on the landing-place outside. Noting this latter circumstance, Miss Miggs turned pale and shuddered, as mistrusting his intentions; and more than once exclaimed, below her breath, ‘Oh! what a Providence it is, as I am bolted in!’ – which, owing doubtless to her alarm, was a confusion of ideas on her part between a bolt and its use; for though there was one on the door, it was not fastened.

Miss Miggs’s sense of hearing, however, having as sharp an edge as her temper, and being of the same snappish and suspicious kind, very soon informed her that the footsteps passed her door, and appeared to have some object quite separate and disconnected from herself. At this discovery she became more alarmed than ever, and was about to give utterance to those cries of ‘Thieves!’ and ‘Murder!’ which she had hitherto restrained, when it occurred to her to look softly out, and see that her fears had some good palpable foundation.

Looking out accordingly, and stretching her neck over the handrail, she descried, to her great amazement, Mr Tappertit completely dressed, stealing downstairs, one step at a time, with

his shoes in one hand and a lamp in the other. Following him with her eyes, and going down a little way herself to get the better of an intervening angle, she beheld him thrust his head in at the parlour-door, draw it back again with great swiftness, and immediately begin a retreat upstairs with all possible expedition.

‘Here’s mysteries!’ said the damsel, when she was safe in her own room again, quite out of breath. ‘Oh, gracious, here’s mysteries!’

The prospect of finding anybody out in anything, would have kept Miss Miggs awake under the influence of henbane. Presently, she heard the step again, as she would have done if it had been that of a feather endowed with motion and walking down on tiptoe. Then gliding out as before, she again beheld the retreating figure of the ‘prentice; again he looked cautiously in at the parlour-door, but this time instead of retreating, he passed in and disappeared.

Miggs was back in her room, and had her head out of the window, before an elderly gentleman could have winked and recovered from it. Out he came at the street-door, shut it carefully behind him, tried it with his knee, and swaggered off, putting something in his pocket as he went along. At this spectacle Miggs cried ‘Gracious!’ again, and then ‘Goodness gracious!’ and then ‘Goodness gracious me!’ and then, candle in hand, went downstairs as he had done. Coming to the workshop, she saw the lamp burning on the forge, and everything as Sim had left it.

‘Why I wish I may only have a walking funeral, and never be

buried decent with a mourning-coach and feathers, if the boy hasn't been and made a key for his own self!' cried Miggs. 'Oh the little villain!'

This conclusion was not arrived at without consideration, and much peeping and peering about; nor was it unassisted by the recollection that she had on several occasions come upon the 'prentice suddenly, and found him busy at some mysterious occupation. Lest the fact of Miss Miggs calling him, on whom she stooped to cast a favourable eye, a boy, should create surprise in any breast, it may be observed that she invariably affected to regard all male bipeds under thirty as mere chits and infants; which phenomenon is not unusual in ladies of Miss Miggs's temper, and is indeed generally found to be the associate of such indomitable and savage virtue.

Miss Miggs deliberated within herself for some little time, looking hard at the shop-door while she did so, as though her eyes and thoughts were both upon it; and then, taking a sheet of paper from a drawer, twisted it into a long thin spiral tube. Having filled this instrument with a quantity of small coal-dust from the forge, she approached the door, and dropping on one knee before it, dexterously blew into the keyhole as much of these fine ashes as the lock would hold. When she had filled it to the brim in a very workmanlike and skilful manner, she crept upstairs again, and chuckled as she went.

'There!' cried Miggs, rubbing her hands, 'now let's see whether you won't be glad to take some notice of me, mister. He, he, he!

You'll have eyes for somebody besides Miss Dolly now, I think. A fat-faced puss she is, as ever I come across!

As she uttered this criticism, she glanced approvingly at her small mirror, as who should say, I thank my stars that can't be said of me! – as it certainly could not; for Miss Miggs's style of beauty was of that kind which Mr Tappertit himself had not inaptly termed, in private, 'scraggy.'

'I don't go to bed this night!' said Miggs, wrapping herself in a shawl, and drawing a couple of chairs near the window, flouncing down upon one, and putting her feet upon the other, 'till you come home, my lad. I wouldn't,' said Miggs viciously, 'no, not for five-and-forty pound!'

With that, and with an expression of face in which a great number of opposite ingredients, such as mischief, cunning, malice, triumph, and patient expectation, were all mixed up together in a kind of physiognomical punch, Miss Miggs composed herself to wait and listen, like some fair ogress who had set a trap and was watching for a nibble from a plump young traveller.

She sat there, with perfect composure, all night. At length, just upon break of day, there was a footstep in the street, and presently she could hear Mr Tappertit stop at the door. Then she could make out that he tried his key – that he was blowing into it – that he knocked it on the nearest post to beat the dust out – that he took it under a lamp to look at it – that he poked bits of stick into the lock to clear it – that he peeped into the keyhole, first

with one eye, and then with the other – that he tried the key again – that he couldn't turn it, and what was worse, couldn't get it out – that he bent it – that then it was much less disposed to come out than before – that he gave it a mighty twist and a great pull, and then it came out so suddenly that he staggered backwards – that he kicked the door – that he shook it – finally, that he smote his forehead, and sat down on the step in despair.

When this crisis had arrived, Miss Miggs, affecting to be exhausted with terror, and to cling to the window-sill for support, put out her nightcap, and demanded in a faint voice who was there.

Mr Tappertit cried 'Hush!' and, backing to the road, exhorted her in frenzied pantomime to secrecy and silence.

'Tell me one thing,' said Miggs. 'Is it thieves?'

'No – no – no!' cried Mr Tappertit.

'Then,' said Miggs, more faintly than before, 'it's fire. Where is it, sir? It's near this room, I know. I've a good conscience, sir, and would much rather die than go down a ladder. All I wish is, respecting my love to my married sister, Golden Lion Court, number twenty-sivin, second bell-handle on the right-hand door-post.'

'Miggs!' cried Mr Tappertit, 'don't you know me? Sim, you know – Sim –'

'Oh! what about him!' cried Miggs, clasping her hands. 'Is he in any danger? Is he in the midst of flames and blazes! Oh gracious, gracious!'

‘Why I’m here, an’t I?’ rejoined Mr Tappertit, knocking himself on the breast. ‘Don’t you see me? What a fool you are, Miggs!’

‘There!’ cried Miggs, unmindful of this compliment. ‘Why – so it – Goodness, what is the meaning of – If you please, mim, here’s –’

‘No, no!’ cried Mr Tappertit, standing on tiptoe, as if by that means he, in the street, were any nearer being able to stop the mouth of Miggs in the garret. ‘Don’t! – I’ve been out without leave, and something or another’s the matter with the lock. Come down, and undo the shop window, that I may get in that way.’

‘I dursn’t do it, Simmun,’ cried Miggs – for that was her pronunciation of his Christian name. ‘I dursn’t do it, indeed. You know as well as anybody, how particular I am. And to come down in the dead of night, when the house is wrapped in slumbers and veiled in obscurity.’ And there she stopped and shivered, for her modesty caught cold at the very thought.

‘But Miggs,’ cried Mr Tappertit, getting under the lamp, that she might see his eyes. ‘My darling Miggs –’

Miggs screamed slightly.

‘– That I love so much, and never can help thinking of,’ and it is impossible to describe the use he made of his eyes when he said this – ‘do – for my sake, do.’

‘Oh Simmun,’ cried Miggs, ‘this is worse than all. I know if I come down, you’ll go, and –’

‘And what, my precious?’ said Mr Tappertit.

‘And try,’ said Miggs, hysterically, ‘to kiss me, or some such dreadfulness; I know you will!’

‘I swear I won’t,’ said Mr Tappertit, with remarkable earnestness. ‘Upon my soul I won’t. It’s getting broad day, and the watchman’s waking up. Angelic Miggs! If you’ll only come and let me in, I promise you faithfully and truly I won’t.’

Miss Miggs, whose gentle heart was touched, did not wait for the oath (knowing how strong the temptation was, and fearing he might forswear himself), but tripped lightly down the stairs, and with her own fair hands drew back the rough fastenings of the workshop window. Having helped the wayward ‘prentice in, she faintly articulated the words ‘Simmun is safe!’ and yielding to her woman’s nature, immediately became insensible.

‘I knew I should quench her,’ said Sim, rather embarrassed by this circumstance. ‘Of course I was certain it would come to this, but there was nothing else to be done – if I hadn’t eyed her over, she wouldn’t have come down. Here. Keep up a minute, Miggs. What a slippery figure she is! There’s no holding her, comfortably. Do keep up a minute, Miggs, will you?’

As Miggs, however, was deaf to all entreaties, Mr Tappertit leant her against the wall as one might dispose of a walking-stick or umbrella, until he had secured the window, when he took her in his arms again, and, in short stages and with great difficulty – arising from her being tall and his being short, and perhaps in some degree from that peculiar physical conformation on which he had already remarked – carried her upstairs, and planting her,

in the same umbrella and walking-stick fashion, just inside her own door, left her to her repose.

‘He may be as cool as he likes,’ said Miss Miggs, recovering as soon as she was left alone; ‘but I’m in his confidence and he can’t help himself, nor couldn’t if he was twenty Simmuneses!’

Chapter 10

It was on one of those mornings, common in early spring, when the year, fickle and changeable in its youth like all other created things, is undecided whether to step backward into winter or forward into summer, and in its uncertainty inclines now to the one and now to the other, and now to both at once – wooing summer in the sunshine, and lingering still with winter in the shade – it was, in short, on one of those mornings, when it is hot and cold, wet and dry, bright and lowering, sad and cheerful, withering and genial, in the compass of one short hour, that old John Willet, who was dropping asleep over the copper boiler, was roused by the sound of a horse's feet, and glancing out at window, beheld a traveller of goodly promise, checking his bridle at the Maypole door.

He was none of your flippant young fellows, who would call for a tankard of mulled ale, and make themselves as much at home as if they had ordered a hogshead of wine; none of your audacious young swaggerers, who would even penetrate into the bar – that solemn sanctuary – and, smiting old John upon the back, inquire if there was never a pretty girl in the house, and where he hid his little chambermaids, with a hundred other impertinences of that nature; none of your free-and-easy companions, who would scrape their boots upon the firedogs in the common room, and be not at all particular on the subject

of spittoons; none of your unconscionable blades, requiring impossible chops, and taking unheard-of pickles for granted. He was a staid, grave, placid gentleman, something past the prime of life, yet upright in his carriage, for all that, and slim as a greyhound. He was well-mounted upon a sturdy chestnut cob, and had the graceful seat of an experienced horseman; while his riding gear, though free from such fopperies as were then in vogue, was handsome and well chosen. He wore a riding-coat of a somewhat brighter green than might have been expected to suit the taste of a gentleman of his years, with a short, black velvet cape, and laced pocket-holes and cuffs, all of a jaunty fashion; his linen, too, was of the finest kind, worked in a rich pattern at the wrists and throat, and scrupulously white. Although he seemed, judging from the mud he had picked up on the way, to have come from London, his horse was as smooth and cool as his own iron-grey periwig and pigtail. Neither man nor beast had turned a single hair; and saving for his soiled skirts and spatter-dashes, this gentleman, with his blooming face, white teeth, exactly-ordered dress, and perfect calmness, might have come from making an elaborate and leisurely toilet, to sit for an equestrian portrait at old John Willet's gate.

It must not be supposed that John observed these several characteristics by other than very slow degrees, or that he took in more than half a one at a time, or that he even made up his mind upon that, without a great deal of very serious consideration. Indeed, if he had been distracted in the first

instance by questionings and orders, it would have taken him at the least a fortnight to have noted what is here set down; but it happened that the gentleman, being struck with the old house, or with the plump pigeons which were skimming and curtsying about it, or with the tall maypole, on the top of which a weathercock, which had been out of order for fifteen years, performed a perpetual walk to the music of its own creaking, sat for some little time looking round in silence. Hence John, standing with his hand upon the horse's bridle, and his great eyes on the rider, and with nothing passing to divert his thoughts, had really got some of these little circumstances into his brain by the time he was called upon to speak.

‘A quaint place this,’ said the gentleman – and his voice was as rich as his dress. ‘Are you the landlord?’

‘At your service, sir,’ replied John Willet.

‘You can give my horse good stabling, can you, and me an early dinner (I am not particular what, so that it be cleanly served), and a decent room of which there seems to be no lack in this great mansion,’ said the stranger, again running his eyes over the exterior.

‘You can have, sir,’ returned John with a readiness quite surprising, ‘anything you please.’

‘It's well I am easily satisfied,’ returned the other with a smile, ‘or that might prove a hardy pledge, my friend.’ And saying so, he dismounted, with the aid of the block before the door, in a twinkling.

‘Halloa there! Hugh!’ roared John. ‘I ask your pardon, sir, for keeping you standing in the porch; but my son has gone to town on business, and the boy being, as I may say, of a kind of use to me, I’m rather put out when he’s away. Hugh! – a dreadful idle vagrant fellow, sir, half a gipsy, as I think – always sleeping in the sun in summer, and in the straw in winter time, sir – Hugh! Dear Lord, to keep a gentleman a waiting here through him! – Hugh! I wish that chap was dead, I do indeed.’

‘Possibly he is,’ returned the other. ‘I should think if he were living, he would have heard you by this time.’

‘In his fits of laziness, he sleeps so desperate hard,’ said the distracted host, ‘that if you were to fire off cannon-balls into his ears, it wouldn’t wake him, sir.’

The guest made no remark upon this novel cure for drowsiness, and recipe for making people lively, but, with his hands clasped behind him, stood in the porch, very much amused to see old John, with the bridle in his hand, wavering between a strong impulse to abandon the animal to his fate, and a half disposition to lead him into the house, and shut him up in the parlour, while he waited on his master.

‘Pillory the fellow, here he is at last!’ cried John, in the very height and zenith of his distress. ‘Did you hear me a calling, villain?’

The figure he addressed made no answer, but putting his hand upon the saddle, sprung into it at a bound, turned the horse’s head towards the stable, and was gone in an instant.

‘Brisk enough when he is awake,’ said the guest.

‘Brisk enough, sir!’ replied John, looking at the place where the horse had been, as if not yet understanding quite, what had become of him. ‘He melts, I think. He goes like a drop of froth. You look at him, and there he is. You look at him again, and – there he isn’t.’

Having, in the absence of any more words, put this sudden climax to what he had faintly intended should be a long explanation of the whole life and character of his man, the oracular John Willet led the gentleman up his wide dismantled staircase into the Maypole’s best apartment.

It was spacious enough in all conscience, occupying the whole depth of the house, and having at either end a great bay window, as large as many modern rooms; in which some few panes of stained glass, emblazoned with fragments of armorial bearings, though cracked, and patched, and shattered, yet remained; attesting, by their presence, that the former owner had made the very light subservient to his state, and pressed the sun itself into his list of flatterers; bidding it, when it shone into his chamber, reflect the badges of his ancient family, and take new hues and colours from their pride.

But those were old days, and now every little ray came and went as it would; telling the plain, bare, searching truth. Although the best room of the inn, it had the melancholy aspect of grandeur in decay, and was much too vast for comfort. Rich rustling hangings, waving on the walls; and, better far, the rustling of

youth and beauty's dress; the light of women's eyes, outshining the tapers and their own rich jewels; the sound of gentle tongues, and music, and the tread of maiden feet, had once been there, and filled it with delight. But they were gone, and with them all its gladness. It was no longer a home; children were never born and bred there; the fireside had become mercenary – a something to be bought and sold – a very courtesan: let who would die, or sit beside, or leave it, it was still the same – it missed nobody, cared for nobody, had equal warmth and smiles for all. God help the man whose heart ever changes with the world, as an old mansion when it becomes an inn!

No effort had been made to furnish this chilly waste, but before the broad chimney a colony of chairs and tables had been planted on a square of carpet, flanked by a ghostly screen, enriched with figures, grinning and grotesque. After lighting with his own hands the faggots which were heaped upon the hearth, old John withdrew to hold grave council with his cook, touching the stranger's entertainment; while the guest himself, seeing small comfort in the yet unkindled wood, opened a lattice in the distant window, and basked in a sickly gleam of cold March sun.

Leaving the window now and then, to rake the crackling logs together, or pace the echoing room from end to end, he closed it when the fire was quite burnt up, and having wheeled the easiest chair into the warmest corner, summoned John Willet.

'Sir,' said John.

He wanted pen, ink, and paper. There was an old standish on the mantelshelf containing a dusty apology for all three. Having set this before him, the landlord was retiring, when he motioned him to stay.

‘There’s a house not far from here,’ said the guest when he had written a few lines, ‘which you call the Warren, I believe?’

As this was said in the tone of one who knew the fact, and asked the question as a thing of course, John contented himself with nodding his head in the affirmative; at the same time taking one hand out of his pockets to cough behind, and then putting it in again.

‘I want this note’ – said the guest, glancing on what he had written, and folding it, ‘conveyed there without loss of time, and an answer brought back here. Have you a messenger at hand?’

John was thoughtful for a minute or thereabouts, and then said Yes.

‘Let me see him,’ said the guest.

This was disconcerting; for Joe being out, and Hugh engaged in rubbing down the chestnut cob, he designed sending on the errand, Barnaby, who had just then arrived in one of his rambles, and who, so that he thought himself employed on a grave and serious business, would go anywhere.

‘Why the truth is,’ said John after a long pause, ‘that the person who’d go quickest, is a sort of natural, as one may say, sir; and though quick of foot, and as much to be trusted as the post itself, he’s not good at talking, being touched and flighty, sir.’

‘You don’t,’ said the guest, raising his eyes to John’s fat face, ‘you don’t mean – what’s the fellow’s name – you don’t mean Barnaby?’

‘Yes, I do,’ returned the landlord, his features turning quite expressive with surprise.

‘How comes he to be here?’ inquired the guest, leaning back in his chair; speaking in the bland, even tone, from which he never varied; and with the same soft, courteous, never-changing smile upon his face. ‘I saw him in London last night.’

‘He’s, for ever, here one hour, and there the next,’ returned old John, after the usual pause to get the question in his mind. ‘Sometimes he walks, and sometimes runs. He’s known along the road by everybody, and sometimes comes here in a cart or chaise, and sometimes riding double. He comes and goes, through wind, rain, snow, and hail, and on the darkest nights. Nothing hurts HIM.’

‘He goes often to the Warren, does he not?’ said the guest carelessly. ‘I seem to remember his mother telling me something to that effect yesterday. But I was not attending to the good woman much.’

‘You’re right, sir,’ John made answer, ‘he does. His father, sir, was murdered in that house.’

‘So I have heard,’ returned the guest, taking a gold toothpick from his pocket with the same sweet smile. ‘A very disagreeable circumstance for the family.’

‘Very,’ said John with a puzzled look, as if it occurred to him,

dimly and afar off, that this might by possibility be a cool way of treating the subject.

‘All the circumstances after a murder,’ said the guest soliloquising, ‘must be dreadfully unpleasant – so much bustle and disturbance – no repose – a constant dwelling upon one subject – and the running in and out, and up and down stairs, intolerable. I wouldn’t have such a thing happen to anybody I was nearly interested in, on any account. ‘Twould be enough to wear one’s life out. – You were going to say, friend – ’ he added, turning to John again.

‘Only that Mrs Rudge lives on a little pension from the family, and that Barnaby’s as free of the house as any cat or dog about it,’ answered John. ‘Shall he do your errand, sir?’

‘Oh yes,’ replied the guest. ‘Oh certainly. Let him do it by all means. Please to bring him here that I may charge him to be quick. If he objects to come you may tell him it’s Mr Chester. He will remember my name, I dare say.’

John was so very much astonished to find who his visitor was, that he could express no astonishment at all, by looks or otherwise, but left the room as if he were in the most placid and imperturbable of all possible conditions. It has been reported that when he got downstairs, he looked steadily at the boiler for ten minutes by the clock, and all that time never once left off shaking his head; for which statement there would seem to be some ground of truth and feasibility, inasmuch as that interval of time did certainly elapse, before he returned with Barnaby to

the guest's apartment.

'Come hither, lad,' said Mr Chester. 'You know Mr Geoffrey Haredale?'

Barnaby laughed, and looked at the landlord as though he would say, 'You hear him?' John, who was greatly shocked at this breach of decorum, clapped his finger to his nose, and shook his head in mute remonstrance.

'He knows him, sir,' said John, frowning aside at Barnaby, 'as well as you or I do.'

'I haven't the pleasure of much acquaintance with the gentleman,' returned his guest. 'YOU may have. Limit the comparison to yourself, my friend.'

Although this was said with the same easy affability, and the same smile, John felt himself put down, and laying the indignity at Barnaby's door, determined to kick his raven, on the very first opportunity.

'Give that,' said the guest, who had by this time sealed the note, and who beckoned his messenger towards him as he spoke, 'into Mr Haredale's own hands. Wait for an answer, and bring it back to me here. If you should find that Mr Haredale is engaged just now, tell him – can he remember a message, landlord?'

'When he chooses, sir,' replied John. 'He won't forget this one.'
'How are you sure of that?'

John merely pointed to him as he stood with his head bent forward, and his earnest gaze fixed closely on his questioner's face; and nodded sagely.

‘Tell him then, Barnaby, should he be engaged,’ said Mr Chester, ‘that I shall be glad to wait his convenience here, and to see him (if he will call) at any time this evening. – At the worst I can have a bed here, Willet, I suppose?’

Old John, immensely flattered by the personal notoriety implied in this familiar form of address, answered, with something like a knowing look, ‘I should believe you could, sir,’ and was turning over in his mind various forms of eulogium, with the view of selecting one appropriate to the qualities of his best bed, when his ideas were put to flight by Mr Chester giving Barnaby the letter, and bidding him make all speed away.

‘Speed!’ said Barnaby, folding the little packet in his breast, ‘Speed! If you want to see hurry and mystery, come here. Here!’

With that, he put his hand, very much to John Willet’s horror, on the guest’s fine broadcloth sleeve, and led him stealthily to the back window.

‘Look down there,’ he said softly; ‘do you mark how they whisper in each other’s ears; then dance and leap, to make believe they are in sport? Do you see how they stop for a moment, when they think there is no one looking, and mutter among themselves again; and then how they roll and gambol, delighted with the mischief they’ve been plotting? Look at ‘em now. See how they whirl and plunge. And now they stop again, and whisper, cautiously together – little thinking, mind, how often I have lain upon the grass and watched them. I say what is it that they plot and hatch? Do you know?’

‘They are only clothes,’ returned the guest, ‘such as we wear; hanging on those lines to dry, and fluttering in the wind.’

‘Clothes!’ echoed Barnaby, looking close into his face, and falling quickly back. ‘Ha ha! Why, how much better to be silly, than as wise as you! You don’t see shadowy people there, like those that live in sleep – not you. Nor eyes in the knotted panes of glass, nor swift ghosts when it blows hard, nor do you hear voices in the air, nor see men stalking in the sky – not you! I lead a merrier life than you, with all your cleverness. You’re the dull men. We’re the bright ones. Ha! ha! I’ll not change with you, clever as you are, – not I!’

With that, he waved his hat above his head, and darted off.

‘A strange creature, upon my word!’ said the guest, pulling out a handsome box, and taking a pinch of snuff.

‘He wants imagination,’ said Mr Willet, very slowly, and after a long silence; ‘that’s what he wants. I’ve tried to instil it into him, many and many’s the time; but’ – John added this in confidence – ‘he an’t made for it; that’s the fact.’

To record that Mr Chester smiled at John’s remark would be little to the purpose, for he preserved the same conciliatory and pleasant look at all times. He drew his chair nearer to the fire though, as a kind of hint that he would prefer to be alone, and John, having no reasonable excuse for remaining, left him to himself.

Very thoughtful old John Willet was, while the dinner was preparing; and if his brain were ever less clear at one time than

another, it is but reasonable to suppose that he addled it in no slight degree by shaking his head so much that day. That Mr Chester, between whom and Mr Haredale, it was notorious to all the neighbourhood, a deep and bitter animosity existed, should come down there for the sole purpose, as it seemed, of seeing him, and should choose the Maypole for their place of meeting, and should send to him express, were stumbling blocks John could not overcome. The only resource he had, was to consult the boiler, and wait impatiently for Barnaby's return.

But Barnaby delayed beyond all precedent. The visitor's dinner was served, removed, his wine was set, the fire replenished, the hearth clean swept; the light waned without, it grew dusk, became quite dark, and still no Barnaby appeared. Yet, though John Willet was full of wonder and misgiving, his guest sat cross-legged in the easy-chair, to all appearance as little ruffled in his thoughts as in his dress – the same calm, easy, cool gentleman, without a care or thought beyond his golden toothpick.

'Barnaby's late,' John ventured to observe, as he placed a pair of tarnished candlesticks, some three feet high, upon the table, and snuffed the lights they held.

'He is rather so,' replied the guest, sipping his wine. 'He will not be much longer, I dare say.'

John coughed and raked the fire together.

'As your roads bear no very good character, if I may judge from my son's mishap, though,' said Mr Chester, 'and as I have no

fancy to be knocked on the head – which is not only disconcerting at the moment, but places one, besides, in a ridiculous position with respect to the people who chance to pick one up – I shall stop here to-night. I think you said you had a bed to spare.’

‘Such a bed, sir,’ returned John Willet; ‘ay, such a bed as few, even of the gentry’s houses, own. A fixter here, sir. I’ve heard say that bedstead is nigh two hundred years of age. Your noble son – a fine young gentleman – slept in it last, sir, half a year ago.’

‘Upon my life, a recommendation!’ said the guest, shrugging his shoulders and wheeling his chair nearer to the fire. ‘See that it be well aired, Mr Willet, and let a blazing fire be lighted there at once. This house is something damp and chilly.’

John raked the faggots up again, more from habit than presence of mind, or any reference to this remark, and was about to withdraw, when a bounding step was heard upon the stair, and Barnaby came panting in.

‘He’ll have his foot in the stirrup in an hour’s time,’ he cried, advancing. ‘He has been riding hard all day – has just come home – but will be in the saddle again as soon as he has eat and drank, to meet his loving friend.’

‘Was that his message?’ asked the visitor, looking up, but without the smallest discomposure – or at least without the show of any.

‘All but the last words,’ Barnaby rejoined. ‘He meant those. I saw that, in his face.’

‘This for your pains,’ said the other, putting money in his

hand, and glancing at him steadfastly. 'This for your pains, sharp Barnaby.'

'For Grip, and me, and Hugh, to share among us,' he rejoined, putting it up, and nodding, as he counted it on his fingers. 'Grip one, me two, Hugh three; the dog, the goat, the cats – well, we shall spend it pretty soon, I warn you. Stay. – Look. Do you wise men see nothing there, now?'

He bent eagerly down on one knee, and gazed intently at the smoke, which was rolling up the chimney in a thick black cloud. John Willet, who appeared to consider himself particularly and chiefly referred to under the term wise men, looked that way likewise, and with great solidity of feature.

'Now, where do they go to, when they spring so fast up there,' asked Barnaby; 'eh? Why do they tread so closely on each other's heels, and why are they always in a hurry – which is what you blame me for, when I only take pattern by these busy folk about me? More of 'em! catching to each other's skirts; and as fast as they go, others come! What a merry dance it is! I would that Grip and I could frisk like that!'

'What has he in that basket at his back?' asked the guest after a few moments, during which Barnaby was still bending down to look higher up the chimney, and earnestly watching the smoke.

'In this?' he answered, jumping up, before John Willet could reply – shaking it as he spoke, and stooping his head to listen. 'In this! What is there here? Tell him!'

'A devil, a devil, a devil!' cried a hoarse voice.

‘Here’s money!’ said Barnaby, chinking it in his hand, ‘money for a treat, Grip!’

‘Hurrah! Hurrah! Hurrah!’ replied the raven, ‘keep up your spirits. Never say die. Bow, wow, wow!’

Mr Willet, who appeared to entertain strong doubts whether a customer in a laced coat and fine linen could be supposed to have any acquaintance even with the existence of such unpolite gentry as the bird claimed to belong to, took Barnaby off at this juncture, with the view of preventing any other improper declarations, and quitted the room with his very best bow.

Chapter 11

There was great news that night for the regular Maypole customers, to each of whom, as he straggled in to occupy his allotted seat in the chimney-corner, John, with a most impressive slowness of delivery, and in an apoplectic whisper, communicated the fact that Mr Chester was alone in the large room upstairs, and was waiting the arrival of Mr Geoffrey Haredale, to whom he had sent a letter (doubtless of a threatening nature) by the hands of Barnaby, then and there present.

For a little knot of smokers and solemn gossips, who had seldom any new topics of discussion, this was a perfect Godsend. Here was a good, dark-looking mystery progressing under that very roof – brought home to the fireside, as it were, and enjoyable without the smallest pains or trouble. It is extraordinary what a zest and relish it gave to the drink, and how it heightened the flavour of the tobacco. Every man smoked his pipe with a face of grave and serious delight, and looked at his neighbour with a sort of quiet congratulation. Nay, it was felt to be such a holiday and special night, that, on the motion of little Solomon Daisy, every man (including John himself) put down his sixpence for a can of flip, which grateful beverage was brewed with all despatch, and set down in the midst of them on the brick floor; both that it might simmer and stew before the fire, and that its fragrant steam, rising up among them, and mixing with the

wreaths of vapour from their pipes, might shroud them in a delicious atmosphere of their own, and shut out all the world. The very furniture of the room seemed to mellow and deepen in its tone; the ceiling and walls looked blacker and more highly polished, the curtains of a ruddier red; the fire burnt clear and high, and the crickets in the hearthstone chirped with a more than wonted satisfaction.

There were present two, however, who showed but little interest in the general contentment. Of these, one was Barnaby himself, who slept, or, to avoid being beset with questions, feigned to sleep, in the chimney-corner; the other, Hugh, who, sleeping too, lay stretched upon the bench on the opposite side, in the full glare of the blazing fire.

The light that fell upon this slumbering form, showed it in all its muscular and handsome proportions. It was that of a young man, of a hale athletic figure, and a giant's strength, whose sunburnt face and swarthy throat, overgrown with jet black hair, might have served a painter for a model. Loosely attired, in the coarsest and roughest garb, with scraps of straw and hay – his usual bed – clinging here and there, and mingling with his uncombed locks, he had fallen asleep in a posture as careless as his dress. The negligence and disorder of the whole man, with something fierce and sullen in his features, gave him a picturesque appearance, that attracted the regards even of the Maypole customers who knew him well, and caused Long Parkes to say that Hugh looked more like a poaching rascal to-night than

ever he had seen him yet.

‘He’s waiting here, I suppose,’ said Solomon, ‘to take Mr Haredale’s horse.’

‘That’s it, sir,’ replied John Willet. ‘He’s not often in the house, you know. He’s more at his ease among horses than men. I look upon him as a animal himself.’

Following up this opinion with a shrug that seemed meant to say, ‘we can’t expect everybody to be like us,’ John put his pipe into his mouth again, and smoked like one who felt his superiority over the general run of mankind.

‘That chap, sir,’ said John, taking it out again after a time, and pointing at him with the stem, ‘though he’s got all his faculties about him – bottled up and corked down, if I may say so, somewheres or another –’

‘Very good!’ said Parkes, nodding his head. ‘A very good expression, Johnny. You’ll be a tackling somebody presently. You’re in twig to-night, I see.’

‘Take care,’ said Mr Willet, not at all grateful for the compliment, ‘that I don’t tackle you, sir, which I shall certainly endeavour to do, if you interrupt me when I’m making observations. – That chap, I was a saying, though he has all his faculties about him, somewheres or another, bottled up and corked down, has no more imagination than Barnaby has. And why hasn’t he?’

The three friends shook their heads at each other; saying by that action, without the trouble of opening their lips, ‘Do you

observe what a philosophical mind our friend has?’

‘Why hasn’t he?’ said John, gently striking the table with his open hand. ‘Because they was never drawed out of him when he was a boy. That’s why. What would any of us have been, if our fathers hadn’t drawed our faculties out of us? What would my boy Joe have been, if I hadn’t drawed his faculties out of him? – Do you mind what I’m a saying of, gentlemen?’

‘Ah! we mind you,’ cried Parkes. ‘Go on improving of us, Johnny.’

‘Consequently, then,’ said Mr Willet, ‘that chap, whose mother was hung when he was a little boy, along with six others, for passing bad notes – and it’s a blessed thing to think how many people are hung in batches every six weeks for that, and such like offences, as showing how wide awake our government is – that chap that was then turned loose, and had to mind cows, and frighten birds away, and what not, for a few pence to live on, and so got on by degrees to mind horses, and to sleep in course of time in lofts and litter, instead of under haystacks and hedges, till at last he come to be hostler at the Maypole for his board and lodging and a annual trifle – that chap that can’t read nor write, and has never had much to do with anything but animals, and has never lived in any way but like the animals he has lived among, IS a animal. And,’ said Mr Willet, arriving at his logical conclusion, ‘is to be treated accordingly.’

‘Willet,’ said Solomon Daisy, who had exhibited some impatience at the intrusion of so unworthy a subject on their more

interesting theme, ‘when Mr Chester come this morning, did he order the large room?’

‘He signified, sir,’ said John, ‘that he wanted a large apartment. Yes. Certainly.’

‘Why then, I’ll tell you what,’ said Solomon, speaking softly and with an earnest look. ‘He and Mr Haredale are going to fight a duel in it.’

Everybody looked at Mr Willet, after this alarming suggestion. Mr Willet looked at the fire, weighing in his own mind the effect which such an occurrence would be likely to have on the establishment.

‘Well,’ said John, ‘I don’t know – I am sure – I remember that when I went up last, he HAD put the lights upon the mantel-shelf.’

‘It’s as plain,’ returned Solomon, ‘as the nose on Parkes’s face’ – Mr Parkes, who had a large nose, rubbed it, and looked as if he considered this a personal allusion – ‘they’ll fight in that room. You know by the newspapers what a common thing it is for gentlemen to fight in coffee-houses without seconds. One of ‘em will be wounded or perhaps killed in this house.’

‘That was a challenge that Barnaby took then, eh?’ said John. ‘ – Inclosing a slip of paper with the measure of his sword upon it, I’ll bet a guinea,’ answered the little man. ‘We know what sort of gentleman Mr Haredale is. You have told us what Barnaby said about his looks, when he came back. Depend upon it, I’m right. Now, mind.’

The flip had had no flavour till now. The tobacco had been of mere English growth, compared with its present taste. A duel in that great old rambling room upstairs, and the best bed ordered already for the wounded man!

‘Would it be swords or pistols, now?’ said John.

‘Heaven knows. Perhaps both,’ returned Solomon. ‘The gentlemen wear swords, and may easily have pistols in their pockets – most likely have, indeed. If they fire at each other without effect, then they’ll draw, and go to work in earnest.’

A shade passed over Mr Willet’s face as he thought of broken windows and disabled furniture, but bethinking himself that one of the parties would probably be left alive to pay the damage, he brightened up again.

‘And then,’ said Solomon, looking from face to face, ‘then we shall have one of those stains upon the floor that never come out. If Mr Haredale wins, depend upon it, it’ll be a deep one; or if he loses, it will perhaps be deeper still, for he’ll never give in unless he’s beaten down. We know him better, eh?’

‘Better indeed!’ they whispered all together.

‘As to its ever being got out again,’ said Solomon, ‘I tell you it never will, or can be. Why, do you know that it has been tried, at a certain house we are acquainted with?’

‘The Warren!’ cried John. ‘No, sure!’

‘Yes, sure – yes. It’s only known by very few. It has been whispered about though, for all that. They planed the board away, but there it was. They went deep, but it went deeper. They put

new boards down, but there was one great spot that came through still, and showed itself in the old place. And – harkye – draw nearer – Mr Geoffrey made that room his study, and sits there, always, with his foot (as I have heard) upon it; and he believes, through thinking of it long and very much, that it will never fade until he finds the man who did the deed.’

As this recital ended, and they all drew closer round the fire, the tramp of a horse was heard without.

‘The very man!’ cried John, starting up. ‘Hugh! Hugh!’

The sleeper staggered to his feet, and hurried after him. John quickly returned, ushering in with great attention and deference (for Mr Haredale was his landlord) the long-expected visitor, who strode into the room clanking his heavy boots upon the floor; and looking keenly round upon the bowing group, raised his hat in acknowledgment of their profound respect.

‘You have a stranger here, Willet, who sent to me,’ he said, in a voice which sounded naturally stern and deep. ‘Where is he?’

‘In the great room upstairs, sir,’ answered John.

‘Show the way. Your staircase is dark, I know. Gentlemen, good night.’

With that, he signed to the landlord to go on before; and went clanking out, and up the stairs; old John, in his agitation, ingeniously lighting everything but the way, and making a stumble at every second step.

‘Stop!’ he said, when they reached the landing. ‘I can announce myself. Don’t wait.’

He laid his hand upon the door, entered, and shut it heavily. Mr Willet was by no means disposed to stand there listening by himself, especially as the walls were very thick; so descended, with much greater alacrity than he had come up, and joined his friends below.

Chapter 12

There was a brief pause in the state-room of the Maypole, as Mr Haredale tried the lock to satisfy himself that he had shut the door securely, and, striding up the dark chamber to where the screen inclosed a little patch of light and warmth, presented himself, abruptly and in silence, before the smiling guest.

If the two had no greater sympathy in their inward thoughts than in their outward bearing and appearance, the meeting did not seem likely to prove a very calm or pleasant one. With no great disparity between them in point of years, they were, in every other respect, as unlike and far removed from each other as two men could well be. The one was soft-spoken, delicately made, precise, and elegant; the other, a burly square-built man, negligently dressed, rough and abrupt in manner, stern, and, in his present mood, forbidding both in look and speech. The one preserved a calm and placid smile; the other, a distrustful frown. The new-comer, indeed, appeared bent on showing by his every tone and gesture his determined opposition and hostility to the man he had come to meet. The guest who received him, on the other hand, seemed to feel that the contrast between them was all in his favour, and to derive a quiet exultation from it which put him more at his ease than ever.

‘Haredale,’ said this gentleman, without the least appearance of embarrassment or reserve, ‘I am very glad to see you.’

‘Let us dispense with compliments. They are misplaced between us,’ returned the other, waving his hand, ‘and say plainly what we have to say. You have asked me to meet you. I am here. Why do we stand face to face again?’

‘Still the same frank and sturdy character, I see!’

‘Good or bad, sir, I am,’ returned the other, leaning his arm upon the chimney-piece, and turning a haughty look upon the occupant of the easy-chair, ‘the man I used to be. I have lost no old likings or dislikings; my memory has not failed me by a hair’s-breadth. You ask me to give you a meeting. I say, I am here.’

‘Our meeting, Haredale,’ said Mr Chester, tapping his snuff-box, and following with a smile the impatient gesture he had made – perhaps unconsciously – towards his sword, ‘is one of conference and peace, I hope?’

‘I have come here,’ returned the other, ‘at your desire, holding myself bound to meet you, when and where you would. I have not come to bandy pleasant speeches, or hollow professions. You are a smooth man of the world, sir, and at such play have me at a disadvantage. The very last man on this earth with whom I would enter the lists to combat with gentle compliments and masked faces, is Mr Chester, I do assure you. I am not his match at such weapons, and have reason to believe that few men are.’

‘You do me a great deal of honour Haredale,’ returned the other, most composedly, ‘and I thank you. I will be frank with you – ’

‘I beg your pardon – will be what?’

‘Frank – open – perfectly candid.’

‘Hah!’ cried Mr Haredale, drawing his breath. ‘But don’t let me interrupt you.’

‘So resolved am I to hold this course,’ returned the other, tasting his wine with great deliberation; ‘that I have determined not to quarrel with you, and not to be betrayed into a warm expression or a hasty word.’

‘There again,’ said Mr Haredale, ‘you have me at a great advantage. Your self-command –’

‘Is not to be disturbed, when it will serve my purpose, you would say’ – rejoined the other, interrupting him with the same complacency. ‘Granted. I allow it. And I have a purpose to serve now. So have you. I am sure our object is the same. Let us attain it like sensible men, who have ceased to be boys some time. – Do you drink?’

‘With my friends,’ returned the other.

‘At least,’ said Mr Chester, ‘you will be seated?’

‘I will stand,’ returned Mr Haredale impatiently, ‘on this dismantled, beggared hearth, and not pollute it, fallen as it is, with mockeries. Go on.’

‘You are wrong, Haredale,’ said the other, crossing his legs, and smiling as he held his glass up in the bright glow of the fire. ‘You are really very wrong. The world is a lively place enough, in which we must accommodate ourselves to circumstances, sail with the stream as glibly as we can, be content to take froth for substance, the surface for the depth, the counterfeit for the real

coin. I wonder no philosopher has ever established that our globe itself is hollow. It should be, if Nature is consistent in her works.'

'YOU think it is, perhaps?'

'I should say,' he returned, sipping his wine, 'there could be no doubt about it. Well; we, in trifling with this jingling toy, have had the ill-luck to jostle and fall out. We are not what the world calls friends; but we are as good and true and loving friends for all that, as nine out of every ten of those on whom it bestows the title. You have a niece, and I a son – a fine lad, Haredale, but foolish. They fall in love with each other, and form what this same world calls an attachment; meaning a something fanciful and false like the rest, which, if it took its own free time, would break like any other bubble. But it may not have its own free time – will not, if they are left alone – and the question is, shall we two, because society calls us enemies, stand aloof, and let them rush into each other's arms, when, by approaching each other sensibly, as we do now, we can prevent it, and part them?'

'I love my niece,' said Mr Haredale, after a short silence. 'It may sound strangely in your ears; but I love her.'

'Strangely, my good fellow!' cried Mr Chester, lazily filling his glass again, and pulling out his toothpick. 'Not at all. I like Ned too – or, as you say, love him – that's the word among such near relations. I'm very fond of Ned. He's an amazingly good fellow, and a handsome fellow – foolish and weak as yet; that's all. But the thing is, Haredale – for I'll be very frank, as I told you I would at first – independently of any dislike that you and I might

have to being related to each other, and independently of the religious differences between us – and damn it, that’s important – I couldn’t afford a match of this description. Ned and I couldn’t do it. It’s impossible.’

‘Curb your tongue, in God’s name, if this conversation is to last,’ retorted Mr Haredale fiercely. ‘I have said I love my niece. Do you think that, loving her, I would have her fling her heart away on any man who had your blood in his veins?’

‘You see,’ said the other, not at all disturbed, ‘the advantage of being so frank and open. Just what I was about to add, upon my honour! I am amazingly attached to Ned – quite doat upon him, indeed – and even if we could afford to throw ourselves away, that very objection would be quite insuperable. – I wish you’d take some wine?’

‘Mark me,’ said Mr Haredale, striding to the table, and laying his hand upon it heavily. ‘If any man believes – presumes to think – that I, in word or deed, or in the wildest dream, ever entertained remotely the idea of Emma Haredale’s favouring the suit of any one who was akin to you – in any way – I care not what – he lies. He lies, and does me grievous wrong, in the mere thought.’

‘Haredale,’ returned the other, rocking himself to and fro as in assent, and nodding at the fire, ‘it’s extremely manly, and really very generous in you, to meet me in this unreserved and handsome way. Upon my word, those are exactly my sentiments, only expressed with much more force and power than I could use – you know my sluggish nature, and will forgive me, I am sure.’

‘While I would restrain her from all correspondence with your son, and sever their intercourse here, though it should cause her death,’ said Mr Haredale, who had been pacing to and fro, ‘I would do it kindly and tenderly if I can. I have a trust to discharge, which my nature is not formed to understand, and, for this reason, the bare fact of there being any love between them comes upon me to-night, almost for the first time.’

‘I am more delighted than I can possibly tell you,’ rejoined Mr Chester with the utmost blandness, ‘to find my own impression so confirmed. You see the advantage of our having met. We understand each other. We quite agree. We have a most complete and thorough explanation, and we know what course to take. – Why don’t you taste your tenant’s wine? It’s really very good.’

‘Pray who,’ said Mr Haredale, ‘have aided Emma, or your son? Who are their go-betweens, and agents – do you know?’

‘All the good people hereabouts – the neighbourhood in general, I think,’ returned the other, with his most affable smile. ‘The messenger I sent to you to-day, foremost among them all.’

‘The idiot? Barnaby?’

‘You are surprised? I am glad of that, for I was rather so myself. Yes. I wrung that from his mother – a very decent sort of woman – from whom, indeed, I chiefly learnt how serious the matter had become, and so determined to ride out here to-day, and hold a parley with you on this neutral ground. – You’re stouter than you used to be, Haredale, but you look extremely well.’

‘Our business, I presume, is nearly at an end,’ said Mr Haredale, with an expression of impatience he was at no pains to conceal. ‘Trust me, Mr Chester, my niece shall change from this time. I will appeal,’ he added in a lower tone, ‘to her woman’s heart, her dignity, her pride, her duty –’

‘I shall do the same by Ned,’ said Mr Chester, restoring some errant faggots to their places in the grate with the toe of his boot. ‘If there is anything real in this world, it is those amazingly fine feelings and those natural obligations which must subsist between father and son. I shall put it to him on every ground of moral and religious feeling. I shall represent to him that we cannot possibly afford it – that I have always looked forward to his marrying well, for a genteel provision for myself in the autumn of life – that there are a great many clamorous dogs to pay, whose claims are perfectly just and right, and who must be paid out of his wife’s fortune. In short, that the very highest and most honourable feelings of our nature, with every consideration of filial duty and affection, and all that sort of thing, imperatively demand that he should run away with an heiress.’

‘And break her heart as speedily as possible?’ said Mr Haredale, drawing on his glove.

‘There Ned will act exactly as he pleases,’ returned the other, sipping his wine; ‘that’s entirely his affair. I wouldn’t for the world interfere with my son, Haredale, beyond a certain point. The relationship between father and son, you know, is positively quite a holy kind of bond. – WON’T you let me persuade you to take

one glass of wine? Well! as you please, as you please,' he added, helping himself again.

'Chester,' said Mr Haredale, after a short silence, during which he had eyed his smiling face from time to time intently, 'you have the head and heart of an evil spirit in all matters of deception.'

'Your health!' said the other, with a nod. 'But I have interrupted you –'

'If now,' pursued Mr Haredale, 'we should find it difficult to separate these young people, and break off their intercourse – if, for instance, you find it difficult on your side, what course do you intend to take?'

'Nothing plainer, my good fellow, nothing easier,' returned the other, shrugging his shoulders and stretching himself more comfortably before the fire. 'I shall then exert those powers on which you flatter me so highly – though, upon my word, I don't deserve your compliments to their full extent – and resort to a few little trivial subterfuges for rousing jealousy and resentment. You see?'

'In short, justifying the means by the end, we are, as a last resource for tearing them asunder, to resort to treachery and – and lying,' said Mr Haredale.

'Oh dear no. Fie, fie!' returned the other, relishing a pinch of snuff extremely. 'Not lying. Only a little management, a little diplomacy, a little – intriguing, that's the word.'

'I wish,' said Mr Haredale, moving to and fro, and stopping, and moving on again, like one who was ill at ease, 'that this could

have been foreseen or prevented. But as it has gone so far, and it is necessary for us to act, it is of no use shrinking or regretting. Well! I shall second your endeavours to the utmost of my power. There is one topic in the whole wide range of human thoughts on which we both agree. We shall act in concert, but apart. There will be no need, I hope, for us to meet again.'

'Are you going?' said Mr Chester, rising with a graceful indolence. 'Let me light you down the stairs.'

'Pray keep your seat,' returned the other drily, 'I know the way.' So, waving his hand slightly, and putting on his hat as he turned upon his heel, he went clanking out as he had come, shut the door behind him, and tramped down the echoing stairs.

'Pah! A very coarse animal, indeed!' said Mr Chester, composing himself in the easy-chair again. 'A rough brute. Quite a human badger!'

John Willet and his friends, who had been listening intently for the clash of swords, or firing of pistols in the great room, and had indeed settled the order in which they should rush in when summoned – in which procession old John had carefully arranged that he should bring up the rear – were very much astonished to see Mr Haredale come down without a scratch, call for his horse, and ride away thoughtfully at a footpace. After some consideration, it was decided that he had left the gentleman above, for dead, and had adopted this stratagem to divert suspicion or pursuit.

As this conclusion involved the necessity of their going

upstairs forthwith, they were about to ascend in the order they had agreed upon, when a smart ringing at the guest's bell, as if he had pulled it vigorously, overthrew all their speculations, and involved them in great uncertainty and doubt. At length Mr Willet agreed to go upstairs himself, escorted by Hugh and Barnaby, as the strongest and stoutest fellows on the premises, who were to make their appearance under pretence of clearing away the glasses.

Under this protection, the brave and broad-faced John boldly entered the room, half a foot in advance, and received an order for a boot-jack without trembling. But when it was brought, and he leant his sturdy shoulder to the guest, Mr Willet was observed to look very hard into his boots as he pulled them off, and, by opening his eyes much wider than usual, to appear to express some surprise and disappointment at not finding them full of blood. He took occasion, too, to examine the gentleman as closely as he could, expecting to discover sundry loopholes in his person, pierced by his adversary's sword. Finding none, however, and observing in course of time that his guest was as cool and unruffled, both in his dress and temper, as he had been all day, old John at last heaved a deep sigh, and began to think no duel had been fought that night.

'And now, Willet,' said Mr Chester, 'if the room's well aired, I'll try the merits of that famous bed.'

'The room, sir,' returned John, taking up a candle, and nudging Barnaby and Hugh to accompany them, in case the gentleman

should unexpectedly drop down faint or dead from some internal wound, ‘the room’s as warm as any toast in a tankard. Barnaby, take you that other candle, and go on before. Hugh! Follow up, sir, with the easy-chair.’

In this order – and still, in his earnest inspection, holding his candle very close to the guest; now making him feel extremely warm about the legs, now threatening to set his wig on fire, and constantly begging his pardon with great awkwardness and embarrassment – John led the party to the best bedroom, which was nearly as large as the chamber from which they had come, and held, drawn out near the fire for warmth, a great old spectral bedstead, hung with faded brocade, and ornamented, at the top of each carved post, with a plume of feathers that had once been white, but with dust and age had now grown hearse-like and funereal.

‘Good night, my friends,’ said Mr Chester with a sweet smile, seating himself, when he had surveyed the room from end to end, in the easy-chair which his attendants wheeled before the fire. ‘Good night! Barnaby, my good fellow, you say some prayers before you go to bed, I hope?’

Barnaby nodded. ‘He has some nonsense that he calls his prayers, sir,’ returned old John, officiously. ‘I’m afraid there an’t much good in em.’

‘And Hugh?’ said Mr Chester, turning to him.

‘Not I,’ he answered. ‘I know his’ – pointing to Barnaby – ‘they’re well enough. He sings ‘em sometimes in the straw. I

listen.'

'He's quite a animal, sir,' John whispered in his ear with dignity. 'You'll excuse him, I'm sure. If he has any soul at all, sir, it must be such a very small one, that it don't signify what he does or doesn't in that way. Good night, sir!'

The guest rejoined 'God bless you!' with a fervour that was quite affecting; and John, beckoning his guards to go before, bowed himself out of the room, and left him to his rest in the Maypole's ancient bed.

Chapter 13

If Joseph Willet, the denounced and proscribed of ‘prentices, had happened to be at home when his father’s courtly guest presented himself before the Maypole door – that is, if it had not perversely chanced to be one of the half-dozen days in the whole year on which he was at liberty to absent himself for as many hours without question or reproach – he would have contrived, by hook or crook, to dive to the very bottom of Mr Chester’s mystery, and to come at his purpose with as much certainty as though he had been his confidential adviser. In that fortunate case, the lovers would have had quick warning of the ills that threatened them, and the aid of various timely and wise suggestions to boot; for all Joe’s readiness of thought and action, and all his sympathies and good wishes, were enlisted in favour of the young people, and were staunch in devotion to their cause. Whether this disposition arose out of his old prepossessions in favour of the young lady, whose history had surrounded her in his mind, almost from his cradle, with circumstances of unusual interest; or from his attachment towards the young gentleman, into whose confidence he had, through his shrewdness and alacrity, and the rendering of sundry important services as a spy and messenger, almost imperceptibly glided; whether they had their origin in either of these sources, or in the habit natural to youth, or in the constant badgering and worrying of his venerable

parent, or in any hidden little love affair of his own which gave him something of a fellow-feeling in the matter, it is needless to inquire – especially as Joe was out of the way, and had no opportunity on that particular occasion of testifying to his sentiments either on one side or the other.

It was, in fact, the twenty-fifth of March, which, as most people know to their cost, is, and has been time out of mind, one of those unpleasant epochs termed quarter-days. On this twenty-fifth of March, it was John Willet's pride annually to settle, in hard cash, his account with a certain vintner and distiller in the city of London; to give into whose hands a canvas bag containing its exact amount, and not a penny more or less, was the end and object of a journey for Joe, so surely as the year and day came round.

This journey was performed upon an old grey mare, concerning whom John had an indistinct set of ideas hovering about him, to the effect that she could win a plate or cup if she tried. She never had tried, and probably never would now, being some fourteen or fifteen years of age, short in wind, long in body, and rather the worse for wear in respect of her mane and tail. Notwithstanding these slight defects, John perfectly gloried in the animal; and when she was brought round to the door by Hugh, actually retired into the bar, and there, in a secret grove of lemons, laughed with pride.

'There's a bit of horseflesh, Hugh!' said John, when he had recovered enough self-command to appear at the door again.

'There's a comely creature! There's high mettle! There's bone!'

There was bone enough beyond all doubt; and so Hugh seemed to think, as he sat sideways in the saddle, lazily doubled up with his chin nearly touching his knees; and heedless of the dangling stirrups and loose bridle-rein, sauntered up and down on the little green before the door.

'Mind you take good care of her, sir,' said John, appealing from this insensible person to his son and heir, who now appeared, fully equipped and ready. 'Don't you ride hard.'

'I should be puzzled to do that, I think, father,' Joe replied, casting a disconsolate look at the animal.

'None of your impudence, sir, if you please,' retorted old John. 'What would you ride, sir? A wild ass or zebra would be too tame for you, wouldn't he, eh sir? You'd like to ride a roaring lion, wouldn't you, sir, eh sir? Hold your tongue, sir.' When Mr Willet, in his differences with his son, had exhausted all the questions that occurred to him, and Joe had said nothing at all in answer, he generally wound up by bidding him hold his tongue.

'And what does the boy mean,' added Mr Willet, after he had stared at him for a little time, in a species of stupefaction, 'by cocking his hat, to such an extent! Are you going to kill the wintner, sir?'

'No,' said Joe, tartly; 'I'm not. Now your mind's at ease, father.'

'With a military air, too!' said Mr Willet, surveying him from top to toe; 'with a swaggering, fire-eating, biling-water drinking sort of way with him! And what do you mean by pulling up the

crocuses and snowdrops, eh sir?

‘It’s only a little nosegay,’ said Joe, reddening. ‘There’s no harm in that, I hope?’

‘You’re a boy of business, you are, sir!’ said Mr Willet, disdainfully, ‘to go supposing that wintners care for nosegays.’

‘I don’t suppose anything of the kind,’ returned Joe. ‘Let them keep their red noses for bottles and tankards. These are going to Mr Varden’s house.’

‘And do you suppose HE minds such things as crocuses?’ demanded John.

‘I don’t know, and to say the truth, I don’t care,’ said Joe. ‘Come, father, give me the money, and in the name of patience let me go.’

‘There it is, sir,’ replied John; ‘and take care of it; and mind you don’t make too much haste back, but give the mare a long rest. – Do you mind?’

‘Ay, I mind,’ returned Joe. ‘She’ll need it, Heaven knows.’

‘And don’t you score up too much at the Black Lion,’ said John. ‘Mind that too.’

‘Then why don’t you let me have some money of my own?’ retorted Joe, sorrowfully; ‘why don’t you, father? What do you send me into London for, giving me only the right to call for my dinner at the Black Lion, which you’re to pay for next time you go, as if I was not to be trusted with a few shillings? Why do you use me like this? It’s not right of you. You can’t expect me to be quiet under it.’

‘Let him have money!’ cried John, in a drowsy reverie. ‘What does he call money – guineas? Hasn’t he got money? Over and above the tolls, hasn’t he one and sixpence?’

‘One and sixpence!’ repeated his son contemptuously.

‘Yes, sir,’ returned John, ‘one and sixpence. When I was your age, I had never seen so much money, in a heap. A shilling of it is in case of accidents – the mare casting a shoe, or the like of that. The other sixpence is to spend in the diversions of London; and the diversion I recommend is going to the top of the Monument, and sitting there. There’s no temptation there, sir – no drink – no young women – no bad characters of any sort – nothing but imagination. That’s the way I enjoyed myself when I was your age, sir.’

To this, Joe made no answer, but beckoning Hugh, leaped into the saddle and rode away; and a very stalwart, manly horseman he looked, deserving a better charger than it was his fortune to bestride. John stood staring after him, or rather after the grey mare (for he had no eyes for her rider), until man and beast had been out of sight some twenty minutes, when he began to think they were gone, and slowly re-entering the house, fell into a gentle doze.

The unfortunate grey mare, who was the agony of Joe’s life, floundered along at her own will and pleasure until the Maypole was no longer visible, and then, contracting her legs into what in a puppet would have been looked upon as a clumsy and awkward imitation of a canter, mended her pace all at once, and did it of

her own accord. The acquaintance with her rider's usual mode of proceeding, which suggested this improvement in hers, impelled her likewise to turn up a bye-way, leading – not to London, but through lanes running parallel with the road they had come, and passing within a few hundred yards of the Maypole, which led finally to an inclosure surrounding a large, old, red-brick mansion – the same of which mention was made as the Warren in the first chapter of this history. Coming to a dead stop in a little copse thereabout, she suffered her rider to dismount with right goodwill, and to tie her to the trunk of a tree.

‘Stay there, old girl,’ said Joe, ‘and let us see whether there's any little commission for me to-day.’ So saying, he left her to browse upon such stunted grass and weeds as happened to grow within the length of her tether, and passing through a wicket gate, entered the grounds on foot.

The pathway, after a very few minutes' walking, brought him close to the house, towards which, and especially towards one particular window, he directed many covert glances. It was a dreary, silent building, with echoing courtyards, desolated turret-chambers, and whole suites of rooms shut up and mouldering to ruin.

The terrace-garden, dark with the shade of overhanging trees, had an air of melancholy that was quite oppressive. Great iron gates, disused for many years, and red with rust, drooping on their hinges and overgrown with long rank grass, seemed as though they tried to sink into the ground, and hide their fallen

state among the friendly weeds. The fantastic monsters on the walls, green with age and damp, and covered here and there with moss, looked grim and desolate. There was a sombre aspect even on that part of the mansion which was inhabited and kept in good repair, that struck the beholder with a sense of sadness; of something forlorn and failing, whence cheerfulness was banished. It would have been difficult to imagine a bright fire blazing in the dull and darkened rooms, or to picture any gaiety of heart or revelry that the frowning walls shut in. It seemed a place where such things had been, but could be no more – the very ghost of a house, haunting the old spot in its old outward form, and that was all.

Much of this decayed and sombre look was attributable, no doubt, to the death of its former master, and the temper of its present occupant; but remembering the tale connected with the mansion, it seemed the very place for such a deed, and one that might have been its predestined theatre years upon years ago. Viewed with reference to this legend, the sheet of water where the steward's body had been found appeared to wear a black and sullen character, such as no other pool might own; the bell upon the roof that had told the tale of murder to the midnight wind, became a very phantom whose voice would raise the listener's hair on end; and every leafless bough that nodded to another, had its stealthy whispering of the crime.

Joe paced up and down the path, sometimes stopping in affected contemplation of the building or the prospect,

sometimes leaning against a tree with an assumed air of idleness and indifference, but always keeping an eye upon the window he had singled out at first. After some quarter of an hour's delay, a small white hand was waved to him for an instant from this casement, and the young man, with a respectful bow, departed, saying under his breath as he crossed his horse again, 'No errand for me to-day!'

But the air of smartness, the cock of the hat to which John Willet had objected, and the spring nosegay, all betokened some little errand of his own, having a more interesting object than a vintner or even a locksmith. So, indeed, it turned out; for when he had settled with the vintner – whose place of business was down in some deep cellars hard by Thames Street, and who was as purple-faced an old gentleman as if he had all his life supported their arched roof on his head – when he had settled the account, and taken the receipt, and declined tasting more than three glasses of old sherry, to the unbounded astonishment of the purple-faced vintner, who, gimlet in hand, had projected an attack upon at least a score of dusty casks, and who stood transfixed, or morally gimleted as it were, to his own wall – when he had done all this, and disposed besides of a frugal dinner at the Black Lion in Whitechapel; spurning the Monument and John's advice, he turned his steps towards the locksmith's house, attracted by the eyes of blooming Dolly Varden.

Joe was by no means a sheepish fellow, but, for all that, when he got to the corner of the street in which the locksmith lived,

he could by no means make up his mind to walk straight to the house. First, he resolved to stroll up another street for five minutes, then up another street for five minutes more, and so on until he had lost full half an hour, when he made a bold plunge and found himself with a red face and a beating heart in the smoky workshop.

‘Joe Willet, or his ghost?’ said Varden, rising from the desk at which he was busy with his books, and looking at him under his spectacles. ‘Which is it? Joe in the flesh, eh? That’s hearty. And how are all the Chigwell company, Joe?’

‘Much as usual, sir – they and I agree as well as ever.’

‘Well, well!’ said the locksmith. ‘We must be patient, Joe, and bear with old folks’ foibles. How’s the mare, Joe? Does she do the four miles an hour as easily as ever? Ha, ha, ha! Does she, Joe? Eh! – What have we there, Joe – a nosegay!’

‘A very poor one, sir – I thought Miss Dolly –’

‘No, no,’ said Gabriel, dropping his voice, and shaking his head, ‘not Dolly. Give ‘em to her mother, Joe. A great deal better give ‘em to her mother. Would you mind giving ‘em to Mrs Varden, Joe?’

‘Oh no, sir,’ Joe replied, and endeavouring, but not with the greatest possible success, to hide his disappointment. ‘I shall be very glad, I’m sure.’

‘That’s right,’ said the locksmith, patting him on the back. ‘It don’t matter who has ‘em, Joe?’

‘Not a bit, sir.’ – Dear heart, how the words stuck in his throat!

‘Come in,’ said Gabriel. ‘I have just been called to tea. She’s in the parlour.’

‘She,’ thought Joe. ‘Which of ‘em I wonder – Mrs or Miss?’ The locksmith settled the doubt as neatly as if it had been expressed aloud, by leading him to the door, and saying, ‘Martha, my dear, here’s young Mr Willet.’

Now, Mrs Varden, regarding the Maypole as a sort of human mantrap, or decoy for husbands; viewing its proprietor, and all who aided and abetted him, in the light of so many poachers among Christian men; and believing, moreover, that the publicans coupled with sinners in Holy Writ were veritable licensed victuallers; was far from being favourably disposed towards her visitor. Wherefore she was taken faint directly; and being duly presented with the crocuses and snowdrops, divined on further consideration that they were the occasion of the languor which had seized upon her spirits. ‘I’m afraid I couldn’t bear the room another minute,’ said the good lady, ‘if they remained here. WOULD you excuse my putting them out of window?’

Joe begged she wouldn’t mention it on any account, and smiled feebly as he saw them deposited on the sill outside. If anybody could have known the pains he had taken to make up that despised and misused bunch of flowers! —

‘I feel it quite a relief to get rid of them, I assure you,’ said Mrs Varden. ‘I’m better already.’ And indeed she did appear to have plucked up her spirits.

Joe expressed his gratitude to Providence for this favourable dispensation, and tried to look as if he didn't wonder where Dolly was.

'You're sad people at Chigwell, Mr Joseph,' said Mrs V.

'I hope not, ma'am,' returned Joe.

'You're the cruellest and most inconsiderate people in the world,' said Mrs Varden, bristling. 'I wonder old Mr Willet, having been a married man himself, doesn't know better than to conduct himself as he does. His doing it for profit is no excuse. I would rather pay the money twenty times over, and have Varden come home like a respectable and sober tradesman. If there is one character,' said Mrs Varden with great emphasis, 'that offends and disgusts me more than another, it is a sot.'

'Come, Martha, my dear,' said the locksmith cheerily, 'let us have tea, and don't let us talk about sots. There are none here, and Joe don't want to hear about them, I dare say.'

At this crisis, Miggs appeared with toast.

'I dare say he does not,' said Mrs Varden; 'and I dare say you do not, Varden. It's a very unpleasant subject, I have no doubt, though I won't say it's personal' – Miggs coughed – 'whatever I may be forced to think' – Miggs sneezed expressively. 'You never will know, Varden, and nobody at young Mr Willet's age – you'll excuse me, sir – can be expected to know, what a woman suffers when she is waiting at home under such circumstances. If you don't believe me, as I know you don't, here's Miggs, who is only too often a witness of it – ask her.'

‘Oh! she were very bad the other night, sir, indeed she were,’ said Miggs. ‘If you hadn’t the sweetness of an angel in you, mim, I don’t think you could abear it, I raly don’t.’

‘Miggs,’ said Mrs Varden, ‘you’re profane.’

‘Begging your pardon, mim,’ returned Miggs, with shrill rapidity, ‘such was not my intentions, and such I hope is not my character, though I am but a servant.’

‘Answering me, Miggs, and providing yourself,’ retorted her mistress, looking round with dignity, ‘is one and the same thing. How dare you speak of angels in connection with your sinful fellow-beings – mere’ – said Mrs Varden, glancing at herself in a neighbouring mirror, and arranging the ribbon of her cap in a more becoming fashion – ‘mere worms and grovellers as we are!’

‘I did not intend, mim, if you please, to give offence,’ said Miggs, confident in the strength of her compliment, and developing strongly in the throat as usual, ‘and I did not expect it would be took as such. I hope I know my own unworthiness, and that I hate and despise myself and all my fellow-creatures as every practicable Christian should.’

‘You’ll have the goodness, if you please,’ said Mrs Varden, loftily, ‘to step upstairs and see if Dolly has finished dressing, and to tell her that the chair that was ordered for her will be here in a minute, and that if she keeps it waiting, I shall send it away that instant. – I’m sorry to see that you don’t take your tea, Varden, and that you don’t take yours, Mr Joseph; though of course it would be foolish of me to expect that anything that can be had

at home, and in the company of females, would please YOU.’

This pronoun was understood in the plural sense, and included both gentlemen, upon both of whom it was rather hard and undeserved, for Gabriel had applied himself to the meal with a very promising appetite, until it was spoilt by Mrs Varden herself, and Joe had as great a liking for the female society of the locksmith’s house – or for a part of it at all events – as man could well entertain.

But he had no opportunity to say anything in his own defence, for at that moment Dolly herself appeared, and struck him quite dumb with her beauty. Never had Dolly looked so handsome as she did then, in all the glow and grace of youth, with all her charms increased a hundredfold by a most becoming dress, by a thousand little coquettish ways which nobody could assume with a better grace, and all the sparkling expectation of that accursed party. It is impossible to tell how Joe hated that party wherever it was, and all the other people who were going to it, whoever they were.

And she hardly looked at him – no, hardly looked at him. And when the chair was seen through the open door coming blundering into the workshop, she actually clapped her hands and seemed glad to go. But Joe gave her his arm – there was some comfort in that – and handed her into it. To see her seat herself inside, with her laughing eyes brighter than diamonds, and her hand – surely she had the prettiest hand in the world – on the ledge of the open window, and her little finger provokingly

and pertly tilted up, as if it wondered why Joe didn't squeeze or kiss it! To think how well one or two of the modest snowdrops would have become that delicate bodice, and how they were lying neglected outside the parlour window! To see how Miggs looked on with a face expressive of knowing how all this loveliness was got up, and of being in the secret of every string and pin and hook and eye, and of saying it ain't half as real as you think, and I could look quite as well myself if I took the pains! To hear that provoking precious little scream when the chair was hoisted on its poles, and to catch that transient but not-to-be-forgotten vision of the happy face within – what torments and aggravations, and yet what delights were these! The very chairmen seemed favoured rivals as they bore her down the street.

There never was such an alteration in a small room in a small time as in that parlour when they went back to finish tea. So dark, so deserted, so perfectly disenchanted. It seemed such sheer nonsense to be sitting tamely there, when she was at a dance with more lovers than man could calculate fluttering about her – with the whole party doting on and adoring her, and wanting to marry her. Miggs was hovering about too; and the fact of her existence, the mere circumstance of her ever having been born, appeared, after Dolly, such an unaccountable practical joke. It was impossible to talk. It couldn't be done. He had nothing left for it but to stir his tea round, and round, and round, and ruminate on all the fascinations of the locksmith's lovely daughter.

Gabriel was dull too. It was a part of the certain uncertainty

of Mrs Varden's temper, that when they were in this condition, she should be gay and sprightly.

'I need have a cheerful disposition, I am sure,' said the smiling housewife, 'to preserve any spirits at all; and how I do it I can scarcely tell.'

'Ah, mim,' sighed Miggs, 'begging your pardon for the interruption, there an't a many like you.'

'Take away, Miggs,' said Mrs Varden, rising, 'take away, pray. I know I'm a restraint here, and as I wish everybody to enjoy themselves as they best can, I feel I had better go.'

'No, no, Martha,' cried the locksmith. 'Stop here. I'm sure we shall be very sorry to lose you, eh Joe!' Joe started, and said 'Certainly.'

'Thank you, Varden, my dear,' returned his wife; 'but I know your wishes better. Tobacco and beer, or spirits, have much greater attractions than any I can boast of, and therefore I shall go and sit upstairs and look out of window, my love. Good night, Mr Joseph. I'm very glad to have seen you, and I only wish I could have provided something more suitable to your taste. Remember me very kindly if you please to old Mr Willet, and tell him that whenever he comes here I have a crow to pluck with him. Good night!'

Having uttered these words with great sweetness of manner, the good lady dropped a curtsy remarkable for its condescension, and serenely withdrew.

And it was for this Joe had looked forward to the twenty-fifth

of March for weeks and weeks, and had gathered the flowers with so much care, and had cocked his hat, and made himself so smart! This was the end of all his bold determination, resolved upon for the hundredth time, to speak out to Dolly and tell her how he loved her! To see her for a minute – for but a minute – to find her going out to a party and glad to go; to be looked upon as a common pipe-smoker, beer-bibber, spirit-guzzler, and tosspot! He bade farewell to his friend the locksmith, and hastened to take horse at the Black Lion, thinking as he turned towards home, as many another Joe has thought before and since, that here was an end to all his hopes – that the thing was impossible and never could be – that she didn't care for him – that he was wretched for life – and that the only congenial prospect left him, was to go for a soldier or a sailor, and get some obliging enemy to knock his brains out as soon as possible.

Chapter 14

Joe Willet rode leisurely along in his desponding mood, picturing the locksmith's daughter going down long country-dances, and pousetting dreadfully with bold strangers – which was almost too much to bear – when he heard the tramp of a horse's feet behind him, and looking back, saw a well-mounted gentleman advancing at a smart canter. As this rider passed, he checked his steed, and called him of the Maypole by his name. Joe set spurs to the grey mare, and was at his side directly.

'I thought it was you, sir,' he said, touching his hat. 'A fair evening, sir. Glad to see you out of doors again.'

The gentleman smiled and nodded. 'What gay doings have been going on to-day, Joe? Is she as pretty as ever? Nay, don't blush, man.'

'If I coloured at all, Mr Edward,' said Joe, 'which I didn't know I did, it was to think I should have been such a fool as ever to have any hope of her. She's as far out of my reach as – as Heaven is.'

'Well, Joe, I hope that's not altogether beyond it,' said Edward, good-humouredly. 'Eh?'

'Ah!' sighed Joe. 'It's all very fine talking, sir. Proverbs are easily made in cold blood. But it can't be helped. Are you bound for our house, sir?'

'Yes. As I am not quite strong yet, I shall stay there to-night, and ride home coolly in the morning.'

‘If you’re in no particular hurry,’ said Joe after a short silence, ‘and will bear with the pace of this poor jade, I shall be glad to ride on with you to the Warren, sir, and hold your horse when you dismount. It’ll save you having to walk from the Maypole, there and back again. I can spare the time well, sir, for I am too soon.’

‘And so am I,’ returned Edward, ‘though I was unconsciously riding fast just now, in compliment I suppose to the pace of my thoughts, which were travelling post. We will keep together, Joe, willingly, and be as good company as may be. And cheer up, cheer up, think of the locksmith’s daughter with a stout heart, and you shall win her yet.’

Joe shook his head; but there was something so cheery in the buoyant hopeful manner of this speech, that his spirits rose under its influence, and communicated as it would seem some new impulse even to the grey mare, who, breaking from her sober amble into a gentle trot, emulated the pace of Edward Chester’s horse, and appeared to flatter herself that he was doing his very best.

It was a fine dry night, and the light of a young moon, which was then just rising, shed around that peace and tranquillity which gives to evening time its most delicious charm. The lengthened shadows of the trees, softened as if reflected in still water, threw their carpet on the path the travellers pursued, and the light wind stirred yet more softly than before, as though it were soothing Nature in her sleep. By little and little they ceased talking, and rode on side by side in a pleasant silence.

‘The Maypole lights are brilliant to-night,’ said Edward, as they rode along the lane from which, while the intervening trees were bare of leaves, that hostelry was visible.

‘Brilliant indeed, sir,’ returned Joe, rising in his stirrups to get a better view. ‘Lights in the large room, and a fire glimmering in the best bedchamber? Why, what company can this be for, I wonder!’

‘Some benighted horseman wending towards London, and deterred from going on to-night by the marvellous tales of my friend the highwayman, I suppose,’ said Edward.

‘He must be a horseman of good quality to have such accommodations. Your bed too, sir – !’

‘No matter, Joe. Any other room will do for me. But come – there’s nine striking. We may push on.’

They cantered forward at as brisk a pace as Joe’s charger could attain, and presently stopped in the little copse where he had left her in the morning. Edward dismounted, gave his bridle to his companion, and walked with a light step towards the house.

A female servant was waiting at a side gate in the garden-wall, and admitted him without delay. He hurried along the terrace-walk, and darted up a flight of broad steps leading into an old and gloomy hall, whose walls were ornamented with rusty suits of armour, antlers, weapons of the chase, and suchlike garniture. Here he paused, but not long; for as he looked round, as if expecting the attendant to have followed, and wondering she had not done so, a lovely girl appeared, whose dark hair next moment

rested on his breast. Almost at the same instant a heavy hand was laid upon her arm, Edward felt himself thrust away, and Mr Haredale stood between them.

He regarded the young man sternly without removing his hat; with one hand clasped his niece, and with the other, in which he held his riding-whip, motioned him towards the door. The young man drew himself up, and returned his gaze.

‘This is well done of you, sir, to corrupt my servants, and enter my house unbidden and in secret, like a thief!’ said Mr Haredale. ‘Leave it, sir, and return no more.’

‘Miss Haredale’s presence,’ returned the young man, ‘and your relationship to her, give you a licence which, if you are a brave man, you will not abuse. You have compelled me to this course, and the fault is yours – not mine.’

‘It is neither generous, nor honourable, nor the act of a true man, sir,’ retorted the other, ‘to tamper with the affections of a weak, trusting girl, while you shrink, in your unworthiness, from her guardian and protector, and dare not meet the light of day. More than this I will not say to you, save that I forbid you this house, and require you to be gone.’

‘It is neither generous, nor honourable, nor the act of a true man to play the spy,’ said Edward. ‘Your words imply dishonour, and I reject them with the scorn they merit.’

‘You will find,’ said Mr Haredale, calmly, ‘your trusty go-between in waiting at the gate by which you entered. I have played no spy’s part, sir. I chanced to see you pass the gate, and

followed. You might have heard me knocking for admission, had you been less swift of foot, or lingered in the garden. Please to withdraw. Your presence here is offensive to me and distressful to my niece.' As he said these words, he passed his arm about the waist of the terrified and weeping girl, and drew her closer to him; and though the habitual severity of his manner was scarcely changed, there was yet apparent in the action an air of kindness and sympathy for her distress.

'Mr Haredale,' said Edward, 'your arm encircles her on whom I have set my every hope and thought, and to purchase one minute's happiness for whom I would gladly lay down my life; this house is the casket that holds the precious jewel of my existence. Your niece has plighted her faith to me, and I have plighted mine to her. What have I done that you should hold me in this light esteem, and give me these discourteous words?'

'You have done that, sir,' answered Mr Haredale, 'which must be undone. You have tied a lover's-knot here which must be cut asunder. Take good heed of what I say. Must. I cancel the bond between ye. I reject you, and all of your kith and kin – all the false, hollow, heartless stock.'

'High words, sir,' said Edward, scornfully.

'Words of purpose and meaning, as you will find,' replied the other. 'Lay them to heart.'

'Lay you then, these,' said Edward. 'Your cold and sullen temper, which chills every breast about you, which turns affection into fear, and changes duty into dread, has forced us

on this secret course, repugnant to our nature and our wish, and far more foreign, sir, to us than you. I am not a false, a hollow, or a heartless man; the character is yours, who poorly venture on these injurious terms, against the truth, and under the shelter whereof I reminded you just now. You shall not cancel the bond between us. I will not abandon this pursuit. I rely upon your niece's truth and honour, and set your influence at nought. I leave her with a confidence in her pure faith, which you will never weaken, and with no concern but that I do not leave her in some gentler care.'

With that, he pressed her cold hand to his lips, and once more encountering and returning Mr Haredale's steady look, withdrew.

A few words to Joe as he mounted his horse sufficiently explained what had passed, and renewed all that young gentleman's despondency with tenfold aggravation. They rode back to the Maypole without exchanging a syllable, and arrived at the door with heavy hearts.

Old John, who had peeped from behind the red curtain as they rode up shouting for Hugh, was out directly, and said with great importance as he held the young man's stirrup,

'He's comfortable in bed – the best bed. A thorough gentleman; the smilingest, affablest gentleman I ever had to do with.'

'Who, Willet?' said Edward carelessly, as he dismounted.

'Your worthy father, sir,' replied John. 'Your honourable,

venerable father.'

'What does he mean?' said Edward, looking with a mixture of alarm and doubt, at Joe.

'What DO you mean?' said Joe. 'Don't you see Mr Edward doesn't understand, father?'

'Why, didn't you know of it, sir?' said John, opening his eyes wide. 'How very singular! Bless you, he's been here ever since noon to-day, and Mr Haredale has been having a long talk with him, and hasn't been gone an hour.'

'My father, Willet!'

'Yes, sir, he told me so – a handsome, slim, upright gentleman, in green-and-gold. In your old room up yonder, sir. No doubt you can go in, sir,' said John, walking backwards into the road and looking up at the window. 'He hasn't put out his candles yet, I see.'

Edward glanced at the window also, and hastily murmuring that he had changed his mind – forgotten something – and must return to London, mounted his horse again and rode away; leaving the Willets, father and son, looking at each other in mute astonishment.

Chapter 15

At noon next day, John Willet's guest sat lingering over his breakfast in his own home, surrounded by a variety of comforts, which left the Maypole's highest flight and utmost stretch of accommodation at an infinite distance behind, and suggested comparisons very much to the disadvantage and disfavour of that venerable tavern.

In the broad old-fashioned window-seat – as capacious as many modern sofas, and cushioned to serve the purpose of a luxurious settee – in the broad old-fashioned window-seat of a roomy chamber, Mr Chester lounged, very much at his ease, over a well-furnished breakfast-table. He had exchanged his riding-coat for a handsome morning-gown, his boots for slippers; had been at great pains to atone for the having been obliged to make his toilet when he rose without the aid of dressing-case and tiring equipage; and, having gradually forgotten through these means the discomforts of an indifferent night and an early ride, was in a state of perfect complacency, indolence, and satisfaction.

The situation in which he found himself, indeed, was particularly favourable to the growth of these feelings; for, not to mention the lazy influence of a late and lonely breakfast, with the additional sedative of a newspaper, there was an air of repose about his place of residence peculiar to itself, and which hangs about it, even in these times, when it is more bustling and busy

than it was in days of yore.

There are, still, worse places than the Temple, on a sultry day, for basking in the sun, or resting idly in the shade. There is yet a drowsiness in its courts, and a dreamy dulness in its trees and gardens; those who pace its lanes and squares may yet hear the echoes of their footsteps on the sounding stones, and read upon its gates, in passing from the tumult of the Strand or Fleet Street, 'Who enters here leaves noise behind.' There is still the plash of falling water in fair Fountain Court, and there are yet nooks and corners where dun-haunted students may look down from their dusty garrets, on a vagrant ray of sunlight patching the shade of the tall houses, and seldom troubled to reflect a passing stranger's form. There is yet, in the Temple, something of a clerkly monkish atmosphere, which public offices of law have not disturbed, and even legal firms have failed to scare away. In summer time, its pumps suggest to thirsty idlers, springs cooler, and more sparkling, and deeper than other wells; and as they trace the spillings of full pitchers on the heated ground, they snuff the freshness, and, sighing, cast sad looks towards the Thames, and think of baths and boats, and saunter on, despondent.

It was in a room in Paper Buildings – a row of goodly tenements, shaded in front by ancient trees, and looking, at the back, upon the Temple Gardens – that this, our idler, lounged; now taking up again the paper he had laid down a hundred times; now trifling with the fragments of his meal; now pulling forth his golden toothpick, and glancing leisurely about the room, or

out at window into the trim garden walks, where a few early loiterers were already pacing to and fro. Here a pair of lovers met to quarrel and make up; there a dark-eyed nursery-maid had better eyes for Templars than her charge; on this hand an ancient spinster, with her lapdog in a string, regarded both enormities with scornful sidelong looks; on that a weazen old gentleman, ogling the nursery-maid, looked with like scorn upon the spinster, and wondered she didn't know she was no longer young. Apart from all these, on the river's margin two or three couple of business-talkers walked slowly up and down in earnest conversation; and one young man sat thoughtfully on a bench, alone.

'Ned is amazingly patient!' said Mr Chester, glancing at this last-named person as he set down his teacup and plied the golden toothpick, 'immensely patient! He was sitting yonder when I began to dress, and has scarcely changed his posture since. A most eccentric dog!'

As he spoke, the figure rose, and came towards him with a rapid pace.

'Really, as if he had heard me,' said the father, resuming his newspaper with a yawn. 'Dear Ned!'

Presently the room-door opened, and the young man entered; to whom his father gently waved his hand, and smiled.

'Are you at leisure for a little conversation, sir?' said Edward. 'Surely, Ned. I am always at leisure. You know my constitution. – Have you breakfasted?'

‘Three hours ago.’

‘What a very early dog!’ cried his father, contemplating him from behind the toothpick, with a languid smile.

‘The truth is,’ said Edward, bringing a chair forward, and seating himself near the table, ‘that I slept but ill last night, and was glad to rise. The cause of my uneasiness cannot but be known to you, sir; and it is upon that I wish to speak.’

‘My dear boy,’ returned his father, ‘confide in me, I beg. But you know my constitution – don’t be prosy, Ned.’

‘I will be plain, and brief,’ said Edward.

‘Don’t say you will, my good fellow,’ returned his father, crossing his legs, ‘or you certainly will not. You are going to tell me’ —

‘Plainly this, then,’ said the son, with an air of great concern, ‘that I know where you were last night – from being on the spot, indeed – and whom you saw, and what your purpose was.’

‘You don’t say so!’ cried his father. ‘I am delighted to hear it. It saves us the worry, and terrible wear and tear of a long explanation, and is a great relief for both. At the very house! Why didn’t you come up? I should have been charmed to see you.’

‘I knew that what I had to say would be better said after a night’s reflection, when both of us were cool,’ returned the son.

‘Fore Gad, Ned,’ rejoined the father, ‘I was cool enough last night. That detestable Maypole! By some infernal contrivance of the builder, it holds the wind, and keeps it fresh. You remember the sharp east wind that blew so hard five weeks ago? I give you

my honour it was rampant in that old house last night, though out of doors there was a dead calm. But you were saying' —

'I was about to say, Heaven knows how seriously and earnestly, that you have made me wretched, sir. Will you hear me gravely for a moment?'

'My dear Ned,' said his father, 'I will hear you with the patience of an anchorite. Oblige me with the milk.'

'I saw Miss Haredale last night,' Edward resumed, when he had complied with this request; 'her uncle, in her presence, immediately after your interview, and, as of course I know, in consequence of it, forbade me the house, and, with circumstances of indignity which are of your creation I am sure, commanded me to leave it on the instant.'

'For his manner of doing so, I give you my honour, Ned, I am not accountable,' said his father. 'That you must excuse. He is a mere boor, a log, a brute, with no address in life. — Positively a fly in the jug. The first I have seen this year.'

Edward rose, and paced the room. His imperturbable parent sipped his tea.

'Father,' said the young man, stopping at length before him, 'we must not trifle in this matter. We must not deceive each other, or ourselves. Let me pursue the manly open part I wish to take, and do not repel me by this unkind indifference.'

'Whether I am indifferent or no,' returned the other, 'I leave you, my dear boy, to judge. A ride of twenty-five or thirty miles, through miry roads — a Maypole dinner — a tete-a-tete

with Haredale, which, vanity apart, was quite a Valentine and Orson business – a Maypole bed – a Maypole landlord, and a Maypole retinue of idiots and centaurs; – whether the voluntary endurance of these things looks like indifference, dear Ned, or like the excessive anxiety, and devotion, and all that sort of thing, of a parent, you shall determine for yourself.’

‘I wish you to consider, sir,’ said Edward, ‘in what a cruel situation I am placed. Loving Miss Haredale as I do’ —

‘My dear fellow,’ interrupted his father with a compassionate smile, ‘you do nothing of the kind. You don’t know anything about it. There’s no such thing, I assure you. Now, do take my word for it. You have good sense, Ned, – great good sense. I wonder you should be guilty of such amazing absurdities. You really surprise me.’

‘I repeat,’ said his son firmly, ‘that I love her. You have interposed to part us, and have, to the extent I have just now told you of, succeeded. May I induce you, sir, in time, to think more favourably of our attachment, or is it your intention and your fixed design to hold us asunder if you can?’

‘My dear Ned,’ returned his father, taking a pinch of snuff and pushing his box towards him, ‘that is my purpose most undoubtedly.’

‘The time that has elapsed,’ rejoined his son, ‘since I began to know her worth, has flown in such a dream that until now I have hardly once paused to reflect upon my true position. What is it? From my childhood I have been accustomed to luxury and

idleness, and have been bred as though my fortune were large, and my expectations almost without a limit. The idea of wealth has been familiarised to me from my cradle. I have been taught to look upon those means, by which men raise themselves to riches and distinction, as being beyond my heeding, and beneath my care. I have been, as the phrase is, liberally educated, and am fit for nothing. I find myself at last wholly dependent upon you, with no resource but in your favour. In this momentous question of my life we do not, and it would seem we never can, agree. I have shrunk instinctively alike from those to whom you have urged me to pay court, and from the motives of interest and gain which have rendered them in your eyes visible objects for my suit. If there never has been thus much plain-speaking between us before, sir, the fault has not been mine, indeed. If I seem to speak too plainly now, it is, believe me father, in the hope that there may be a franker spirit, a worthier reliance, and a kinder confidence between us in time to come.'

'My good fellow,' said his smiling father, 'you quite affect me. Go on, my dear Edward, I beg. But remember your promise. There is great earnestness, vast candour, a manifest sincerity in all you say, but I fear I observe the faintest indications of a tendency to prose.'

'I am very sorry, sir.'

'I am very sorry, too, Ned, but you know that I cannot fix my mind for any long period upon one subject. If you'll come to the point at once, I'll imagine all that ought to go before,

and conclude it said. Oblige me with the milk again. Listening, invariably makes me feverish.'

'What I would say then, tends to this,' said Edward. 'I cannot bear this absolute dependence, sir, even upon you. Time has been lost and opportunity thrown away, but I am yet a young man, and may retrieve it. Will you give me the means of devoting such abilities and energies as I possess, to some worthy pursuit? Will you let me try to make for myself an honourable path in life? For any term you please to name – say for five years if you will – I will pledge myself to move no further in the matter of our difference without your full concurrence. During that period, I will endeavour earnestly and patiently, if ever man did, to open some prospect for myself, and free you from the burden you fear I should become if I married one whose worth and beauty are her chief endowments. Will you do this, sir? At the expiration of the term we agree upon, let us discuss this subject again. Till then, unless it is revived by you, let it never be renewed between us.'

'My dear Ned,' returned his father, laying down the newspaper at which he had been glancing carelessly, and throwing himself back in the window-seat, 'I believe you know how very much I dislike what are called family affairs, which are only fit for plebeian Christmas days, and have no manner of business with people of our condition. But as you are proceeding upon a mistake, Ned – altogether upon a mistake – I will conquer my repugnance to entering on such matters, and give you a perfectly plain and candid answer, if you will do me the favour to shut the

door.'

Edward having obeyed him, he took an elegant little knife from his pocket, and paring his nails, continued:

'You have to thank me, Ned, for being of good family; for your mother, charming person as she was, and almost broken-hearted, and so forth, as she left me, when she was prematurely compelled to become immortal – had nothing to boast of in that respect.'

'Her father was at least an eminent lawyer, sir,' said Edward.

'Quite right, Ned; perfectly so. He stood high at the bar, had a great name and great wealth, but having risen from nothing – I have always closed my eyes to the circumstance and steadily resisted its contemplation, but I fear his father dealt in pork, and that his business did once involve cow-heel and sausages – he wished to marry his daughter into a good family. He had his heart's desire, Ned. I was a younger son's younger son, and I married her. We each had our object, and gained it. She stepped at once into the politest and best circles, and I stepped into a fortune which I assure you was very necessary to my comfort – quite indispensable. Now, my good fellow, that fortune is among the things that have been. It is gone, Ned, and has been gone – how old are you? I always forget.'

'Seven-and-twenty, sir.'

'Are you indeed?' cried his father, raising his eyelids in a languishing surprise. 'So much! Then I should say, Ned, that as nearly as I remember, its skirts vanished from human knowledge, about eighteen or nineteen years ago. It was about that time when

I came to live in these chambers (once your grandfather's, and bequeathed by that extremely respectable person to me), and commenced to live upon an inconsiderable annuity and my past reputation.'

'You are jesting with me, sir,' said Edward.

'Not in the slightest degree, I assure you,' returned his father with great composure. 'These family topics are so extremely dry, that I am sorry to say they don't admit of any such relief. It is for that reason, and because they have an appearance of business, that I dislike them so very much. Well! You know the rest. A son, Ned, unless he is old enough to be a companion – that is to say, unless he is some two or three and twenty – is not the kind of thing to have about one. He is a restraint upon his father, his father is a restraint upon him, and they make each other mutually uncomfortable. Therefore, until within the last four years or so – I have a poor memory for dates, and if I mistake, you will correct me in your own mind – you pursued your studies at a distance, and picked up a great variety of accomplishments. Occasionally we passed a week or two together here, and disconcerted each other as only such near relations can. At last you came home. I candidly tell you, my dear boy, that if you had been awkward and overgrown, I should have exported you to some distant part of the world.'

'I wish with all my soul you had, sir,' said Edward.

'No you don't, Ned,' said his father coolly; 'you are mistaken, I assure you. I found you a handsome, prepossessing, elegant

fellow, and I threw you into the society I can still command. Having done that, my dear fellow, I consider that I have provided for you in life, and rely upon your doing something to provide for me in return.'

'I do not understand your meaning, sir.'

'My meaning, Ned, is obvious – I observe another fly in the cream-jug, but have the goodness not to take it out as you did the first, for their walk when their legs are milky, is extremely ungraceful and disagreeable – my meaning is, that you must do as I did; that you must marry well and make the most of yourself.'

'A mere fortune-hunter!' cried the son, indignantly.

'What in the devil's name, Ned, would you be!' returned the father. 'All men are fortune-hunters, are they not? The law, the church, the court, the camp – see how they are all crowded with fortune-hunters, jostling each other in the pursuit. The stock-exchange, the pulpit, the counting-house, the royal drawing-room, the senate, – what but fortune-hunters are they filled with? A fortune-hunter! Yes. You ARE one; and you would be nothing else, my dear Ned, if you were the greatest courtier, lawyer, legislator, prelate, or merchant, in existence. If you are squeamish and moral, Ned, console yourself with the reflection that at the very worst your fortune-hunting can make but one person miserable or unhappy. How many people do you suppose these other kinds of huntsmen crush in following their sport – hundreds at a step? Or thousands?'

The young man leant his head upon his hand, and made no

answer.

‘I am quite charmed,’ said the father rising, and walking slowly to and fro – stopping now and then to glance at himself in the mirror, or survey a picture through his glass, with the air of a connoisseur, ‘that we have had this conversation, Ned, unpromising as it was. It establishes a confidence between us which is quite delightful, and was certainly necessary, though how you can ever have mistaken our positions and designs, I confess I cannot understand. I conceived, until I found your fancy for this girl, that all these points were tacitly agreed upon between us.’

‘I knew you were embarrassed, sir,’ returned the son, raising his head for a moment, and then falling into his former attitude, ‘but I had no idea we were the beggared wretches you describe. How could I suppose it, bred as I have been; witnessing the life you have always led; and the appearance you have always made?’

‘My dear child,’ said the father – ‘for you really talk so like a child that I must call you one – you were bred upon a careful principle; the very manner of your education, I assure you, maintained my credit surprisingly. As to the life I lead, I must lead it, Ned. I must have these little refinements about me. I have always been used to them, and I cannot exist without them. They must surround me, you observe, and therefore they are here. With regard to our circumstances, Ned, you may set your mind at rest upon that score. They are desperate. Your own appearance is by no means despicable, and our joint pocket-money alone

devours our income. That's the truth.'

'Why have I never known this before? Why have you encouraged me, sir, to an expenditure and mode of life to which we have no right or title?'

'My good fellow,' returned his father more compassionately than ever, 'if you made no appearance, how could you possibly succeed in the pursuit for which I destined you? As to our mode of life, every man has a right to live in the best way he can; and to make himself as comfortable as he can, or he is an unnatural scoundrel. Our debts, I grant, are very great, and therefore it the more behoves you, as a young man of principle and honour, to pay them off as speedily as possible.'

'The villain's part,' muttered Edward, 'that I have unconsciously played! I to win the heart of Emma Haredale! I would, for her sake, I had died first!'

'I am glad you see, Ned,' returned his father, 'how perfectly self-evident it is, that nothing can be done in that quarter. But apart from this, and the necessity of your speedily bestowing yourself on another (as you know you could to-morrow, if you chose), I wish you'd look upon it pleasantly. In a religious point of view alone, how could you ever think of uniting yourself to a Catholic, unless she was amazingly rich? You ought to be so very Protestant, coming of such a Protestant family as you do. Let us be moral, Ned, or we are nothing. Even if one could set that objection aside, which is impossible, we come to another which is quite conclusive. The very idea of marrying a girl whose

father was killed, like meat! Good God, Ned, how disagreeable! Consider the impossibility of having any respect for your father-in-law under such unpleasant circumstances – think of his having been “viewed” by jurors, and “sat upon” by coroners, and of his very doubtful position in the family ever afterwards. It seems to me such an indelicate sort of thing that I really think the girl ought to have been put to death by the state to prevent its happening. But I tease you perhaps. You would rather be alone? My dear Ned, most willingly. God bless you. I shall be going out presently, but we shall meet to-night, or if not to-night, certainly to-morrow. Take care of yourself in the mean time, for both our sakes. You are a person of great consequence to me, Ned – of vast consequence indeed. God bless you!’

With these words, the father, who had been arranging his cravat in the glass, while he uttered them in a disconnected careless manner, withdrew, humming a tune as he went. The son, who had appeared so lost in thought as not to hear or understand them, remained quite still and silent. After the lapse of half an hour or so, the elder Chester, gaily dressed, went out. The younger still sat with his head resting on his hands, in what appeared to be a kind of stupor.

Chapter 16

A series of pictures representing the streets of London in the night, even at the comparatively recent date of this tale, would present to the eye something so very different in character from the reality which is witnessed in these times, that it would be difficult for the beholder to recognise his most familiar walks in the altered aspect of little more than half a century ago.

They were, one and all, from the broadest and best to the narrowest and least frequented, very dark. The oil and cotton lamps, though regularly trimmed twice or thrice in the long winter nights, burnt feebly at the best; and at a late hour, when they were unassisted by the lamps and candles in the shops, cast but a narrow track of doubtful light upon the footway, leaving the projecting doors and house-fronts in the deepest gloom. Many of the courts and lanes were left in total darkness; those of the meaner sort, where one glimmering light twinkled for a score of houses, being favoured in no slight degree. Even in these places, the inhabitants had often good reason for extinguishing their lamp as soon as it was lighted; and the watch being utterly inefficient and powerless to prevent them, they did so at their pleasure. Thus, in the lightest thoroughfares, there was at every turn some obscure and dangerous spot whither a thief might fly or shelter, and few would care to follow; and the city being belted round by fields, green lanes, waste grounds, and lonely roads,

dividing it at that time from the suburbs that have joined it since, escape, even where the pursuit was hot, was rendered easy.

It is no wonder that with these favouring circumstances in full and constant operation, street robberies, often accompanied by cruel wounds, and not unfrequently by loss of life, should have been of nightly occurrence in the very heart of London, or that quiet folks should have had great dread of traversing its streets after the shops were closed. It was not unusual for those who wended home alone at midnight, to keep the middle of the road, the better to guard against surprise from lurking footpads; few would venture to repair at a late hour to Kentish Town or Hampstead, or even to Kensington or Chelsea, unarmed and unattended; while he who had been loudest and most valiant at the supper-table or the tavern, and had but a mile or so to go, was glad to fee a link-boy to escort him home.

There were many other characteristics – not quite so disagreeable – about the thoroughfares of London then, with which they had been long familiar. Some of the shops, especially those to the eastward of Temple Bar, still adhered to the old practice of hanging out a sign; and the creaking and swinging of these boards in their iron frames on windy nights, formed a strange and mournful concert for the ears of those who lay awake in bed or hurried through the streets. Long stands of hackney-chairs and groups of chairmen, compared with whom the coachmen of our day are gentle and polite, obstructed the way and filled the air with clamour; night-cellars, indicated by

a little stream of light crossing the pavement, and stretching out half-way into the road, and by the stifled roar of voices from below, yawned for the reception and entertainment of the most abandoned of both sexes; under every shed and bulk small groups of link-boys gamed away the earnings of the day; or one more weary than the rest, gave way to sleep, and let the fragment of his torch fall hissing on the puddled ground.

Then there was the watch with staff and lantern crying the hour, and the kind of weather; and those who woke up at his voice and turned them round in bed, were glad to hear it rained, or snowed, or blew, or froze, for very comfort's sake. The solitary passenger was startled by the chairmen's cry of 'By your leave there!' as two came trotting past him with their empty vehicle – carried backwards to show its being disengaged – and hurried to the nearest stand. Many a private chair, too, inclosing some fine lady, monstrously hooped and furbelowed, and preceded by running-footmen bearing flambeaux – for which extinguishers are yet suspended before the doors of a few houses of the better sort – made the way gay and light as it danced along, and darker and more dismal when it had passed. It was not unusual for these running gentry, who carried it with a very high hand, to quarrel in the servants' hall while waiting for their masters and mistresses; and, falling to blows either there or in the street without, to strew the place of skirmish with hair-powder, fragments of bag-wigs, and scattered nosegays. Gaming, the vice which ran so high among all classes (the fashion being of course set by the

upper), was generally the cause of these disputes; for cards and dice were as openly used, and worked as much mischief, and yielded as much excitement below stairs, as above. While incidents like these, arising out of drums and masquerades and parties at quadrille, were passing at the west end of the town, heavy stagecoaches and scarce heavier waggons were lumbering slowly towards the city, the coachmen, guard, and passengers, armed to the teeth, and the coach – a day or so perhaps behind its time, but that was nothing – despoiled by highwaymen; who made no scruple to attack, alone and single-handed, a whole caravan of goods and men, and sometimes shot a passenger or two, and were sometimes shot themselves, as the case might be. On the morrow, rumours of this new act of daring on the road yielded matter for a few hours' conversation through the town, and a Public Progress of some fine gentleman (half-drunk) to Tyburn, dressed in the newest fashion, and damning the ordinary with unspeakable gallantry and grace, furnished to the populace, at once a pleasant excitement and a wholesome and profound example.

Among all the dangerous characters who, in such a state of society, prowled and skulked in the metropolis at night, there was one man from whom many as uncouth and fierce as he, shrunk with an involuntary dread. Who he was, or whence he came, was a question often asked, but which none could answer. His name was unknown, he had never been seen until within about eight days or thereabouts, and was equally a stranger to the

old ruffians, upon whose haunts he ventured fearlessly, as to the young. He could be no spy, for he never removed his slouched hat to look about him, entered into conversation with no man, heeded nothing that passed, listened to no discourse, regarded nobody that came or went. But so surely as the dead of night set in, so surely this man was in the midst of the loose concourse in the night-cellar where outcasts of every grade resorted; and there he sat till morning.

He was not only a spectre at their licentious feasts; a something in the midst of their revelry and riot that chilled and haunted them; but out of doors he was the same. Directly it was dark, he was abroad – never in company with any one, but always alone; never lingering or loitering, but always walking swiftly; and looking (so they said who had seen him) over his shoulder from time to time, and as he did so quickening his pace. In the fields, the lanes, the roads, in all quarters of the town – east, west, north, and south – that man was seen gliding on like a shadow. He was always hurrying away. Those who encountered him, saw him steal past, caught sight of the backward glance, and so lost him in the darkness.

This constant restlessness, and flitting to and fro, gave rise to strange stories. He was seen in such distant and remote places, at times so nearly tallying with each other, that some doubted whether there were not two of them, or more – some, whether he had not unearthly means of travelling from spot to spot. The footpad hiding in a ditch had marked him passing like a ghost

along its brink; the vagrant had met him on the dark high-road; the beggar had seen him pause upon the bridge to look down at the water, and then sweep on again; they who dealt in bodies with the surgeons could swear he slept in churchyards, and that they had beheld him glide away among the tombs on their approach. And as they told these stories to each other, one who had looked about him would pull his neighbour by the sleeve, and there he would be among them.

At last, one man – he was one of those whose commerce lay among the graves – resolved to question this strange companion. Next night, when he had eat his poor meal voraciously (he was accustomed to do that, they had observed, as though he had no other in the day), this fellow sat down at his elbow.

‘A black night, master!’

‘It is a black night.’

‘Blacker than last, though that was pitchy too. Didn’t I pass you near the turnpike in the Oxford Road?’

‘It’s like you may. I don’t know.’

‘Come, come, master,’ cried the fellow, urged on by the looks of his comrades, and slapping him on the shoulder; ‘be more companionable and communicative. Be more the gentleman in this good company. There are tales among us that you have sold yourself to the devil, and I know not what.’

‘We all have, have we not?’ returned the stranger, looking up. ‘If we were fewer in number, perhaps he would give better wages.’

‘It goes rather hard with you, indeed,’ said the fellow, as the stranger disclosed his haggard unwashed face, and torn clothes. ‘What of that? Be merry, master. A stave of a roaring song now’

‘Sing you, if you desire to hear one,’ replied the other, shaking him roughly off; ‘and don’t touch me if you’re a prudent man; I carry arms which go off easily – they have done so, before now – and make it dangerous for strangers who don’t know the trick of them, to lay hands upon me.’

‘Do you threaten?’ said the fellow.

‘Yes,’ returned the other, rising and turning upon him, and looking fiercely round as if in apprehension of a general attack.

His voice, and look, and bearing – all expressive of the wildest recklessness and desperation – daunted while they repelled the bystanders. Although in a very different sphere of action now, they were not without much of the effect they had wrought at the Maypole Inn.

‘I am what you all are, and live as you all do,’ said the man sternly, after a short silence. ‘I am in hiding here like the rest, and if we were surprised would perhaps do my part with the best of ye. If it’s my humour to be left to myself, let me have it. Otherwise,’ – and here he swore a tremendous oath – ‘there’ll be mischief done in this place, though there ARE odds of a score against me.’

A low murmur, having its origin perhaps in a dread of the man and the mystery that surrounded him, or perhaps in a sincere

opinion on the part of some of those present, that it would be an inconvenient precedent to meddle too curiously with a gentleman's private affairs if he saw reason to conceal them, warned the fellow who had occasioned this discussion that he had best pursue it no further. After a short time the strange man lay down upon a bench to sleep, and when they thought of him again, they found he was gone.

Next night, as soon as it was dark, he was abroad again and traversing the streets; he was before the locksmith's house more than once, but the family were out, and it was close shut. This night he crossed London Bridge and passed into Southwark. As he glided down a bye street, a woman with a little basket on her arm, turned into it at the other end. Directly he observed her, he sought the shelter of an archway, and stood aside until she had passed. Then he emerged cautiously from his hiding-place, and followed.

She went into several shops to purchase various kinds of household necessaries, and round every place at which she stopped he hovered like her evil spirit; following her when she reappeared. It was nigh eleven o'clock, and the passengers in the streets were thinning fast, when she turned, doubtless to go home. The phantom still followed her.

She turned into the same bye street in which he had seen her first, which, being free from shops, and narrow, was extremely dark. She quickened her pace here, as though distrustful of being stopped, and robbed of such trifling property as she carried with

her. He crept along on the other side of the road. Had she been gifted with the speed of wind, it seemed as if his terrible shadow would have tracked her down.

At length the widow – for she it was – reached her own door, and, panting for breath, paused to take the key from her basket. In a flush and glow, with the haste she had made, and the pleasure of being safe at home, she stooped to draw it out, when, raising her head, she saw him standing silently beside her: the apparition of a dream.

His hand was on her mouth, but that was needless, for her tongue clove to its roof, and her power of utterance was gone. ‘I have been looking for you many nights. Is the house empty? Answer me. Is any one inside?’

She could only answer by a rattle in her throat.

‘Make me a sign.’

She seemed to indicate that there was no one there. He took the key, unlocked the door, carried her in, and secured it carefully behind them.

Chapter 17

It was a chilly night, and the fire in the widow's parlour had burnt low. Her strange companion placed her in a chair, and stooping down before the half-extinguished ashes, raked them together and fanned them with his hat. From time to time he glanced at her over his shoulder, as though to assure himself of her remaining quiet and making no effort to depart; and that done, busied himself about the fire again.

It was not without reason that he took these pains, for his dress was dank and drenched with wet, his jaws rattled with cold, and he shivered from head to foot. It had rained hard during the previous night and for some hours in the morning, but since noon it had been fine. Wheresoever he had passed the hours of darkness, his condition sufficiently betokened that many of them had been spent beneath the open sky. Besmeared with mire; his saturated clothes clinging with a damp embrace about his limbs; his beard unshaven, his face unwashed, his meagre cheeks worn into deep hollows, – a more miserable wretch could hardly be, than this man who now cowered down upon the widow's hearth, and watched the struggling flame with bloodshot eyes.

She had covered her face with her hands, fearing, as it seemed, to look towards him. So they remained for some short time in silence. Glancing round again, he asked at length:

‘Is this your house?’

‘It is. Why, in the name of Heaven, do you darken it?’

‘Give me meat and drink,’ he answered sullenly, ‘or I dare do more than that. The very marrow in my bones is cold, with wet and hunger. I must have warmth and food, and I will have them here.’

‘You were the robber on the Chigwell road.’

‘I was.’

‘And nearly a murderer then.’

‘The will was not wanting. There was one came upon me and raised the hue-and-cry, that it would have gone hard with, but for his nimbleness. I made a thrust at him.’

‘You thrust your sword at HIM!’ cried the widow, looking upwards. ‘You hear this man! you hear and saw!’

He looked at her, as, with her head thrown back, and her hands tight clenched together, she uttered these words in an agony of appeal. Then, starting to his feet as she had done, he advanced towards her.

‘Beware!’ she cried in a suppressed voice, whose firmness stopped him midway. ‘Do not so much as touch me with a finger, or you are lost; body and soul, you are lost.’

‘Hear me,’ he replied, menacing her with his hand. ‘I, that in the form of a man live the life of a hunted beast; that in the body am a spirit, a ghost upon the earth, a thing from which all creatures shrink, save those curst beings of another world, who will not leave me; – I am, in my desperation of this night, past all fear but that of the hell in which I exist from day to day. Give the

alarm, cry out, refuse to shelter me. I will not hurt you. But I will not be taken alive; and so surely as you threaten me above your breath, I fall a dead man on this floor. The blood with which I sprinkle it, be on you and yours, in the name of the Evil Spirit that tempts men to their ruin!

As he spoke, he took a pistol from his breast, and firmly clutched it in his hand.

‘Remove this man from me, good Heaven!’ cried the widow. ‘In thy grace and mercy, give him one minute’s penitence, and strike him dead!’

‘It has no such purpose,’ he said, confronting her. ‘It is deaf. Give me to eat and drink, lest I do that it cannot help my doing, and will not do for you.’

‘Will you leave me, if I do thus much? Will you leave me and return no more?’

‘I will promise nothing,’ he rejoined, seating himself at the table, ‘nothing but this – I will execute my threat if you betray me.’

She rose at length, and going to a closet or pantry in the room, brought out some fragments of cold meat and bread and put them on the table. He asked for brandy, and for water. These she produced likewise; and he ate and drank with the voracity of a famished hound. All the time he was so engaged she kept at the uttermost distance of the chamber, and sat there shuddering, but with her face towards him. She never turned her back upon him once; and although when she passed him (as she was obliged to

do in going to and from the cupboard) she gathered the skirts of her garment about her, as if even its touching his by chance were horrible to think of, still, in the midst of all this dread and terror, she kept her face towards his own, and watched his every movement.

His repast ended – if that can be called one, which was a mere ravenous satisfying of the calls of hunger – he moved his chair towards the fire again, and warming himself before the blaze which had now sprung brightly up, accosted her once more.

‘I am an outcast, to whom a roof above his head is often an uncommon luxury, and the food a beggar would reject is delicate fare. You live here at your ease. Do you live alone?’

‘I do not,’ she made answer with an effort.

‘Who dwells here besides?’

‘One – it is no matter who. You had best begone, or he may find you here. Why do you linger?’

‘For warmth,’ he replied, spreading out his hands before the fire. ‘For warmth. You are rich, perhaps?’

‘Very,’ she said faintly. ‘Very rich. No doubt I am very rich.’

‘At least you are not penniless. You have some money. You were making purchases to-night.’

‘I have a little left. It is but a few shillings.’

‘Give me your purse. You had it in your hand at the door. Give it to me.’

She stepped to the table and laid it down. He reached across, took it up, and told the contents into his hand. As he was counting

them, she listened for a moment, and sprung towards him.

‘Take what there is, take all, take more if more were there, but go before it is too late. I have heard a wayward step without, I know full well. It will return directly. Begone.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Do not stop to ask. I will not answer. Much as I dread to touch you, I would drag you to the door if I possessed the strength, rather than you should lose an instant. Miserable wretch! fly from this place.’

‘If there are spies without, I am safer here,’ replied the man, standing aghast. ‘I will remain here, and will not fly till the danger is past.’

‘It is too late!’ cried the widow, who had listened for the step, and not to him. ‘Hark to that foot upon the ground. Do you tremble to hear it! It is my son, my idiot son!’

As she said this wildly, there came a heavy knocking at the door. He looked at her, and she at him.

‘Let him come in,’ said the man, hoarsely. ‘I fear him less than the dark, houseless night. He knocks again. Let him come in!’

‘The dread of this hour,’ returned the widow, ‘has been upon me all my life, and I will not. Evil will fall upon him, if you stand eye to eye. My blighted boy! Oh! all good angels who know the truth – hear a poor mother’s prayer, and spare my boy from knowledge of this man!’

‘He rattles at the shutters!’ cried the man. ‘He calls you. That voice and cry! It was he who grappled with me in the road. Was

it he?’

She had sunk upon her knees, and so knelt down, moving her lips, but uttering no sound. As he gazed upon her, uncertain what to do or where to turn, the shutters flew open. He had barely time to catch a knife from the table, sheathe it in the loose sleeve of his coat, hide in the closet, and do all with the lightning’s speed, when Barnaby tapped at the bare glass, and raised the sash exultingly.

‘Why, who can keep out Grip and me!’ he cried, thrusting in his head, and staring round the room. ‘Are you there, mother? How long you keep us from the fire and light.’

She stammered some excuse and tendered him her hand. But Barnaby sprung lightly in without assistance, and putting his arms about her neck, kissed her a hundred times.

‘We have been afield, mother – leaping ditches, scrambling through hedges, running down steep banks, up and away, and hurrying on. The wind has been blowing, and the rushes and young plants bowing and bending to it, lest it should do them harm, the cowards – and Grip – ha ha ha! – brave Grip, who cares for nothing, and when the wind rolls him over in the dust, turns manfully to bite it – Grip, bold Grip, has quarrelled with every little bowing twig – thinking, he told me, that it mocked him – and has worried it like a bulldog. Ha ha ha!’

The raven, in his little basket at his master’s back, hearing this frequent mention of his name in a tone of exultation, expressed his sympathy by crowing like a cock, and afterwards running over his various phrases of speech with such rapidity, and in so many

varieties of hoarseness, that they sounded like the murmurs of a crowd of people.

‘He takes such care of me besides!’ said Barnaby. ‘Such care, mother! He watches all the time I sleep, and when I shut my eyes and make-believe to slumber, he practises new learning softly, but he keeps his eye on me the while, and if he sees me laugh, though never so little, stops directly. He won’t surprise me till he’s perfect.’

The raven crowed again in a rapturous manner which plainly said, ‘Those are certainly some of my characteristics, and I glory in them.’ In the meantime, Barnaby closed the window and secured it, and coming to the fireplace, prepared to sit down with his face to the closet. But his mother prevented this, by hastily taking that side herself, and motioning him towards the other.

‘How pale you are to-night!’ said Barnaby, leaning on his stick. ‘We have been cruel, Grip, and made her anxious!’

Anxious in good truth, and sick at heart! The listener held the door of his hiding-place open with his hand, and closely watched her son. Grip – alive to everything his master was unconscious of – had his head out of the basket, and in return was watching him intently with his glistening eye.

‘He flaps his wings,’ said Barnaby, turning almost quickly enough to catch the retreating form and closing door, ‘as if there were strangers here, but Grip is wiser than to fancy that. Jump then!’

Accepting this invitation with a dignity peculiar to himself,

the bird hopped up on his master's shoulder, from that to his extended hand, and so to the ground. Barnaby unstrapping the basket and putting it down in a corner with the lid open, Grip's first care was to shut it down with all possible despatch, and then to stand upon it. Believing, no doubt, that he had now rendered it utterly impossible, and beyond the power of mortal man, to shut him up in it any more, he drew a great many corks in triumph, and uttered a corresponding number of hurrahs.

'Mother!' said Barnaby, laying aside his hat and stick, and returning to the chair from which he had risen, 'I'll tell you where we have been to-day, and what we have been doing, – shall I?'

She took his hand in hers, and holding it, nodded the word she could not speak.

'You mustn't tell,' said Barnaby, holding up his finger, 'for it's a secret, mind, and only known to me, and Grip, and Hugh. We had the dog with us, but he's not like Grip, clever as he is, and doesn't guess it yet, I'll wager. – Why do you look behind me so?'

'Did I?' she answered faintly. 'I didn't know I did. Come nearer me.'

'You are frightened!' said Barnaby, changing colour. 'Mother – you don't see' —

'See what?'

'There's – there's none of this about, is there?' he answered in a whisper, drawing closer to her and clasping the mark upon his wrist. 'I am afraid there is, somewhere. You make my hair stand on end, and my flesh creep. Why do you look like that? Is it in

the room as I have seen it in my dreams, dashing the ceiling and the walls with red? Tell me. Is it?’

He fell into a shivering fit as he put the question, and shutting out the light with his hands, sat shaking in every limb until it had passed away. After a time, he raised his head and looked about him.

‘Is it gone?’

‘There has been nothing here,’ rejoined his mother, soothing him. ‘Nothing indeed, dear Barnaby. Look! You see there are but you and me.’

He gazed at her vacantly, and, becoming reassured by degrees, burst into a wild laugh.

‘But let us see,’ he said, thoughtfully. ‘Were we talking? Was it you and me? Where have we been?’

‘Nowhere but here.’

‘Aye, but Hugh, and I,’ said Barnaby, – ‘that’s it. Maypole Hugh, and I, you know, and Grip – we have been lying in the forest, and among the trees by the road side, with a dark lantern after night came on, and the dog in a noose ready to slip him when the man came by.’

‘What man?’

‘The robber; him that the stars winked at. We have waited for him after dark these many nights, and we shall have him. I’d know him in a thousand. Mother, see here! This is the man. Look!’

He twisted his handkerchief round his head, pulled his hat

upon his brow, wrapped his coat about him, and stood up before her: so like the original he counterfeited, that the dark figure peering out behind him might have passed for his own shadow.

‘Ha ha ha! We shall have him,’ he cried, ridding himself of the semblance as hastily as he had assumed it. ‘You shall see him, mother, bound hand and foot, and brought to London at a saddle-girth; and you shall hear of him at Tyburn Tree if we have luck. So Hugh says. You’re pale again, and trembling. And why DO you look behind me so?’

‘It is nothing,’ she answered. ‘I am not quite well. Go you to bed, dear, and leave me here.’

‘To bed!’ he answered. ‘I don’t like bed. I like to lie before the fire, watching the prospects in the burning coals – the rivers, hills, and dells, in the deep, red sunset, and the wild faces. I am hungry too, and Grip has eaten nothing since broad noon. Let us to supper. Grip! To supper, lad!’

The raven flapped his wings, and, croaking his satisfaction, hopped to the feet of his master, and there held his bill open, ready for snapping up such lumps of meat as he should throw him. Of these he received about a score in rapid succession, without the smallest discomposure.

‘That’s all,’ said Barnaby.

‘More!’ cried Grip. ‘More!’

But it appearing for a certainty that no more was to be had, he retreated with his store; and disgorging the morsels one by one from his pouch, hid them in various corners – taking particular

care, however, to avoid the closet, as being doubtful of the hidden man's propensities and power of resisting temptation. When he had concluded these arrangements, he took a turn or two across the room with an elaborate assumption of having nothing on his mind (but with one eye hard upon his treasure all the time), and then, and not till then, began to drag it out, piece by piece, and eat it with the utmost relish.

Barnaby, for his part, having pressed his mother to eat in vain, made a hearty supper too. Once during the progress of his meal, he wanted more bread from the closet and rose to get it. She hurriedly interposed to prevent him, and summoning her utmost fortitude, passed into the recess, and brought it out herself.

'Mother,' said Barnaby, looking at her steadfastly as she sat down beside him after doing so; 'is to-day my birthday?'

'To-day!' she answered. 'Don't you recollect it was but a week or so ago, and that summer, autumn, and winter have to pass before it comes again?'

'I remember that it has been so till now,' said Barnaby. 'But I think to-day must be my birthday too, for all that.'

She asked him why? 'I'll tell you why,' he said. 'I have always seen you – I didn't let you know it, but I have – on the evening of that day grow very sad. I have seen you cry when Grip and I were most glad; and look frightened with no reason; and I have touched your hand, and felt that it was cold – as it is now. Once, mother (on a birthday that was, also), Grip and I thought of this after we went upstairs to bed, and when it was midnight, striking

one o'clock, we came down to your door to see if you were well. You were on your knees. I forget what it was you said. Grip, what was it we heard her say that night?"

'I'm a devil!' rejoined the raven promptly.

'No, no,' said Barnaby. 'But you said something in a prayer, and when you rose and walked about, you looked (as you have done ever since, mother, towards night on my birthday) just as you do now. I have found that out, you see, though I am silly. So I say you're wrong; and this must be my birthday – my birthday, Grip!'

The bird received this information with a crow of such duration as a cock, gifted with intelligence beyond all others of his kind, might usher in the longest day with. Then, as if he had well considered the sentiment, and regarded it as apposite to birthdays, he cried, 'Never say die!' a great many times, and flapped his wings for emphasis.

The widow tried to make light of Barnaby's remark, and endeavoured to divert his attention to some new subject; too easy a task at all times, as she knew. His supper done, Barnaby, regardless of her entreaties, stretched himself on the mat before the fire; Grip perched upon his leg, and divided his time between dozing in the grateful warmth, and endeavouring (as it presently appeared) to recall a new accomplishment he had been studying all day.

A long and profound silence ensued, broken only by some change of position on the part of Barnaby, whose eyes were still

wide open and intently fixed upon the fire; or by an effort of recollection on the part of Grip, who would cry in a low voice from time to time, 'Polly put the ket - ' and there stop short, forgetting the remainder, and go off in a doze again.

After a long interval, Barnaby's breathing grew more deep and regular, and his eyes were closed. But even then the unquiet spirit of the raven interposed. 'Polly put the ket - ' cried Grip, and his master was broad awake again.

At length Barnaby slept soundly, and the bird with his bill sunk upon his breast, his breast itself puffed out into a comfortable alderman-like form, and his bright eye growing smaller and smaller, really seemed to be subsiding into a state of repose. Now and then he muttered in a sepulchral voice, 'Polly put the ket - ' but very drowsily, and more like a drunken man than a reflecting raven.

The widow, scarcely venturing to breathe, rose from her seat. The man glided from the closet, and extinguished the candle.

' - tle on,' cried Grip, suddenly struck with an idea and very much excited. ' - tle on. Hurrah! Polly put the ket-tle on, we'll all have tea; Polly put the ket-tle on, we'll all have tea. Hurrah, hurrah, hurrah! I'm a devil, I'm a devil, I'm a ket-tle on, Keep up your spirits, Never say die, Bow, wow, wow, I'm a devil, I'm a ket-tle, I'm a - Polly put the ket-tle on, we'll all have tea.'

They stood rooted to the ground, as though it had been a voice from the grave.

But even this failed to awaken the sleeper. He turned over

towards the fire, his arm fell to the ground, and his head drooped heavily upon it. The widow and her unwelcome visitor gazed at him and at each other for a moment, and then she motioned him towards the door.

‘Stay,’ he whispered. ‘You teach your son well.’

‘I have taught him nothing that you heard to-night. Depart instantly, or I will rouse him.’

‘You are free to do so. Shall I rouse him?’

‘You dare not do that.’

‘I dare do anything, I have told you. He knows me well, it seems. At least I will know him.’

‘Would you kill him in his sleep?’ cried the widow, throwing herself between them.

‘Woman,’ he returned between his teeth, as he motioned her aside, ‘I would see him nearer, and I will. If you want one of us to kill the other, wake him.’

With that he advanced, and bending down over the prostrate form, softly turned back the head and looked into the face. The light of the fire was upon it, and its every lineament was revealed distinctly. He contemplated it for a brief space, and hastily arose.

‘Observe,’ he whispered in the widow’s ear: ‘In him, of whose existence I was ignorant until to-night, I have you in my power. Be careful how you use me. Be careful how you use me. I am destitute and starving, and a wanderer upon the earth. I may take a sure and slow revenge.’

‘There is some dreadful meaning in your words. I do not fathom it.’

‘There is a meaning in them, and I see you fathom it to its very depth. You have anticipated it for years; you have told me as much. I leave you to digest it. Do not forget my warning.’

He pointed, as he left her, to the slumbering form, and stealthily withdrawing, made his way into the street. She fell on her knees beside the sleeper, and remained like one stricken into stone, until the tears which fear had frozen so long, came tenderly to her relief.

‘Oh Thou,’ she cried, ‘who hast taught me such deep love for this one remnant of the promise of a happy life, out of whose affliction, even, perhaps the comfort springs that he is ever a relying, loving child to me – never growing old or cold at heart, but needing my care and duty in his manly strength as in his cradle-time – help him, in his darkened walk through this sad world, or he is doomed, and my poor heart is broken!’

Chapter 18

Gliding along the silent streets, and holding his course where they were darkest and most gloomy, the man who had left the widow's house crossed London Bridge, and arriving in the City, plunged into the backways, lanes, and courts, between Cornhill and Smithfield; with no more fixedness of purpose than to lose himself among their windings, and baffle pursuit, if any one were dogging his steps.

It was the dead time of the night, and all was quiet. Now and then a drowsy watchman's footsteps sounded on the pavement, or the lamplighter on his rounds went flashing past, leaving behind a little track of smoke mingled with glowing morsels of his hot red link. He hid himself even from these partakers of his lonely walk, and, shrinking in some arch or doorway while they passed, issued forth again when they were gone and so pursued his solitary way.

To be shelterless and alone in the open country, hearing the wind moan and watching for day through the whole long weary night; to listen to the falling rain, and crouch for warmth beneath the lee of some old barn or rick, or in the hollow of a tree; are dismal things – but not so dismal as the wandering up and down where shelter is, and beds and sleepers are by thousands; a houseless rejected creature. To pace the echoing stones from hour to hour, counting the dull chimes of the clocks; to watch the lights twinkling in chamber windows, to think what happy

forgetfulness each house shuts in; that here are children coiled together in their beds, here youth, here age, here poverty, here wealth, all equal in their sleep, and all at rest; to have nothing in common with the slumbering world around, not even sleep, Heaven's gift to all its creatures, and be akin to nothing but despair; to feel, by the wretched contrast with everything on every hand, more utterly alone and cast away than in a trackless desert; this is a kind of suffering, on which the rivers of great cities close full many a time, and which the solitude in crowds alone awakens.

The miserable man paced up and down the streets – so long, so wearisome, so like each other – and often cast a wistful look towards the east, hoping to see the first faint streaks of day. But obdurate night had yet possession of the sky, and his disturbed and restless walk found no relief.

One house in a back street was bright with the cheerful glare of lights; there was the sound of music in it too, and the tread of dancers, and there were cheerful voices, and many a burst of laughter. To this place – to be near something that was awake and glad – he returned again and again; and more than one of those who left it when the merriment was at its height, felt it a check upon their mirthful mood to see him flitting to and fro like an uneasy ghost. At last the guests departed, one and all; and then the house was close shut up, and became as dull and silent as the rest.

His wanderings brought him at one time to the city jail. Instead

of hastening from it as a place of ill omen, and one he had cause to shun, he sat down on some steps hard by, and resting his chin upon his hand, gazed upon its rough and frowning walls as though even they became a refuge in his jaded eyes. He paced it round and round, came back to the same spot, and sat down again. He did this often, and once, with a hasty movement, crossed to where some men were watching in the prison lodge, and had his foot upon the steps as though determined to accost them. But looking round, he saw that the day began to break, and failing in his purpose, turned and fled.

He was soon in the quarter he had lately traversed, and pacing to and fro again as he had done before. He was passing down a mean street, when from an alley close at hand some shouts of revelry arose, and there came straggling forth a dozen madcaps, whooping and calling to each other, who, parting noisily, took different ways and dispersed in smaller groups.

Hoping that some low place of entertainment which would afford him a safe refuge might be near at hand, he turned into this court when they were all gone, and looked about for a half-opened door, or lighted window, or other indication of the place whence they had come. It was so profoundly dark, however, and so ill-favoured, that he concluded they had but turned up there, missing their way, and were pouring out again when he observed them. With this impression, and finding there was no outlet but that by which he had entered, he was about to turn, when from a grating near his feet a sudden stream of light appeared, and the

sound of talking came. He retreated into a doorway to see who these talkers were, and to listen to them.

The light came to the level of the pavement as he did this, and a man ascended, bearing in his hand a torch. This figure unlocked and held open the grating as for the passage of another, who presently appeared, in the form of a young man of small stature and uncommon self-importance, dressed in an obsolete and very gaudy fashion.

‘Good night, noble captain,’ said he with the torch. ‘Farewell, commander. Good luck, illustrious general!’

In return to these compliments the other bade him hold his tongue, and keep his noise to himself, and laid upon him many similar injunctions, with great fluency of speech and sternness of manner.

‘Commend me, captain, to the stricken Miggs,’ returned the torch-bearer in a lower voice. ‘My captain flies at higher game than Miggses. Ha, ha, ha! My captain is an eagle, both as respects his eye and soaring wings. My captain breaketh hearts as other bachelors break eggs at breakfast.’

‘What a fool you are, Stagg!’ said Mr Tappertit, stepping on the pavement of the court, and brushing from his legs the dust he had contracted in his passage upward.

‘His precious limbs!’ cried Stagg, clasping one of his ankles. ‘Shall a Miggs aspire to these proportions! No, no, my captain. We will inveigle ladies fair, and wed them in our secret cavern. We will unite ourselves with blooming beauties, captain.’

‘I’ll tell you what, my buck,’ said Mr Tappertit, releasing his leg; ‘I’ll trouble you not to take liberties, and not to broach certain questions unless certain questions are broached to you. Speak when you’re spoke to on particular subjects, and not otherways. Hold the torch up till I’ve got to the end of the court, and then kennel yourself, do you hear?’

‘I hear you, noble captain.’

‘Obey then,’ said Mr Tappertit haughtily. ‘Gentlemen, lead on!’ With which word of command (addressed to an imaginary staff or retinue) he folded his arms, and walked with surpassing dignity down the court.

His obsequious follower stood holding the torch above his head, and then the observer saw for the first time, from his place of concealment, that he was blind. Some involuntary motion on his part caught the quick ear of the blind man, before he was conscious of having moved an inch towards him, for he turned suddenly and cried, ‘Who’s there?’

‘A man,’ said the other, advancing. ‘A friend.’

‘A stranger!’ rejoined the blind man. ‘Strangers are not my friends. What do you do there?’

‘I saw your company come out, and waited here till they were gone. I want a lodging.’

‘A lodging at this time!’ returned Stagg, pointing towards the dawn as though he saw it. ‘Do you know the day is breaking?’

‘I know it,’ rejoined the other, ‘to my cost. I have been traversing this iron-hearted town all night.’

‘You had better traverse it again,’ said the blind man, preparing to descend, ‘till you find some lodgings suitable to your taste. I don’t let any.’

‘Stay!’ cried the other, holding him by the arm.

‘I’ll beat this light about that hangdog face of yours (for hangdog it is, if it answers to your voice), and rouse the neighbourhood besides, if you detain me,’ said the blind man. ‘Let me go. Do you hear?’

‘Do YOU hear!’ returned the other, chinking a few shillings together, and hurriedly pressing them into his hand. ‘I beg nothing of you. I will pay for the shelter you give me. Death! Is it much to ask of such as you! I have come from the country, and desire to rest where there are none to question me. I am faint, exhausted, worn out, almost dead. Let me lie down, like a dog, before your fire. I ask no more than that. If you would be rid of me, I will depart to-morrow.’

‘If a gentleman has been unfortunate on the road,’ muttered Stagg, yielding to the other, who, pressing on him, had already gained a footing on the steps – ‘and can pay for his accommodation –’

‘I will pay you with all I have. I am just now past the want of food, God knows, and wish but to purchase shelter. What companion have you below?’

‘None.’

‘Then fasten your grate there, and show me the way. Quick!’
The blind man complied after a moment’s hesitation, and they

descended together. The dialogue had passed as hurriedly as the words could be spoken, and they stood in his wretched room before he had had time to recover from his first surprise.

‘May I see where that door leads to, and what is beyond?’ said the man, glancing keenly round. ‘You will not mind that?’

‘I will show you myself. Follow me, or go before. Take your choice.’

He bade him lead the way, and, by the light of the torch which his conductor held up for the purpose, inspected all three cellars narrowly. Assured that the blind man had spoken truth, and that he lived there alone, the visitor returned with him to the first, in which a fire was burning, and flung himself with a deep groan upon the ground before it.

His host pursued his usual occupation without seeming to heed him any further. But directly he fell asleep – and he noted his falling into a slumber, as readily as the keenest-sighted man could have done – he knelt down beside him, and passed his hand lightly but carefully over his face and person.

His sleep was checkered with starts and moans, and sometimes with a muttered word or two. His hands were clenched, his brow bent, and his mouth firmly set. All this, the blind man accurately marked; and as if his curiosity were strongly awakened, and he had already some inkling of his mystery, he sat watching him, if the expression may be used, and listening, until it was broad day.

Chapter 19

Dolly Varden's pretty little head was yet bewildered by various recollections of the party, and her bright eyes were yet dazzled by a crowd of images, dancing before them like motes in the sunbeams, among which the effigy of one partner in particular did especially figure, the same being a young coachmaker (a master in his own right) who had given her to understand, when he handed her into the chair at parting, that it was his fixed resolve to neglect his business from that time, and die slowly for the love of her – Dolly's head, and eyes, and thoughts, and seven senses, were all in a state of flutter and confusion for which the party was accountable, although it was now three days old, when, as she was sitting listlessly at breakfast, reading all manner of fortunes (that is to say, of married and flourishing fortunes) in the grounds of her teacup, a step was heard in the workshop, and Mr Edward Chester was descried through the glass door, standing among the rusty locks and keys, like love among the roses – for which apt comparison the historian may by no means take any credit to himself, the same being the invention, in a sentimental mood, of the chaste and modest Miggs, who, beholding him from the doorsteps she was then cleaning, did, in her maiden meditation, give utterance to the simile.

The locksmith, who happened at the moment to have his eyes thrown upward and his head backward, in an intense communing

with Toby, did not see his visitor, until Mrs Varden, more watchful than the rest, had desired Sim Tappertit to open the glass door and give him admission – from which untoward circumstance the good lady argued (for she could deduce a precious moral from the most trifling event) that to take a draught of small ale in the morning was to observe a pernicious, irreligious, and Pagan custom, the relish whereof should be left to swine, and Satan, or at least to Popish persons, and should be shunned by the righteous as a work of sin and evil. She would no doubt have pursued her admonition much further, and would have founded on it a long list of precious precepts of inestimable value, but that the young gentleman standing by in a somewhat uncomfortable and discomfited manner while she read her spouse this lecture, occasioned her to bring it to a premature conclusion.

‘I’m sure you’ll excuse me, sir,’ said Mrs Varden, rising and curtsying. ‘Varden is so very thoughtless, and needs so much reminding – Sim, bring a chair here.’

Mr Tappertit obeyed, with a flourish implying that he did so, under protest.

‘And you can go, Sim,’ said the locksmith.

Mr Tappertit obeyed again, still under protest; and betaking himself to the workshop, began seriously to fear that he might find it necessary to poison his master, before his time was out.

In the meantime, Edward returned suitable replies to Mrs Varden’s courtesies, and that lady brightened up very much; so

that when he accepted a dish of tea from the fair hands of Dolly, she was perfectly agreeable.

‘I am sure if there’s anything we can do, – Varden, or I, or Dolly either, – to serve you, sir, at any time, you have only to say it, and it shall be done,’ said Mrs V.

‘I am much obliged to you, I am sure,’ returned Edward. ‘You encourage me to say that I have come here now, to beg your good offices.’

Mrs Varden was delighted beyond measure.

‘It occurred to me that probably your fair daughter might be going to the Warren, either to-day or to-morrow,’ said Edward, glancing at Dolly; ‘and if so, and you will allow her to take charge of this letter, ma’am, you will oblige me more than I can tell you. The truth is, that while I am very anxious it should reach its destination, I have particular reasons for not trusting it to any other conveyance; so that without your help, I am wholly at a loss.’

‘She was not going that way, sir, either to-day, or to-morrow, nor indeed all next week,’ the lady graciously rejoined, ‘but we shall be very glad to put ourselves out of the way on your account, and if you wish it, you may depend upon its going to-day. You might suppose,’ said Mrs Varden, frowning at her husband, ‘from Varden’s sitting there so glum and silent, that he objected to this arrangement; but you must not mind that, sir, if you please. It’s his way at home. Out of doors, he can be cheerful and talkative enough.’

Now, the fact was, that the unfortunate locksmith, blessing his stars to find his helpmate in such good humour, had been sitting with a beaming face, hearing this discourse with a joy past all expression. Wherefore this sudden attack quite took him by surprise.

‘My dear Martha – ’ he said.

‘Oh yes, I dare say,’ interrupted Mrs Varden, with a smile of mingled scorn and pleasantry. ‘Very dear! We all know that.’

‘No, but my good soul,’ said Gabriel, ‘you are quite mistaken. You are indeed. I was delighted to find you so kind and ready. I waited, my dear, anxiously, I assure you, to hear what you would say.’

‘You waited anxiously,’ repeated Mrs V. ‘Yes! Thank you, Varden. You waited, as you always do, that I might bear the blame, if any came of it. But I am used to it,’ said the lady with a kind of solemn titter, ‘and that’s my comfort!’

‘I give you my word, Martha – ’ said Gabriel.

‘Let me give you MY word, my dear,’ interposed his wife with a Christian smile, ‘that such discussions as these between married people, are much better left alone. Therefore, if you please, Varden, we’ll drop the subject. I have no wish to pursue it. I could. I might say a great deal. But I would rather not. Pray don’t say any more.’

‘I don’t want to say any more,’ rejoined the goaded locksmith.

‘Well then, don’t,’ said Mrs Varden.

‘Nor did I begin it, Martha,’ added the locksmith, good-

humouredly, 'I must say that.'

'You did not begin it, Varden!' exclaimed his wife, opening her eyes very wide and looking round upon the company, as though she would say, You hear this man! 'You did not begin it, Varden! But you shall not say I was out of temper. No, you did not begin it, oh dear no, not you, my dear!'

'Well, well,' said the locksmith. 'That's settled then.'

'Oh yes,' rejoined his wife, 'quite. If you like to say Dolly began it, my dear, I shall not contradict you. I know my duty. I need know it, I am sure. I am often obliged to bear it in mind, when my inclination perhaps would be for the moment to forget it. Thank you, Varden.' And so, with a mighty show of humility and forgiveness, she folded her hands, and looked round again, with a smile which plainly said, 'If you desire to see the first and foremost among female martyrs, here she is, on view!'

This little incident, illustrative though it was of Mrs Varden's extraordinary sweetness and amiability, had so strong a tendency to check the conversation and to disconcert all parties but that excellent lady, that only a few monosyllables were uttered until Edward withdrew; which he presently did, thanking the lady of the house a great many times for her condescension, and whispering in Dolly's ear that he would call on the morrow, in case there should happen to be an answer to the note – which, indeed, she knew without his telling, as Barnaby and his friend Grip had dropped in on the previous night to prepare her for the visit which was then terminating.

Gabriel, who had attended Edward to the door, came back with his hands in his pockets; and, after fidgeting about the room in a very uneasy manner, and casting a great many sidelong looks at Mrs Varden (who with the calmest countenance in the world was five fathoms deep in the Protestant Manual), inquired of Dolly how she meant to go. Dolly supposed by the stage-coach, and looked at her lady mother, who finding herself silently appealed to, dived down at least another fathom into the Manual, and became unconscious of all earthly things.

‘Martha – ’ said the locksmith.

‘I hear you, Varden,’ said his wife, without rising to the surface.

‘I am sorry, my dear, you have such an objection to the Maypole and old John, for otherways as it’s a very fine morning, and Saturday’s not a busy day with us, we might have all three gone to Chigwell in the chaise, and had quite a happy day of it.’

Mrs Varden immediately closed the Manual, and bursting into tears, requested to be led upstairs.

‘What is the matter now, Martha?’ inquired the locksmith.

To which Martha rejoined, ‘Oh! don’t speak to me,’ and protested in agony that if anybody had told her so, she wouldn’t have believed it.

‘But, Martha,’ said Gabriel, putting himself in the way as she was moving off with the aid of Dolly’s shoulder, ‘wouldn’t have believed what? Tell me what’s wrong now. Do tell me. Upon my soul I don’t know. Do YOU know, child? Damme!’ cried the

locksmith, plucking at his wig in a kind of frenzy, ‘nobody does know, I verily believe, but Miggs!’

‘Miggs,’ said Mrs Varden faintly, and with symptoms of approaching incoherence, ‘is attached to me, and that is sufficient to draw down hatred upon her in this house. She is a comfort to me, whatever she may be to others.’

‘She’s no comfort to me,’ cried Gabriel, made bold by despair. ‘She’s the misery of my life. She’s all the plagues of Egypt in one.’

‘She’s considered so, I have no doubt,’ said Mrs Varden. ‘I was prepared for that; it’s natural; it’s of a piece with the rest. When you taunt me as you do to my face, how can I wonder that you taunt her behind her back!’ And here the incoherence coming on very strong, Mrs Varden wept, and laughed, and sobbed, and shivered, and hiccoughed, and choked; and said she knew it was very foolish but she couldn’t help it; and that when she was dead and gone, perhaps they would be sorry for it – which really under the circumstances did not appear quite so probable as she seemed to think – with a great deal more to the same effect. In a word, she passed with great decency through all the ceremonies incidental to such occasions; and being supported upstairs, was deposited in a highly spasmodic state on her own bed, where Miss Miggs shortly afterwards flung herself upon the body.

The philosophy of all this was, that Mrs Varden wanted to go to Chigwell; that she did not want to make any concession or explanation; that she would only go on being implored and entreated so to do; and that she would accept no other terms.

Accordingly, after a vast amount of moaning and crying upstairs, and much damping of foreheads, and vinegaring of temples, and hartshorning of noses, and so forth; and after most pathetic adjurations from Miggs, assisted by warm brandy-and-water not over-weak, and divers other cordials, also of a stimulating quality, administered at first in teaspoonfuls and afterwards in increasing doses, and of which Miss Miggs herself partook as a preventive measure (for fainting is infectious); after all these remedies, and many more too numerous to mention, but not to take, had been applied; and many verbal consolations, moral, religious, and miscellaneous, had been super-added thereto; the locksmith humbled himself, and the end was gained.

‘If it’s only for the sake of peace and quietness, father,’ said Dolly, urging him to go upstairs.

‘Oh, Doll, Doll,’ said her good-natured father. ‘If you ever have a husband of your own – ’

Dolly glanced at the glass.

‘ – Well, WHEN you have,’ said the locksmith, ‘never faint, my darling. More domestic unhappiness has come of easy fainting, Doll, than from all the greater passions put together. Remember that, my dear, if you would be really happy, which you never can be, if your husband isn’t. And a word in your ear, my precious. Never have a Miggs about you!’

With this advice he kissed his blooming daughter on the cheek, and slowly repaired to Mrs Varden’s room; where that lady, lying all pale and languid on her couch, was refreshing

herself with a sight of her last new bonnet, which Miggs, as a means of calming her scattered spirits, displayed to the best advantage at her bedside.

‘Here’s master, mim,’ said Miggs. ‘Oh, what a happiness it is when man and wife come round again! Oh gracious, to think that him and her should ever have a word together!’ In the energy of these sentiments, which were uttered as an apostrophe to the Heavens in general, Miss Miggs perched the bonnet on the top of her own head, and folding her hands, turned on her tears.

‘I can’t help it,’ cried Miggs. ‘I couldn’t, if I was to be drowned in ‘em. She has such a forgiving spirit! She’ll forget all that has passed, and go along with you, sir – Oh, if it was to the world’s end, she’d go along with you.’

Mrs Varden with a faint smile gently reproved her attendant for this enthusiasm, and reminded her at the same time that she was far too unwell to venture out that day.

‘Oh no, you’re not, mim, indeed you’re not,’ said Miggs; ‘I repeat to master; master knows you’re not, mim. The hair, and motion of the shay, will do you good, mim, and you must not give way, you must not raly. She must keep up, mustn’t she, sir, for all our sakes? I was a telling her that, just now. She must remember us, even if she forgets herself. Master will persuade you, mim, I’m sure. There’s Miss Dolly’s a-going you know, and master, and you, and all so happy and so comfortable. Oh!’ cried Miggs, turning on the tears again, previous to quitting the room in great emotion, ‘I never see such a blessed one as she is for the

forgiveness of her spirit, I never, never, never did. Not more did master neither; no, nor no one – never!

For five minutes or thereabouts, Mrs Varden remained mildly opposed to all her husband's prayers that she would oblige him by taking a day's pleasure, but relenting at length, she suffered herself to be persuaded, and granting him her free forgiveness (the merit whereof, she meekly said, rested with the Manual and not with her), desired that Miggs might come and help her dress. The handmaid attended promptly, and it is but justice to their joint exertions to record that, when the good lady came downstairs in course of time, completely decked out for the journey, she really looked as if nothing had happened, and appeared in the very best health imaginable.

As to Dolly, there she was again, the very pink and pattern of good looks, in a smart little cherry-coloured mantle, with a hood of the same drawn over her head, and upon the top of that hood, a little straw hat trimmed with cherry-coloured ribbons, and worn the merest trifle on one side – just enough in short to make it the wickedest and most provoking head-dress that ever malicious milliner devised. And not to speak of the manner in which these cherry-coloured decorations brightened her eyes, or vied with her lips, or shed a new bloom on her face, she wore such a cruel little muff, and such a heart-rending pair of shoes, and was so surrounded and hemmed in, as it were, by aggravations of all kinds, that when Mr Tappettit, holding the horse's head, saw her come out of the house alone, such impulses came over

him to decoy her into the chaise and drive off like mad, that he would unquestionably have done it, but for certain uneasy doubts besetting him as to the shortest way to Gretna Green; whether it was up the street or down, or up the right-hand turning or the left; and whether, supposing all the turnpikes to be carried by storm, the blacksmith in the end would marry them on credit; which by reason of his clerical office appeared, even to his excited imagination, so unlikely, that he hesitated. And while he stood hesitating, and looking post-chaises-and-six at Dolly, out came his master and his mistress, and the constant Miggs, and the opportunity was gone for ever. For now the chaise creaked upon its springs, and Mrs Varden was inside; and now it creaked again, and more than ever, and the locksmith was inside; and now it bounded once, as if its heart beat lightly, and Dolly was inside; and now it was gone and its place was empty, and he and that dreary Miggs were standing in the street together.

The hearty locksmith was in as good a humour as if nothing had occurred for the last twelve months to put him out of his way, Dolly was all smiles and graces, and Mrs Varden was agreeable beyond all precedent. As they jogged through the streets talking of this thing and of that, who should be descried upon the pavement but that very coachmaker, looking so genteel that nobody would have believed he had ever had anything to do with a coach but riding in it, and bowing like any nobleman. To be sure Dolly was confused when she bowed again, and to be sure the cherry-coloured ribbons trembled a little when she met his

mournful eye, which seemed to say, 'I have kept my word, I have begun, the business is going to the devil, and you're the cause of it.' There he stood, rooted to the ground: as Dolly said, like a statue; and as Mrs Varden said, like a pump; till they turned the corner: and when her father thought it was like his impudence, and her mother wondered what he meant by it, Dolly blushed again till her very hood was pale.

But on they went, not the less merrily for this, and there was the locksmith in the incautious fulness of his heart 'pulling-up' at all manner of places, and evincing a most intimate acquaintance with all the taverns on the road, and all the landlords and all the landladies, with whom, indeed, the little horse was on equally friendly terms, for he kept on stopping of his own accord. Never were people so glad to see other people as these landlords and landladies were to behold Mr Varden and Mrs Varden and Miss Varden; and wouldn't they get out, said one; and they really must walk upstairs, said another; and she would take it ill and be quite certain they were proud if they wouldn't have a little taste of something, said a third; and so on, that it was really quite a Progress rather than a ride, and one continued scene of hospitality from beginning to end. It was pleasant enough to be held in such esteem, not to mention the refreshments; so Mrs Varden said nothing at the time, and was all affability and delight – but such a body of evidence as she collected against the unfortunate locksmith that day, to be used thereafter as occasion might require, never was got together for matrimonial purposes.

In course of time – and in course of a pretty long time too, for these agreeable interruptions delayed them not a little, – they arrived upon the skirts of the Forest, and riding pleasantly on among the trees, came at last to the Maypole, where the locksmith's cheerful 'Yoho!' speedily brought to the porch old John, and after him young Joe, both of whom were so transfixed at sight of the ladies, that for a moment they were perfectly unable to give them any welcome, and could do nothing but stare.

It was only for a moment, however, that Joe forgot himself, for speedily reviving he thrust his drowsy father aside – to Mr Willet's mighty and inexpressible indignation – and darting out, stood ready to help them to alight. It was necessary for Dolly to get out first. Joe had her in his arms; – yes, though for a space of time no longer than you could count one in, Joe had her in his arms. Here was a glimpse of happiness!

It would be difficult to describe what a flat and commonplace affair the helping Mrs Varden out afterwards was, but Joe did it, and did it too with the best grace in the world. Then old John, who, entertaining a dull and foggy sort of idea that Mrs Varden wasn't fond of him, had been in some doubt whether she might not have come for purposes of assault and battery, took courage, hoped she was well, and offered to conduct her into the house. This tender being amicably received, they marched in together; Joe and Dolly followed, arm-in-arm, (happiness again!) and Varden brought up the rear.

Old John would have it that they must sit in the bar, and

nobody objecting, into the bar they went. All bars are snug places, but the Maypole's was the very snuggest, cosiest, and completest bar, that ever the wit of man devised. Such amazing bottles in old oaken pigeon-holes; such gleaming tankards dangling from pegs at about the same inclination as thirsty men would hold them to their lips; such sturdy little Dutch kegs ranged in rows on shelves; so many lemons hanging in separate nets, and forming the fragrant grove already mentioned in this chronicle, suggestive, with goodly loaves of snowy sugar stowed away hard by, of punch, idealised beyond all mortal knowledge; such closets, such presses, such drawers full of pipes, such places for putting things away in hollow window-seats, all crammed to the throat with eatables, drinkables, or savoury condiments; lastly, and to crown all, as typical of the immense resources of the establishment, and its defiances to all visitors to cut and come again, such a stupendous cheese!

It is a poor heart that never rejoices – it must have been the poorest, weakest, and most watery heart that ever beat, which would not have warmed towards the Maypole bar. Mrs Varden's did directly. She could no more have reproached John Willet among those household gods, the kegs and bottles, lemons, pipes, and cheese, than she could have stabbed him with his own bright carving-knife. The order for dinner too – it might have soothed a savage. 'A bit of fish,' said John to the cook, 'and some lamb chops (breaded, with plenty of ketchup), and a good salad, and a roast spring chicken, with a dish of sausages and mashed

potatoes, or something of that sort.’ Something of that sort! The resources of these inns! To talk carelessly about dishes, which in themselves were a first-rate holiday kind of dinner, suitable to one’s wedding-day, as something of that sort: meaning, if you can’t get a spring chicken, any other trifle in the way of poultry will do – such as a peacock, perhaps! The kitchen too, with its great broad cavernous chimney; the kitchen, where nothing in the way of cookery seemed impossible; where you could believe in anything to eat, they chose to tell you of. Mrs Varden returned from the contemplation of these wonders to the bar again, with a head quite dizzy and bewildered. Her housekeeping capacity was not large enough to comprehend them. She was obliged to go to sleep. Waking was pain, in the midst of such immensity.

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