

## Chapter VII

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.