

Chapter VI

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.'