

Chapter VIII

Clear of the locksmith's house, Sim Tappertit laid aside his cautious manner, and assuming in its stead that of a ruffling, swaggering, roving blade, who would rather kill a man than otherwise, and eat him too if needful, made the best of his way along the darkened streets.

Half pausing for an instant now and then to smite his pocket and assure himself of the safety of his master key, he hurried on to Barbican, and turning into one of the narrowest of the narrow streets which diverged from that centre, slackened his pace and wiped his heated brow, as if the termination of his walk were near at hand.

It was not a very choice spot for midnight expeditions, being in truth one of more than questionable character, and of an appearance by no means inviting. From the main street he had entered, itself little better than an alley, a low-browed doorway led into a blind court, or yard, profoundly dark, unpaved, and reeking with stagnant odours. Into this ill-favoured pit, the locksmith's vagrant 'prentice groped his way; and stopping at a house from whose defaced and rotten front the rude effigy of a bottle swung to and fro like some gibbeted malefactor, struck thrice upon an iron grating with his foot. After listening in vain for some response to his signal, Mr Tappertit became impatient, and struck the grating thrice again.

A further delay ensued, but it was not of long duration. The ground seemed to open at his feet, and a ragged head appeared.

'Is that the captain?' said a voice as ragged as the head.

'Yes,' replied Mr Tappertit haughtily, descending as he spoke, 'who should it be?'

'It's so late, we gave you up,' returned the voice, as its owner stopped to shut and fasten the grating. 'You're late, sir.'

'Lead on,' said Mr Tappertit, with a gloomy majesty, 'and make remarks when I require you. Forward!'

This latter word of command was perhaps somewhat theatrical and unnecessary, inasmuch as the descent was by a very narrow, steep, and slippery flight of steps, and any rashness or departure from the beaten track must have ended in a yawning water-butt. But Mr Tappertit being, like some other great commanders, favourable to strong effects, and personal display, cried 'Forward!' again, in the hoarsest voice he could assume; and led the way, with folded arms and knitted brows, to the cellar down below, where there was a small copper fixed in one corner, a chair or two, a form and table, a

glimmering fire, and a truckle-bed, covered with a ragged patchwork rug.

'Welcome, noble captain!' cried a lanky figure, rising as from a nap.

The captain nodded. Then, throwing off his outer coat, he stood composed in all his dignity, and eyed his follower over.

'What news to-night?' he asked, when he had looked into his very soul.

'Nothing particular,' replied the other, stretching himself - and he was so long already that it was quite alarming to see him do it - 'how come you to be so late?'

'No matter,' was all the captain deigned to say in answer. 'Is the room prepared?'

'It is,' replied the follower.

'The comrade - is he here?'

'Yes. And a sprinkling of the others - you hear 'em?'

'Playing skittles!' said the captain moodily. 'Light-hearted revellers!'

There was no doubt respecting the particular amusement in which these heedless spirits were indulging, for even in the close and stifling atmosphere of the vault, the noise sounded like distant thunder. It certainly appeared, at first sight, a singular spot to choose, for that or any other purpose of relaxation, if the other cellars answered to the one in which this brief colloquy took place; for the floors were of sodden earth, the walls and roof of damp bare brick tapestried with the tracks of snails and slugs; the air was sickening, tainted, and offensive. It seemed, from one strong flavour which was uppermost among the various odours of the place, that it had, at no very distant period, been used as a storehouse for cheeses; a circumstance which, while it accounted for the greasy moisture that hung about it, was agreeably suggestive of rats. It was naturally damp besides, and little trees of fungus sprung from every mouldering corner.

The proprietor of this charming retreat, and owner of the ragged head before mentioned - for he wore an old tie-wig as bare and frowzy as a stunted hearth-broom - had by this time joined them; and stood a little apart, rubbing his hands, wagging his hoary bristled chin, and smiling in silence. His eyes were closed; but had they been wide open, it would have been easy to tell, from the attentive expression of the face he turned towards them - pale and unwholesome as might be

expected in one of his underground existence - and from a certain anxious raising and quivering of the lids, that he was blind.

'Even Stagg hath been asleep,' said the long comrade, nodding towards this person.

'Sound, captain, sound!' cried the blind man; 'what does my noble captain drink - is it brandy, rum, usquebaugh? Is it soaked gunpowder, or blazing oil? Give it a name, heart of oak, and we'd get it for you, if it was wine from a bishop's cellar, or melted gold from King George's mint.'

'See,' said Mr Tappertit haughtily, 'that it's something strong, and comes quick; and so long as you take care of that, you may bring it from the devil's cellar, if you like.'

'Boldly said, noble captain!' rejoined the blind man. 'Spoken like the 'Prentices' Glory. Ha, ha! From the devil's cellar! A brave joke! The captain joketh. Ha, ha, ha!'

'I'll tell you what, my fine feller,' said Mr Tappertit, eyeing the host over as he walked to a closet, and took out a bottle and glass as carelessly as if he had been in full possession of his sight, 'if you make that row, you'll find that the captain's very far from joking, and so I tell you.'

'He's got his eyes on me!' cried Stagg, stopping short on his way back, and affecting to screen his face with the bottle. 'I feel 'em though I can't see 'em. Take 'em off, noble captain. Remove 'em, for they pierce like gimlets.'

Mr Tappertit smiled grimly at his comrade; and twisting out one more look - a kind of ocular screw - under the influence of which the blind man feigned to undergo great anguish and torture, bade him, in a softened tone, approach, and hold his peace.

'I obey you, captain,' cried Stagg, drawing close to him and filling out a bumper without spilling a drop, by reason that he held his little finger at the brim of the glass, and stopped at the instant the liquor touched it, 'drink, noble governor. Death to all masters, life to all 'prentices, and love to all fair damsels. Drink, brave general, and warm your gallant heart!'

Mr Tappertit condescended to take the glass from his outstretched hand. Stagg then dropped on one knee, and gently smoothed the calves of his legs, with an air of humble admiration.

'That I had but eyes!' he cried, 'to behold my captain's symmetrical proportions! That I had but eyes, to look upon these twin invaders of domestic peace!'

'Get out!' said Mr Tappertit, glancing downward at his favourite limbs. 'Go along, will you, Stagg!'

'When I touch my own afterwards,' cried the host, smiting them reproachfully, 'I hate 'em. Comparatively speaking, they've no more shape than wooden legs, beside these models of my noble captain's.'

'Yours!' exclaimed Mr Tappertit. 'No, I should think not. Don't talk about those precious old toothpicks in the same breath with mine; that's rather too much. Here. Take the glass. Benjamin. Lead on. To business!'

With these words, he folded his arms again; and frowning with a sullen majesty, passed with his companion through a little door at the upper end of the cellar, and disappeared; leaving Stagg to his private meditations.

The vault they entered, strewn with sawdust and dimly lighted, was between the outer one from which they had just come, and that in which the skittle-players were diverting themselves; as was manifested by the increased noise and clamour of tongues, which was suddenly stopped, however, and replaced by a dead silence, at a signal from the long comrade. Then, this young gentleman, going to a little cupboard, returned with a thigh-bone, which in former times must have been part and parcel of some individual at least as long as himself, and placed the same in the hands of Mr Tappertit; who, receiving it as a sceptre and staff of authority, cocked his three-cornered hat fiercely on the top of his head, and mounted a large table, whereon a chair of state, cheerfully ornamented with a couple of skulls, was placed ready for his reception.

He had no sooner assumed this position, than another young gentleman appeared, bearing in his arms a huge clasped book, who made him a profound obeisance, and delivering it to the long comrade, advanced to the table, and turning his back upon it, stood there Atlas-wise. Then, the long comrade got upon the table too; and seating himself in a lower chair than Mr Tappertit's, with much state and ceremony, placed the large book on the shoulders of their mute companion as deliberately as if he had been a wooden desk, and prepared to make entries therein with a pen of corresponding size.

When the long comrade had made these preparations, he looked towards Mr Tappertit; and Mr Tappertit, flourishing the bone, knocked nine times therewith upon one of the skulls. At the ninth stroke, a

third young gentleman emerged from the door leading to the skittle ground, and bowing low, awaited his commands.

'Prentice!' said the mighty captain, 'who waits without?'

The 'prentice made answer that a stranger was in attendance, who claimed admission into that secret society of 'Prentice Knights, and a free participation in their rights, privileges, and immunities. Thereupon Mr Tappertit flourished the bone again, and giving the other skull a prodigious rap on the nose, exclaimed 'Admit him!' At these dread words the 'prentice bowed once more, and so withdrew as he had come.

There soon appeared at the same door, two other 'prentices, having between them a third, whose eyes were bandaged, and who was attired in a bag-wig, and a broad-skirted coat, trimmed with tarnished lace; and who was girded with a sword, in compliance with the laws of the Institution regulating the introduction of candidates, which required them to assume this courtly dress, and kept it constantly in lavender, for their convenience. One of the conductors of this novice held a rusty blunderbuss pointed towards his ear, and the other a very ancient sabre, with which he carved imaginary offenders as he came along in a sanguinary and anatomical manner.

As this silent group advanced, Mr Tappertit fixed his hat upon his head. The novice then laid his hand upon his breast and bent before him. When he had humbled himself sufficiently, the captain ordered the bandage to be removed, and proceeded to eye him over.

'Ha!' said the captain, thoughtfully, when he had concluded this ordeal. 'Proceed.'

The long comrade read aloud as follows: - 'Mark Gilbert. Age, nineteen. Bound to Thomas Curzon, hosier, Golden Fleece, Aldgate. Loves Curzon's daughter. Cannot say that Curzon's daughter loves him. Should think it probable. Curzon pulled his ears last Tuesday week.'

'How!' cried the captain, starting.

'For looking at his daughter, please you,' said the novice.

'Write Curzon down, Denounced,' said the captain. 'Put a black cross against the name of Curzon.'

'So please you,' said the novice, 'that's not the worst - he calls his 'prentice idle dog, and stops his beer unless he works to his liking. He

gives Dutch cheese, too, eating Cheshire, sir, himself; and Sundays out, are only once a month.'

'This,' said Mr Tappert gravely, 'is a flagrant case. Put two black crosses to the name of Curzon.'

'If the society,' said the novice, who was an ill-looking, one-sided, shambling lad, with sunken eyes set close together in his head - 'if the society would burn his house down - for he's not insured - or beat him as he comes home from his club at night, or help me to carry off his daughter, and marry her at the Fleet, whether she gave consent or no -'

Mr Tappertit waved his grizzly truncheon as an admonition to him not to interrupt, and ordered three black crosses to the name of Curzon.

'Which means,' he said in gracious explanation, 'vengeance, complete and terrible. 'Prentice, do you love the Constitution?'

To which the novice (being to that end instructed by his attendant sponsors) replied 'I do!'

'The Church, the State, and everything established - but the masters?' quoth the captain.

Again the novice said 'I do.'

Having said it, he listened meekly to the captain, who in an address prepared for such occasions, told him how that under that same Constitution (which was kept in a strong box somewhere, but where exactly he could not find out, or he would have endeavoured to procure a copy of it), the 'prentices had, in times gone by, had frequent holidays of right, broken people's heads by scores, defied their masters, nay, even achieved some glorious murders in the streets, which privileges had gradually been wrested from them, and in all which noble aspirations they were now restrained; how the degrading checks imposed upon them were unquestionably attributable to the innovating spirit of the times, and how they united therefore to resist all change, except such change as would restore those good old English customs, by which they would stand or fall. After illustrating the wisdom of going backward, by reference to that sagacious fish, the crab, and the not unfrequent practice of the mule and donkey, he described their general objects; which were briefly vengeance on their Tyrant Masters (of whose grievous and insupportable oppression no 'prentice could entertain a moment's doubt) and the restoration, as aforesaid, of their ancient rights and holidays; for neither of which objects were they now quite ripe, being barely twenty strong, but which they pledged themselves to pursue

with fire and sword when needful. Then he described the oath which every member of that small remnant of a noble body took, and which was of a dreadful and impressive kind; binding him, at the bidding of his chief, to resist and obstruct the Lord Mayor, sword-bearer, and chaplain; to despise the authority of the sheriffs; and to hold the court of aldermen as nought; but not on any account, in case the fulness of time should bring a general rising of 'prentices, to damage or in any way disfigure Temple Bar, which was strictly constitutional and always to be approached with reverence. Having gone over these several heads with great eloquence and force, and having further informed the novice that this society had its origin in his own teeming brain, stimulated by a swelling sense of wrong and outrage, Mr Tappertit demanded whether he had strength of heart to take the mighty pledge required, or whether he would withdraw while retreat was yet in his power.

To this the novice made rejoinder, that he would take the vow, though it should choke him; and it was accordingly administered with many impressive circumstances, among which the lighting up of the two skulls with a candle-end inside of each, and a great many flourishes with the bone, were chiefly conspicuous; not to mention a variety of grave exercises with the blunderbuss and sabre, and some dismal groaning by unseen 'prentices without. All these dark and direful ceremonies being at length completed, the table was put aside, the chair of state removed, the sceptre locked up in its usual cupboard, the doors of communication between the three cellars thrown freely open, and the 'Prentice Knights resigned themselves to merriment.

But Mr Tappertit, who had a soul above the vulgar herd, and who, on account of his greatness, could only afford to be merry now and then, threw himself on a bench with the air of a man who was faint with dignity. He looked with an indifferent eye, alike on skittles, cards, and dice, thinking only of the locksmith's daughter, and the base degenerate days on which he had fallen.

'My noble captain neither games, nor sings, nor dances,' said his host, taking a seat beside him. 'Drink, gallant general!'

Mr Tappertit drained the proffered goblet to the dregs; then thrust his hands into his pockets, and with a lowering visage walked among the skittles, while his followers (such is the influence of superior genius) restrained the ardent ball, and held his little shins in dumb respect.

'If I had been born a corsair or a pirate, a brigand, genteel highwayman or patriot - and they're the same thing,' thought Mr Tappertit, musing among the nine-pins, 'I should have been all right. But to drag out a ignoble existence unbeknown to mankind in general - patience! I will be famous yet. A voice within me keeps on whispering

Greatness. I shall burst out one of these days, and when I do, what power can keep me down? I feel my soul getting into my head at the idea. More drink there!

'The novice,' pursued Mr Tappertit, not exactly in a voice of thunder, for his tones, to say the truth were rather cracked and shrill - but very impressively, notwithstanding - 'where is he?'

'Here, noble captain!' cried Stagg. 'One stands beside me who I feel is a stranger.'

'Have you,' said Mr Tappertit, letting his gaze fall on the party indicated, who was indeed the new knight, by this time restored to his own apparel; 'Have you the impression of your street-door key in wax?'

The long comrade anticipated the reply, by producing it from the shelf on which it had been deposited.

'Good,' said Mr Tappertit, scrutinising it attentively, while a breathless silence reigned around; for he had constructed secret door-keys for the whole society, and perhaps owed something of his influence to that mean and trivial circumstance - on such slight accidents do even men of mind depend! - 'This is easily made. Come hither, friend.'

With that, he beckoned the new knight apart, and putting the pattern in his pocket, motioned to him to walk by his side.

'And so,' he said, when they had taken a few turns up and down, you - you love your master's daughter?'

'I do,' said the 'prentice. 'Honour bright. No chaff, you know.'

'Have you,' rejoined Mr Tappertit, catching him by the wrist, and giving him a look which would have been expressive of the most deadly malevolence, but for an accidental hiccup that rather interfered with it; 'have you a - a rival?'

'Not as I know on,' replied the 'prentice.

'If you had now - ' said Mr Tappertit - 'what would you - eh? - '

The 'prentice looked fierce and clenched his fists.

'It is enough,' cried Mr Tappertit hastily, 'we understand each other. We are observed. I thank you.'

So saying, he cast him off again; and calling the long comrade aside after taking a few hasty turns by himself, bade him immediately write and post against the wall, a notice, proscribing one Joseph Willet (commonly known as Joe) of Chigwell; forbidding all 'Prentice Knights to succour, comfort, or hold communion with him; and requiring them, on pain of excommunication, to molest, hurt, wrong, annoy, and pick quarrels with the said Joseph, whensoever and wheresoever they, or any of them, should happen to encounter him.

Having relieved his mind by this energetic proceeding, he condescended to approach the festive board, and warming by degrees, at length deigned to preside, and even to enchant the company with a song. After this, he rose to such a pitch as to consent to regale the society with a hornpipe, which he actually performed to the music of a fiddle (played by an ingenious member) with such surpassing agility and brilliancy of execution, that the spectators could not be sufficiently enthusiastic in their admiration; and their host protested, with tears in his eyes, that he had never truly felt his blindness until that moment.

But the host withdrawing - probably to weep in secret - soon returned with the information that it wanted little more than an hour of day, and that all the cocks in Barbican had already begun to crow, as if their lives depended on it. At this intelligence, the 'Prentice Knights arose in haste, and marshalling into a line, filed off one by one and dispersed with all speed to their several homes, leaving their leader to pass the grating last.

'Good night, noble captain,' whispered the blind man as he held it open for his passage out; 'Farewell, brave general. Bye, bye, illustrious commander. Good luck go with you for a - conceited, bragging, empty-headed, duck-legged idiot.'

With which parting words, coolly added as he listened to his receding footsteps and locked the grate upon himself, he descended the steps, and lighting the fire below the little copper, prepared, without any assistance, for his daily occupation; which was to retail at the area-head above pennyworths of broth and soup, and savoury puddings, compounded of such scraps as were to be bought in the heap for the least money at Fleet Market in the evening time; and for the sale of which he had need to have depended chiefly on his private connection, for the court had no thoroughfare, and was not that kind of place in which many people were likely to take the air, or to frequent as an agreeable promenade.