

Chapter V

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.