

Chapter III

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 fidgeting 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.