

Chapter XI

There was great news that night for the regular Maypole customers, to each of whom, as he straggled in to occupy his allotted seat in the chimney-corner, John, with a most impressive slowness of delivery, and in an apoplectic whisper, communicated the fact that Mr Chester was alone in the large room upstairs, and was waiting the arrival of Mr Geoffrey Haredale, to whom he had sent a letter (doubtless of a threatening nature) by the hands of Barnaby, then and there present.

For a little knot of smokers and solemn gossips, who had seldom any new topics of discussion, this was a perfect Godsend. Here was a good, dark-looking mystery progressing under that very roof - brought home to the fireside, as it were, and enjoyable without the smallest pains or trouble. It is extraordinary what a zest and relish it gave to the drink, and how it heightened the flavour of the tobacco. Every man smoked his pipe with a face of grave and serious delight, and looked at his neighbour with a sort of quiet congratulation. Nay, it was felt to be such a holiday and special night, that, on the motion of little Solomon Daisy, every man (including John himself) put down his sixpence for a can of flip, which grateful beverage was brewed with all despatch, and set down in the midst of them on the brick floor; both that it might simmer and stew before the fire, and that its fragrant steam, rising up among them, and mixing with the wreaths of vapour from their pipes, might shroud them in a delicious atmosphere of their own, and shut out all the world. The very furniture of the room seemed to mellow and deepen in its tone; the ceiling and walls looked blacker and more highly polished, the curtains of a ruddier red; the fire burnt clear and high, and the crickets in the hearthstone chirped with a more than wonted satisfaction.

There were present two, however, who showed but little interest in the general contentment. Of these, one was Barnaby himself, who slept, or, to avoid being beset with questions, feigned to sleep, in the chimney-corner; the other, Hugh, who, sleeping too, lay stretched upon the bench on the opposite side, in the full glare of the blazing fire.

The light that fell upon this slumbering form, showed it in all its muscular and handsome proportions. It was that of a young man, of a hale athletic figure, and a giant's strength, whose sunburnt face and swarthy throat, overgrown with jet black hair, might have served a painter for a model. Loosely attired, in the coarsest and roughest garb, with scraps of straw and hay - his usual bed - clinging here and there, and mingling with his uncombed locks, he had fallen asleep in a posture as careless as his dress. The negligence and disorder of the whole man, with something fierce and sullen in his features, gave him a picturesque appearance, that attracted the regards even of the

Maypole customers who knew him well, and caused Long Parkes to say that Hugh looked more like a poaching rascal to-night than ever he had seen him yet.

'He's waiting here, I suppose,' said Solomon, 'to take Mr Haredale's horse.'

'That's it, sir,' replied John Willet. 'He's not often in the house, you know. He's more at his ease among horses than men. I look upon him as a animal himself.'

Following up this opinion with a shrug that seemed meant to say, 'we can't expect everybody to be like us,' John put his pipe into his mouth again, and smoked like one who felt his superiority over the general run of mankind.

'That chap, sir,' said John, taking it out again after a time, and pointing at him with the stem, 'though he's got all his faculties about him - bottled up and corked down, if I may say so, somewheres or another - '

'Very good!' said Parkes, nodding his head. 'A very good expression, Johnny. You'll be a tackling somebody presently. You're in twig to-night, I see.'

'Take care,' said Mr Willet, not at all grateful for the compliment, 'that I don't tackle you, sir, which I shall certainly endeavour to do, if you interrupt me when I'm making observations. - That chap, I was a saying, though he has all his faculties about him, somewheres or another, bottled up and corked down, has no more imagination than Barnaby has. And why hasn't he?'

The three friends shook their heads at each other; saying by that action, without the trouble of opening their lips, 'Do you observe what a philosophical mind our friend has?'

'Why hasn't he?' said John, gently striking the table with his open hand. 'Because they was never drewed out of him when he was a boy. That's why. What would any of us have been, if our fathers hadn't drewed our faculties out of us? What would my boy Joe have been, if I hadn't drewed his faculties out of him? - Do you mind what I'm a saying of, gentlemen?'

'Ah! we mind you,' cried Parkes. 'Go on improving of us, Johnny.'

'Consequently, then,' said Mr Willet, 'that chap, whose mother was hung when he was a little boy, along with six others, for passing bad notes - and it's a blessed thing to think how many people are hung in

batches every six weeks for that, and such like offences, as showing how wide awake our government is - that chap that was then turned loose, and had to mind cows, and frighten birds away, and what not, for a few pence to live on, and so got on by degrees to mind horses, and to sleep in course of time in lofts and litter, instead of under haystacks and hedges, till at last he come to be hostler at the Maypole for his board and lodging and a annual trifle - that chap that can't read nor write, and has never had much to do with anything but animals, and has never lived in any way but like the animals he has lived among, IS a animal. And,' said Mr Willet, arriving at his logical conclusion, 'is to be treated accordingly.'

'Willet,' said Solomon Daisy, who had exhibited some impatience at the intrusion of so unworthy a subject on their more interesting theme, 'when Mr Chester come this morning, did he order the large room?'

'He signified, sir,' said John, 'that he wanted a large apartment. Yes. Certainly.'

'Why then, I'll tell you what,' said Solomon, speaking softly and with an earnest look. 'He and Mr Haredale are going to fight a duel in it.'

Everybody looked at Mr Willet, after this alarming suggestion. Mr Willet looked at the fire, weighing in his own mind the effect which such an occurrence would be likely to have on the establishment.

'Well,' said John, 'I don't know - I am sure - I remember that when I went up last, he HAD put the lights upon the mantel-shelf.'

'It's as plain,' returned Solomon, 'as the nose on Parkes's face' - Mr Parkes, who had a large nose, rubbed it, and looked as if he considered this a personal allusion - 'they'll fight in that room. You know by the newspapers what a common thing it is for gentlemen to fight in coffee-houses without seconds. One of 'em will be wounded or perhaps killed in this house.'

'That was a challenge that Barnaby took then, eh?' said John.

' - Inclosing a slip of paper with the measure of his sword upon it, I'll bet a guinea,' answered the little man. 'We know what sort of gentleman Mr Haredale is. You have told us what Barnaby said about his looks, when he came back. Depend upon it, I'm right. Now, mind.'

The flip had had no flavour till now. The tobacco had been of mere English growth, compared with its present taste. A duel in that great old rambling room upstairs, and the best bed ordered already for the wounded man!

'Would it be swords or pistols, now?' said John.

'Heaven knows. Perhaps both,' returned Solomon. 'The gentlemen wear swords, and may easily have pistols in their pockets - most likely have, indeed. If they fire at each other without effect, then they'll draw, and go to work in earnest.'

A shade passed over Mr Willet's face as he thought of broken windows and disabled furniture, but bethinking himself that one of the parties would probably be left alive to pay the damage, he brightened up again.

'And then,' said Solomon, looking from face to face, 'then we shall have one of those stains upon the floor that never come out. If Mr Haredale wins, depend upon it, it'll be a deep one; or if he loses, it will perhaps be deeper still, for he'll never give in unless he's beaten down. We know him better, eh?'

'Better indeed!' they whispered all together.

'As to its ever being got out again,' said Solomon, 'I tell you it never will, or can be. Why, do you know that it has been tried, at a certain house we are acquainted with?'

'The Warren!' cried John. 'No, sure!'

'Yes, sure - yes. It's only known by very few. It has been whispered about though, for all that. They planed the board away, but there it was. They went deep, but it went deeper. They put new boards down, but there was one great spot that came through still, and showed itself in the old place. And - harkye - draw nearer - Mr Geoffrey made that room his study, and sits there, always, with his foot (as I have heard) upon it; and he believes, through thinking of it long and very much, that it will never fade until he finds the man who did the deed.'

As this recital ended, and they all drew closer round the fire, the tramp of a horse was heard without.

'The very man!' cried John, starting up. 'Hugh! Hugh!'

The sleeper staggered to his feet, and hurried after him. John quickly returned, ushering in with great attention and deference (for Mr Haredale was his landlord) the long-expected visitor, who strode into the room clanking his heavy boots upon the floor; and looking keenly round upon the bowing group, raised his hat in acknowledgment of their profound respect.

'You have a stranger here, Willet, who sent to me,' he said, in a voice which sounded naturally stern and deep. 'Where is he?'

'In the great room upstairs, sir,' answered John.

'Show the way. Your staircase is dark, I know. Gentlemen, good night.'

With that, he signed to the landlord to go on before; and went clanking out, and up the stairs; old John, in his agitation, ingeniously lighting everything but the way, and making a stumble at every second step.

'Stop!' he said, when they reached the landing. 'I can announce myself. Don't wait.'

He laid his hand upon the door, entered, and shut it heavily. Mr Willet was by no means disposed to stand there listening by himself, especially as the walls were very thick; so descended, with much greater alacrity than he had come up, and joined his friends below.