

Chapter X

It was on one of those mornings, common in early spring, when the year, fickle and changeable in its youth like all other created things, is undecided whether to step backward into winter or forward into summer, and in its uncertainty inclines now to the one and now to the other, and now to both at once - wooing summer in the sunshine, and lingering still with winter in the shade - it was, in short, on one of those mornings, when it is hot and cold, wet and dry, bright and lowering, sad and cheerful, withering and genial, in the compass of one short hour, that old John Willet, who was dropping asleep over the copper boiler, was roused by the sound of a horse's feet, and glancing out at window, beheld a traveller of goodly promise, checking his bridle at the Maypole door.

He was none of your flippant young fellows, who would call for a tankard of mulled ale, and make themselves as much at home as if they had ordered a hogshead of wine; none of your audacious young swaggerers, who would even penetrate into the bar - that solemn sanctuary - and, smiting old John upon the back, inquire if there was never a pretty girl in the house, and where he hid his little chambermaids, with a hundred other impertinences of that nature; none of your free-and-easy companions, who would scrape their boots upon the fire-dogs in the common room, and be not at all particular on the subject of spittoons; none of your unconscionable blades, requiring impossible chops, and taking unheard-of pickles for granted. He was a staid, grave, placid gentleman, something past the prime of life, yet upright in his carriage, for all that, and slim as a greyhound. He was well-mounted upon a sturdy chestnut cob, and had the graceful seat of an experienced horseman; while his riding gear, though free from such fopperies as were then in vogue, was handsome and well chosen. He wore a riding-coat of a somewhat brighter green than might have been expected to suit the taste of a gentleman of his years, with a short, black velvet cape, and laced pocket-holes and cuffs, all of a jaunty fashion; his linen, too, was of the finest kind, worked in a rich pattern at the wrists and throat, and scrupulously white. Although he seemed, judging from the mud he had picked up on the way, to have come from London, his horse was as smooth and cool as his own iron-grey periwig and pigtail. Neither man nor beast had turned a single hair; and saving for his soiled skirts and spatter-dashes, this gentleman, with his blooming face, white teeth, exactly-ordered dress, and perfect calmness, might have come from making an elaborate and leisurely toilet, to sit for an equestrian portrait at old John Willet's gate.

It must not be supposed that John observed these several characteristics by other than very slow degrees, or that he took in more than half a one at a time, or that he even made up his mind

upon that, without a great deal of very serious consideration. Indeed, if he had been distracted in the first instance by questionings and orders, it would have taken him at the least a fortnight to have noted what is here set down; but it happened that the gentleman, being struck with the old house, or with the plump pigeons which were skimming and curtsying about it, or with the tall maypole, on the top of which a weathercock, which had been out of order for fifteen years, performed a perpetual walk to the music of its own creaking, sat for some little time looking round in silence. Hence John, standing with his hand upon the horse's bridle, and his great eyes on the rider, and with nothing passing to divert his thoughts, had really got some of these little circumstances into his brain by the time he was called upon to speak.

'A quaint place this,' said the gentleman - and his voice was as rich as his dress. 'Are you the landlord?'

'At your service, sir,' replied John Willet.

'You can give my horse good stabling, can you, and me an early dinner (I am not particular what, so that it be cleanly served), and a decent room of which there seems to be no lack in this great mansion,' said the stranger, again running his eyes over the exterior.

'You can have, sir,' returned John with a readiness quite surprising, 'anything you please.'

'It's well I am easily satisfied,' returned the other with a smile, 'or that might prove a hardy pledge, my friend.' And saying so, he dismounted, with the aid of the block before the door, in a twinkling.

'Halloa there! Hugh!' roared John. 'I ask your pardon, sir, for keeping you standing in the porch; but my son has gone to town on business, and the boy being, as I may say, of a kind of use to me, I'm rather put out when he's away. Hugh! - a dreadful idle vagrant fellow, sir, half a gipsy, as I think - always sleeping in the sun in summer, and in the straw in winter time, sir - Hugh! Dear Lord, to keep a gentleman a waiting here through him! - Hugh! I wish that chap was dead, I do indeed.'

'Possibly he is,' returned the other. 'I should think if he were living, he would have heard you by this time.'

'In his fits of laziness, he sleeps so desperate hard,' said the distracted host, 'that if you were to fire off cannon-balls into his ears, it wouldn't wake him, sir.'

The guest made no remark upon this novel cure for drowsiness, and recipe for making people lively, but, with his hands clasped behind him, stood in the porch, very much amused to see old John, with the bridle in his hand, wavering between a strong impulse to abandon the animal to his fate, and a half disposition to lead him into the house, and shut him up in the parlour, while he waited on his master.

'Pillory the fellow, here he is at last!' cried John, in the very height and zenith of his distress. 'Did you hear me a calling, villain?'

The figure he addressed made no answer, but putting his hand upon the saddle, sprung into it at a bound, turned the horse's head towards the stable, and was gone in an instant.

'Brisk enough when he is awake,' said the guest.

'Brisk enough, sir!' replied John, looking at the place where the horse had been, as if not yet understanding quite, what had become of him. 'He melts, I think. He goes like a drop of froth. You look at him, and there he is. You look at him again, and - there he isn't.'

Having, in the absence of any more words, put this sudden climax to what he had faintly intended should be a long explanation of the whole life and character of his man, the oracular John Willet led the gentleman up his wide dismantled staircase into the Maypole's best apartment.

It was spacious enough in all conscience, occupying the whole depth of the house, and having at either end a great bay window, as large as many modern rooms; in which some few panes of stained glass, emblazoned with fragments of armorial bearings, though cracked, and patched, and shattered, yet remained; attesting, by their presence, that the former owner had made the very light subservient to his state, and pressed the sun itself into his list of flatterers; bidding it, when it shone into his chamber, reflect the badges of his ancient family, and take new hues and colours from their pride.

But those were old days, and now every little ray came and went as it would; telling the plain, bare, searching truth. Although the best room of the inn, it had the melancholy aspect of grandeur in decay, and was much too vast for comfort. Rich rustling hangings, waving on the walls; and, better far, the rustling of youth and beauty's dress; the light of women's eyes, outshining the tapers and their own rich jewels; the sound of gentle tongues, and music, and the tread of maiden feet, had once been there, and filled it with delight. But they were gone, and with them all its gladness. It was no longer a home; children were never born and bred there; the fireside had become mercenary - a something to be bought and sold - a very courtesan: let who would

die, or sit beside, or leave it, it was still the same - it missed nobody, cared for nobody, had equal warmth and smiles for all. God help the man whose heart ever changes with the world, as an old mansion when it becomes an inn!

No effort had been made to furnish this chilly waste, but before the broad chimney a colony of chairs and tables had been planted on a square of carpet, flanked by a ghostly screen, enriched with figures, grinning and grotesque. After lighting with his own hands the faggots which were heaped upon the hearth, old John withdrew to hold grave council with his cook, touching the stranger's entertainment; while the guest himself, seeing small comfort in the yet unkindled wood, opened a lattice in the distant window, and basked in a sickly gleam of cold March sun.

Leaving the window now and then, to rake the crackling logs together, or pace the echoing room from end to end, he closed it when the fire was quite burnt up, and having wheeled the easiest chair into the warmest corner, summoned John Willet.

'Sir,' said John.

He wanted pen, ink, and paper. There was an old standish on the mantelshelf containing a dusty apology for all three. Having set this before him, the landlord was retiring, when he motioned him to stay.

'There's a house not far from here,' said the guest when he had written a few lines, 'which you call the Warren, I believe?'

As this was said in the tone of one who knew the fact, and asked the question as a thing of course, John contented himself with nodding his head in the affirmative; at the same time taking one hand out of his pockets to cough behind, and then putting it in again.

'I want this note' - said the guest, glancing on what he had written, and folding it, 'conveyed there without loss of time, and an answer brought back here. Have you a messenger at hand?'

John was thoughtful for a minute or thereabouts, and then said Yes.

'Let me see him,' said the guest.

This was disconcerting; for Joe being out, and Hugh engaged in rubbing down the chestnut cob, he designed sending on the errand, Barnaby, who had just then arrived in one of his rambles, and who, so that he thought himself employed on a grave and serious business, would go anywhere.

'Why the truth is,' said John after a long pause, 'that the person who'd go quickest, is a sort of natural, as one may say, sir; and though quick of foot, and as much to be trusted as the post itself, he's not good at talking, being touched and flighty, sir.'

'You don't,' said the guest, raising his eyes to John's fat face, 'you don't mean - what's the fellow's name - you don't mean Barnaby?'

'Yes, I do,' returned the landlord, his features turning quite expressive with surprise.

'How comes he to be here?' inquired the guest, leaning back in his chair; speaking in the bland, even tone, from which he never varied; and with the same soft, courteous, never-changing smile upon his face. 'I saw him in London last night.'

'He's, for ever, here one hour, and there the next,' returned old John, after the usual pause to get the question in his mind. 'Sometimes he walks, and sometimes runs. He's known along the road by everybody, and sometimes comes here in a cart or chaise, and sometimes riding double. He comes and goes, through wind, rain, snow, and hail, and on the darkest nights. Nothing hurts HIM.'

'He goes often to the Warren, does he not?' said the guest carelessly. 'I seem to remember his mother telling me something to that effect yesterday. But I was not attending to the good woman much.'

'You're right, sir,' John made answer, 'he does. His father, sir, was murdered in that house.'

'So I have heard,' returned the guest, taking a gold toothpick from his pocket with the same sweet smile. 'A very disagreeable circumstance for the family.'

'Very,' said John with a puzzled look, as if it occurred to him, dimly and afar off, that this might by possibility be a cool way of treating the subject.

'All the circumstances after a murder,' said the guest soliloquising, 'must be dreadfully unpleasant - so much bustle and disturbance - no repose - a constant dwelling upon one subject - and the running in and out, and up and down stairs, intolerable. I wouldn't have such a thing happen to anybody I was nearly interested in, on any account. 'Twould be enough to wear one's life out. - You were going to say, friend - ' he added, turning to John again.

'Only that Mrs Rudge lives on a little pension from the family, and that Barnaby's as free of the house as any cat or dog about it,' answered John. 'Shall he do your errand, sir?'

'Oh yes,' replied the guest. 'Oh certainly. Let him do it by all means. Please to bring him here that I may charge him to be quick. If he objects to come you may tell him it's Mr Chester. He will remember my name, I dare say.'

John was so very much astonished to find who his visitor was, that he could express no astonishment at all, by looks or otherwise, but left the room as if he were in the most placid and imperturbable of all possible conditions. It has been reported that when he got downstairs, he looked steadily at the boiler for ten minutes by the clock, and all that time never once left off shaking his head; for which statement there would seem to be some ground of truth and feasibility, inasmuch as that interval of time did certainly elapse, before he returned with Barnaby to the guest's apartment.

'Come hither, lad,' said Mr Chester. 'You know Mr Geoffrey Haredale?'

Barnaby laughed, and looked at the landlord as though he would say, 'You hear him?' John, who was greatly shocked at this breach of decorum, clapped his finger to his nose, and shook his head in mute remonstrance.

'He knows him, sir,' said John, frowning aside at Barnaby, 'as well as you or I do.'

'I haven't the pleasure of much acquaintance with the gentleman,' returned his guest. 'YOU may have. Limit the comparison to yourself, my friend.'

Although this was said with the same easy affability, and the same smile, John felt himself put down, and laying the indignity at Barnaby's door, determined to kick his raven, on the very first opportunity.

'Give that,' said the guest, who had by this time sealed the note, and who beckoned his messenger towards him as he spoke, 'into Mr Haredale's own hands. Wait for an answer, and bring it back to me here. If you should find that Mr Haredale is engaged just now, tell him - can he remember a message, landlord?'

'When he chooses, sir,' replied John. 'He won't forget this one.'

'How are you sure of that?'

John merely pointed to him as he stood with his head bent forward, and his earnest gaze fixed closely on his questioner's face; and nodded sagely.

'Tell him then, Barnaby, should he be engaged,' said Mr Chester, 'that I shall be glad to wait his convenience here, and to see him (if he will call) at any time this evening. - At the worst I can have a bed here, Willet, I suppose?'

Old John, immensely flattered by the personal notoriety implied in this familiar form of address, answered, with something like a knowing look, 'I should believe you could, sir,' and was turning over in his mind various forms of eulogium, with the view of selecting one appropriate to the qualities of his best bed, when his ideas were put to flight by Mr Chester giving Barnaby the letter, and bidding him make all speed away.

'Speed!' said Barnaby, folding the little packet in his breast, 'Speed! If you want to see hurry and mystery, come here. Here!'

With that, he put his hand, very much to John Willet's horror, on the guest's fine broadcloth sleeve, and led him stealthily to the back window.

'Look down there,' he said softly; 'do you mark how they whisper in each other's ears; then dance and leap, to make believe they are in sport? Do you see how they stop for a moment, when they think there is no one looking, and mutter among themselves again; and then how they roll and gambol, delighted with the mischief they've been plotting? Look at 'em now. See how they whirl and plunge. And now they stop again, and whisper, cautiously together - little thinking, mind, how often I have lain upon the grass and watched them. I say what is it that they plot and hatch? Do you know?'

'They are only clothes,' returned the guest, 'such as we wear; hanging on those lines to dry, and fluttering in the wind.'

'Clothes!' echoed Barnaby, looking close into his face, and falling quickly back. 'Ha ha! Why, how much better to be silly, than as wise as you! You don't see shadowy people there, like those that live in sleep - not you. Nor eyes in the knotted panes of glass, nor swift ghosts when it blows hard, nor do you hear voices in the air, nor see men stalking in the sky - not you! I lead a merrier life than you, with all your cleverness. You're the dull men. We're the bright ones. Ha! ha! I'll not change with you, clever as you are, - not I!'

With that, he waved his hat above his head, and darted off.

'A strange creature, upon my word!' said the guest, pulling out a handsome box, and taking a pinch of snuff.

'He wants imagination,' said Mr Willet, very slowly, and after a long silence; 'that's what he wants. I've tried to instil it into him, many and many's the time; but' - John added this in confidence - 'he an't made for it; that's the fact.'

To record that Mr Chester smiled at John's remark would be little to the purpose, for he preserved the same conciliatory and pleasant look at all times. He drew his chair nearer to the fire though, as a kind of hint that he would prefer to be alone, and John, having no reasonable excuse for remaining, left him to himself.

Very thoughtful old John Willet was, while the dinner was preparing; and if his brain were ever less clear at one time than another, it is but reasonable to suppose that he addled it in no slight degree by shaking his head so much that day. That Mr Chester, between whom and Mr Haredale, it was notorious to all the neighbourhood, a deep and bitter animosity existed, should come down there for the sole purpose, as it seemed, of seeing him, and should choose the Maypole for their place of meeting, and should send to him express, were stumbling blocks John could not overcome. The only resource he had, was to consult the boiler, and wait impatiently for Barnaby's return.

But Barnaby delayed beyond all precedent. The visitor's dinner was served, removed, his wine was set, the fire replenished, the hearth clean swept; the light waned without, it grew dusk, became quite dark, and still no Barnaby appeared. Yet, though John Willet was full of wonder and misgiving, his guest sat cross-legged in the easy-chair, to all appearance as little ruffled in his thoughts as in his dress - the same calm, easy, cool gentleman, without a care or thought beyond his golden toothpick.

'Barnaby's late,' John ventured to observe, as he placed a pair of tarnished candlesticks, some three feet high, upon the table, and snuffed the lights they held.

'He is rather so,' replied the guest, sipping his wine. 'He will not be much longer, I dare say.'

John coughed and raked the fire together.

'As your roads bear no very good character, if I may judge from my son's mishap, though,' said Mr Chester, 'and as I have no fancy to be knocked on the head - which is not only disconcerting at the moment, but places one, besides, in a ridiculous position with respect to the

people who chance to pick one up - I shall stop here to-night. I think you said you had a bed to spare.'

'Such a bed, sir,' returned John Willet; 'ay, such a bed as few, even of the gentry's houses, own. A fixter here, sir. I've heard say that bedstead is nigh two hundred years of age. Your noble son - a fine young gentleman - slept in it last, sir, half a year ago.'

'Upon my life, a recommendation!' said the guest, shrugging his shoulders and wheeling his chair nearer to the fire. 'See that it be well aired, Mr Willet, and let a blazing fire be lighted there at once. This house is something damp and chilly.'

John raked the faggots up again, more from habit than presence of mind, or any reference to this remark, and was about to withdraw, when a bounding step was heard upon the stair, and Barnaby came panting in.

'He'll have his foot in the stirrup in an hour's time,' he cried, advancing. 'He has been riding hard all day - has just come home - but will be in the saddle again as soon as he has eat and drank, to meet his loving friend.'

'Was that his message?' asked the visitor, looking up, but without the smallest discomposure - or at least without the show of any.

'All but the last words,' Barnaby rejoined. 'He meant those. I saw that, in his face.'

'This for your pains,' said the other, putting money in his hand, and glancing at him steadfastly. 'This for your pains, sharp Barnaby.'

'For Grip, and me, and Hugh, to share among us,' he rejoined, putting it up, and nodding, as he counted it on his fingers. 'Grip one, me two, Hugh three; the dog, the goat, the cats - well, we shall spend it pretty soon, I warn you. Stay. - Look. Do you wise men see nothing there, now?'

He bent eagerly down on one knee, and gazed intently at the smoke, which was rolling up the chimney in a thick black cloud. John Willet, who appeared to consider himself particularly and chiefly referred to under the term wise men, looked that way likewise, and with great solidity of feature.

'Now, where do they go to, when they spring so fast up there,' asked Barnaby; 'eh? Why do they tread so closely on each other's heels, and why are they always in a hurry - which is what you blame me for, when I only take pattern by these busy folk about me? More of 'em!

catching to each other's skirts; and as fast as they go, others come! What a merry dance it is! I would that Grip and I could frisk like that!

'What has he in that basket at his back?' asked the guest after a few moments, during which Barnaby was still bending down to look higher up the chimney, and earnestly watching the smoke.

'In this?' he answered, jumping up, before John Willet could reply - shaking it as he spoke, and stooping his head to listen. 'In this! What is there here? Tell him!'

'A devil, a devil, a devil!' cried a hoarse voice.

'Here's money!' said Barnaby, chinking it in his hand, 'money for a treat, Grip!'

'Hurrah! Hurrah! Hurrah!' replied the raven, 'keep up your spirits. Never say die. Bow, wow, wow!'

Mr Willet, who appeared to entertain strong doubts whether a customer in a laced coat and fine linen could be supposed to have any acquaintance even with the existence of such unpolite gentry as the bird claimed to belong to, took Barnaby off at this juncture, with the view of preventing any other improper declarations, and quitted the room with his very best bow.