

Chapter IX

Chronicler's are privileged to enter where they list, to come and go through keyholes, to ride upon the wind, to overcome, in their soarings up and down, all obstacles of distance, time, and place. Thrice blessed be this last consideration, since it enables us to follow the disdainful Miggs even into the sanctity of her chamber, and to hold her in sweet companionship through the dreary watches of the night!

Miss Miggs, having undone her mistress, as she phrased it (which means, assisted to undress her), and having seen her comfortably to bed in the back room on the first floor, withdrew to her own apartment, in the attic story. Notwithstanding her declaration in the locksmith's presence, she was in no mood for sleep; so, putting her light upon the table and withdrawing the little window curtain, she gazed out pensively at the wild night sky.

Perhaps she wondered what star was destined for her habitation when she had run her little course below; perhaps speculated which of those glimmering spheres might be the natal orb of Mr Tappetit; perhaps marvelled how they could gaze down on that perfidious creature, man, and not sicken and turn green as chemists' lamps; perhaps thought of nothing in particular. Whatever she thought about, there she sat, until her attention, alive to anything connected with the insinuating 'prentice, was attracted by a noise in the next room to her own - his room; the room in which he slept, and dreamed - it might be, sometimes dreamed of her.

That he was not dreaming now, unless he was taking a walk in his sleep, was clear, for every now and then there came a shuffling noise, as though he were engaged in polishing the whitewashed wall; then a gentle creaking of his door; then the faintest indication of his stealthy footsteps on the landing-place outside. Noting this latter circumstance, Miss Miggs turned pale and shuddered, as mistrusting his intentions; and more than once exclaimed, below her breath, 'Oh! what a Providence it is, as I am bolted in!' - which, owing doubtless to her alarm, was a confusion of ideas on her part between a bolt and its use; for though there was one on the door, it was not fastened.

Miss Miggs's sense of hearing, however, having as sharp an edge as her temper, and being of the same snappish and suspicious kind, very soon informed her that the footsteps passed her door, and appeared to have some object quite separate and disconnected from herself. At this discovery she became more alarmed than ever, and was about to give utterance to those cries of 'Thieves!' and 'Murder!' which she had hitherto restrained, when it occurred to her to look softly out, and see that her fears had some good palpable foundation.

Looking out accordingly, and stretching her neck over the handrail, she descried, to her great amazement, Mr Tappetit completely dressed, stealing downstairs, one step at a time, with his shoes in one hand and a lamp in the other. Following him with her eyes, and going down a little way herself to get the better of an intervening angle, she beheld him thrust his head in at the parlour-door, draw it back again with great swiftness, and immediately begin a retreat upstairs with all possible expedition.

'Here's mysteries!' said the damsel, when she was safe in her own room again, quite out of breath. 'Oh, gracious, here's mysteries!'

The prospect of finding anybody out in anything, would have kept Miss Miggs awake under the influence of henbane. Presently, she heard the step again, as she would have done if it had been that of a feather endowed with motion and walking down on tiptoe. Then gliding out as before, she again beheld the retreating figure of the 'prentice; again he looked cautiously in at the parlour-door, but this time instead of retreating, he passed in and disappeared.

Miggs was back in her room, and had her head out of the window, before an elderly gentleman could have winked and recovered from it. Out he came at the street-door, shut it carefully behind him, tried it with his knee, and swaggered off, putting something in his pocket as he went along. At this spectacle Miggs cried 'Gracious!' again, and then 'Goodness gracious!' and then 'Goodness gracious me!' and then, candle in hand, went downstairs as he had done. Coming to the workshop, she saw the lamp burning on the forge, and everything as Sim had left it.

'Why I wish I may only have a walking funeral, and never be buried decent with a mourning-coach and feathers, if the boy hasn't been and made a key for his own self!' cried Miggs. 'Oh the little villain!'

This conclusion was not arrived at without consideration, and much peeping and peering about; nor was it unassisted by the recollection that she had on several occasions come upon the 'prentice suddenly, and found him busy at some mysterious occupation. Lest the fact of Miss Miggs calling him, on whom she stooped to cast a favourable eye, a boy, should create surprise in any breast, it may be observed that she invariably affected to regard all male bipeds under thirty as mere chits and infants; which phenomenon is not unusual in ladies of Miss Miggs's temper, and is indeed generally found to be the associate of such indomitable and savage virtue.

Miss Miggs deliberated within herself for some little time, looking hard at the shop-door while she did so, as though her eyes and thoughts were both upon it; and then, taking a sheet of paper from a drawer,

twisted it into a long thin spiral tube. Having filled this instrument with a quantity of small coal-dust from the forge, she approached the door, and dropping on one knee before it, dexterously blew into the keyhole as much of these fine ashes as the lock would hold. When she had filled it to the brim in a very workmanlike and skilful manner, she crept upstairs again, and chuckled as she went.

'There!' cried Miggs, rubbing her hands, 'now let's see whether you won't be glad to take some notice of me, mister. He, he, he! You'll have eyes for somebody besides Miss Dolly now, I think. A fat-faced puss she is, as ever I come across!'

As she uttered this criticism, she glanced approvingly at her small mirror, as who should say, I thank my stars that can't be said of me! - as it certainly could not; for Miss Miggs's style of beauty was of that kind which Mr Tappertit himself had not inaptly termed, in private, 'scraggy.'

'I don't go to bed this night!' said Miggs, wrapping herself in a shawl, and drawing a couple of chairs near the window, flouncing down upon one, and putting her feet upon the other, 'till you come home, my lad. I wouldn't,' said Miggs viciously, 'no, not for five-and-forty pound!'

With that, and with an expression of face in which a great number of opposite ingredients, such as mischief, cunning, malice, triumph, and patient expectation, were all mixed up together in a kind of physiognomical punch, Miss Miggs composed herself to wait and listen, like some fair ogress who had set a trap and was watching for a nibble from a plump young traveller.

She sat there, with perfect composure, all night. At length, just upon break of day, there was a footstep in the street, and presently she could hear Mr Tappertit stop at the door. Then she could make out that he tried his key - that he was blowing into it - that he knocked it on the nearest post to beat the dust out - that he took it under a lamp to look at it - that he poked bits of stick into the lock to clear it - that he peeped into the keyhole, first with one eye, and then with the other - that he tried the key again - that he couldn't turn it, and what was worse, couldn't get it out - that he bent it - that then it was much less disposed to come out than before - that he gave it a mighty twist and a great pull, and then it came out so suddenly that he staggered backwards - that he kicked the door - that he shook it - finally, that he smote his forehead, and sat down on the step in despair.

When this crisis had arrived, Miss Miggs, affecting to be exhausted with terror, and to cling to the window-sill for support, put out her nightcap, and demanded in a faint voice who was there.

Mr Tappertit cried 'Hush!' and, backing to the road, exhorted her in frenzied pantomime to secrecy and silence.

'Tell me one thing,' said Miggs. 'Is it thieves?'

'No - no - no!' cried Mr Tappertit.

'Then,' said Miggs, more faintly than before, 'it's fire. Where is it, sir? It's near this room, I know. I've a good conscience, sir, and would much rather die than go down a ladder. All I wish is, respecting my love to my married sister, Golden Lion Court, number twenty-sivin, second bell-handle on the right-hand door-post.'

'Miggs!' cried Mr Tappertit, 'don't you know me? Sim, you know - Sim - '

'Oh! what about him!' cried Miggs, clasping her hands. 'Is he in any danger? Is he in the midst of flames and blazes! Oh gracious, gracious!'

'Why I'm here, an't I?' rejoined Mr Tappertit, knocking himself on the breast. 'Don't you see me? What a fool you are, Miggs!'

'There!' cried Miggs, unmindful of this compliment. 'Why - so it - Goodness, what is the meaning of - If you please, mim, here's - '

'No, no!' cried Mr Tappertit, standing on tiptoe, as if by that means he, in the street, were any nearer being able to stop the mouth of Miggs in the garret. 'Don't! - I've been out without leave, and something or another's the matter with the lock. Come down, and undo the shop window, that I may get in that way.'

'I dursn't do it, Simmun,' cried Miggs - for that was her pronunciation of his Christian name. 'I dursn't do it, indeed. You know as well as anybody, how particular I am. And to come down in the dead of night, when the house is wrapped in slumbers and weiled in obscurity.' And there she stopped and shivered, for her modesty caught cold at the very thought.

'But Miggs,' cried Mr Tappertit, getting under the lamp, that she might see his eyes. 'My darling Miggs - '

Miggs screamed slightly.

' - That I love so much, and never can help thinking of,' and it is impossible to describe the use he made of his eyes when he said this - 'do - for my sake, do.'

'Oh Simmun,' cried Miggs, 'this is worse than all. I know if I come down, you'll go, and - '

'And what, my precious?' said Mr Tappertit.

'And try,' said Miggs, hysterically, 'to kiss me, or some such dreadfulness; I know you will!'

'I swear I won't,' said Mr Tappertit, with remarkable earnestness. 'Upon my soul I won't. It's getting broad day, and the watchman's waking up. Angelic Miggs! If you'll only come and let me in, I promise you faithfully and truly I won't.'

Miss Miggs, whose gentle heart was touched, did not wait for the oath (knowing how strong the temptation was, and fearing he might forswear himself), but tripped lightly down the stairs, and with her own fair hands drew back the rough fastenings of the workshop window. Having helped the wayward 'prentice in, she faintly articulated the words 'Simmun is safe!' and yielding to her woman's nature, immediately became insensible.

'I knew I should quench her,' said Sim, rather embarrassed by this circumstance. 'Of course I was certain it would come to this, but there was nothing else to be done - if I hadn't eyed her over, she wouldn't have come down. Here. Keep up a minute, Miggs. What a slippery figure she is! There's no holding her, comfortably. Do keep up a minute, Miggs, will you?'

As Miggs, however, was deaf to all entreaties, Mr Tappertit leant her against the wall as one might dispose of a walking-stick or umbrella, until he had secured the window, when he took her in his arms again, and, in short stages and with great difficulty - arising from her being tall and his being short, and perhaps in some degree from that peculiar physical conformation on which he had already remarked - carried her upstairs, and planting her, in the same umbrella and walking-stick fashion, just inside her own door, left her to her repose.

'He may be as cool as he likes,' said Miss Miggs, recovering as soon as she was left alone; 'but I'm in his confidence and he can't help himself, nor couldn't if he was twenty Simmunses!'