

Chapter II

'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. 'How's 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 tomorrow, 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!