

## Chapter XII

There was a brief pause in the state-room of the Maypole, as Mr Haredale tried the lock to satisfy himself that he had shut the door securely, and, striding up the dark chamber to where the screen inclosed a little patch of light and warmth, presented himself, abruptly and in silence, before the smiling guest.

If the two had no greater sympathy in their inward thoughts than in their outward bearing and appearance, the meeting did not seem likely to prove a very calm or pleasant one. With no great disparity between them in point of years, they were, in every other respect, as unlike and far removed from each other as two men could well be. The one was soft-spoken, delicately made, precise, and elegant; the other, a burly square-built man, negligently dressed, rough and abrupt in manner, stern, and, in his present mood, forbidding both in look and speech. The one preserved a calm and placid smile; the other, a distrustful frown. The new-comer, indeed, appeared bent on showing by his every tone and gesture his determined opposition and hostility to the man he had come to meet. The guest who received him, on the other hand, seemed to feel that the contrast between them was all in his favour, and to derive a quiet exultation from it which put him more at his ease than ever.

'Haredale,' said this gentleman, without the least appearance of embarrassment or reserve, 'I am very glad to see you.'

'Let us dispense with compliments. They are misplaced between us,' returned the other, waving his hand, 'and say plainly what we have to say. You have asked me to meet you. I am here. Why do we stand face to face again?'

'Still the same frank and sturdy character, I see!'

'Good or bad, sir, I am,' returned the other, leaning his arm upon the chimney-piece, and turning a haughty look upon the occupant of the easy-chair, 'the man I used to be. I have lost no old likings or dislikings; my memory has not failed me by a hair's-breadth. You ask me to give you a meeting. I say, I am here.'

'Our meeting, Haredale,' said Mr Chester, tapping his snuff-box, and following with a smile the impatient gesture he had made - perhaps unconsciously - towards his sword, 'is one of conference and peace, I hope?'

'I have come here,' returned the other, 'at your desire, holding myself bound to meet you, when and where you would. I have not come to bandy pleasant speeches, or hollow professions. You are a smooth

man of the world, sir, and at such play have me at a disadvantage. The very last man on this earth with whom I would enter the lists to combat with gentle compliments and masked faces, is Mr Chester, I do assure you. I am not his match at such weapons, and have reason to believe that few men are.'

'You do me a great deal of honour Haredale,' returned the other, most composedly, 'and I thank you. I will be frank with you - '

'I beg your pardon - will be what?'

'Frank - open - perfectly candid.'

'Hab!' cried Mr Haredale, drawing his breath. 'But don't let me interrupt you.'

'So resolved am I to hold this course,' returned the other, tasting his wine with great deliberation; 'that I have determined not to quarrel with you, and not to be betrayed into a warm expression or a hasty word.'

'There again,' said Mr Haredale, 'you have me at a great advantage. Your self-command - '

'Is not to be disturbed, when it will serve my purpose, you would say' - rejoined the other, interrupting him with the same complacency. 'Granted. I allow it. And I have a purpose to serve now. So have you. I am sure our object is the same. Let us attain it like sensible men, who have ceased to be boys some time. - Do you drink?'

'With my friends,' returned the other.

'At least,' said Mr Chester, 'you will be seated?'

'I will stand,' returned Mr Haredale impatiently, 'on this dismantled, beggared hearth, and not pollute it, fallen as it is, with mockeries. Go on.'

'You are wrong, Haredale,' said the other, crossing his legs, and smiling as he held his glass up in the bright glow of the fire. 'You are really very wrong. The world is a lively place enough, in which we must accommodate ourselves to circumstances, sail with the stream as glibly as we can, be content to take froth for substance, the surface for the depth, the counterfeit for the real coin. I wonder no philosopher has ever established that our globe itself is hollow. It should be, if Nature is consistent in her works.'

'YOU think it is, perhaps?'

'I should say,' he returned, sipping his wine, 'there could be no doubt about it. Well; we, in trifling with this jingling toy, have had the ill-luck to jostle and fall out. We are not what the world calls friends; but we are as good and true and loving friends for all that, as nine out of every ten of those on whom it bestows the title. You have a niece, and I a son - a fine lad, Haredale, but foolish. They fall in love with each other, and form what this same world calls an attachment; meaning a something fanciful and false like the rest, which, if it took its own free time, would break like any other bubble. But it may not have its own free time - will not, if they are left alone - and the question is, shall we two, because society calls us enemies, stand aloof, and let them rush into each other's arms, when, by approaching each other sensibly, as we do now, we can prevent it, and part them?'

'I love my niece,' said Mr Haredale, after a short silence. 'It may sound strangely in your ears; but I love her.'

'Strangely, my good fellow!' cried Mr Chester, lazily filling his glass again, and pulling out his toothpick. 'Not at all. I like Ned too - or, as you say, love him - that's the word among such near relations. I'm very fond of Ned. He's an amazingly good fellow, and a handsome fellow - foolish and weak as yet; that's all. But the thing is, Haredale - for I'll be very frank, as I told you I would at first - independently of any dislike that you and I might have to being related to each other, and independently of the religious differences between us - and damn it, that's important - I couldn't afford a match of this description. Ned and I couldn't do it. It's impossible.'

'Curb your tongue, in God's name, if this conversation is to last,' retorted Mr Haredale fiercely. 'I have said I love my niece. Do you think that, loving her, I would have her fling her heart away on any man who had your blood in his veins?'

'You see,' said the other, not at all disturbed, 'the advantage of being so frank and open. Just what I was about to add, upon my honour! I am amazingly attached to Ned - quite doat upon him, indeed - and even if we could afford to throw ourselves away, that very objection would be quite insuperable. - I wish you'd take some wine?'

'Mark me,' said Mr Haredale, striding to the table, and laying his hand upon it heavily. 'If any man believes - presumes to think - that I, in word or deed, or in the wildest dream, ever entertained remotely the idea of Emma Haredale's favouring the suit of any one who was akin to you - in any way - I care not what - he lies. He lies, and does me grievous wrong, in the mere thought.'

'Haredale,' returned the other, rocking himself to and fro as in assent, and nodding at the fire, 'it's extremely manly, and really very generous

in you, to meet me in this unreserved and handsome way. Upon my word, those are exactly my sentiments, only expressed with much more force and power than I could use - you know my sluggish nature, and will forgive me, I am sure.'

'While I would restrain her from all correspondence with your son, and sever their intercourse here, though it should cause her death,' said Mr Haredale, who had been pacing to and fro, 'I would do it kindly and tenderly if I can. I have a trust to discharge, which my nature is not formed to understand, and, for this reason, the bare fact of there being any love between them comes upon me to-night, almost for the first time.' 'I am more delighted than I can possibly tell you,' rejoined Mr Chester with the utmost blandness, 'to find my own impression so confirmed. You see the advantage of our having met. We understand each other. We quite agree. We have a most complete and thorough explanation, and we know what course to take. - Why don't you taste your tenant's wine? It's really very good.'

'Pray who,' said Mr Haredale, 'have aided Emma, or your son? Who are their go-betweens, and agents - do you know?'

'All the good people hereabouts - the neighbourhood in general, I think,' returned the other, with his most affable smile. 'The messenger I sent to you to-day, foremost among them all.'

'The idiot? Barnaby?'

'You are surprised? I am glad of that, for I was rather so myself. Yes. I wrung that from his mother - a very decent sort of woman - from whom, indeed, I chiefly learnt how serious the matter had become, and so determined to ride out here to-day, and hold a parley with you on this neutral ground. - You're stouter than you used to be, Haredale, but you look extremely well.'

'Our business, I presume, is nearly at an end,' said Mr Haredale, with an expression of impatience he was at no pains to conceal. 'Trust me, Mr Chester, my niece shall change from this time. I will appeal,' he added in a lower tone, 'to her woman's heart, her dignity, her pride, her duty - '

'I shall do the same by Ned,' said Mr Chester, restoring some errant faggots to their places in the grate with the toe of his boot. 'If there is anything real in this world, it is those amazingly fine feelings and those natural obligations which must subsist between father and son. I shall put it to him on every ground of moral and religious feeling. I shall represent to him that we cannot possibly afford it - that I have always looked forward to his marrying well, for a genteel provision for myself in the autumn of life - that there are a great many clamorous

dogs to pay, whose claims are perfectly just and right, and who must be paid out of his wife's fortune. In short, that the very highest and most honourable feelings of our nature, with every consideration of filial duty and affection, and all that sort of thing, imperatively demand that he should run away with an heiress.'

'And break her heart as speedily as possible?' said Mr Haredale, drawing on his glove.

'There Ned will act exactly as he pleases,' returned the other, sipping his wine; 'that's entirely his affair. I wouldn't for the world interfere with my son, Haredale, beyond a certain point. The relationship between father and son, you know, is positively quite a holy kind of bond. - WON'T you let me persuade you to take one glass of wine? Well! as you please, as you please,' he added, helping himself again.

'Chester,' said Mr Haredale, after a short silence, during which he had eyed his smiling face from time to time intently, 'you have the head and heart of an evil spirit in all matters of deception.'

'Your health!' said the other, with a nod. 'But I have interrupted you - '

'If now,' pursued Mr Haredale, 'we should find it difficult to separate these young people, and break off their intercourse - if, for instance, you find it difficult on your side, what course do you intend to take?'

'Nothing plainer, my good fellow, nothing easier,' returned the other, shrugging his shoulders and stretching himself more comfortably before the fire. 'I shall then exert those powers on which you flatter me so highly - though, upon my word, I don't deserve your compliments to their full extent - and resort to a few little trivial subterfuges for rousing jealousy and resentment. You see?'

'In short, justifying the means by the end, we are, as a last resource for tearing them asunder, to resort to treachery and - and lying,' said Mr Haredale.

'Oh dear no. Fie, fie!' returned the other, relishing a pinch of snuff extremely. 'Not lying. Only a little management, a little diplomacy, a little - intriguing, that's the word.'

'I wish,' said Mr Haredale, moving to and fro, and stopping, and moving on again, like one who was ill at ease, 'that this could have been foreseen or prevented. But as it has gone so far, and it is necessary for us to act, it is of no use shrinking or regretting. Well! I shall second your endeavours to the utmost of my power. There is one topic in the whole wide range of human thoughts on which we both

agree. We shall act in concert, but apart. There will be no need, I hope, for us to meet again.'

'Are you going?' said Mr Chester, rising with a graceful indolence. 'Let me light you down the stairs.'

'Pray keep your seat,' returned the other drily, 'I know the way. So, waving his hand slightly, and putting on his hat as he turned upon his heel, he went clanking out as he had come, shut the door behind him, and tramped down the echoing stairs.

'Pah! A very coarse animal, indeed!' said Mr Chester, composing himself in the easy-chair again. 'A rough brute. Quite a human badger!'

John Willet and his friends, who had been listening intently for the clash of swords, or firing of pistols in the great room, and had indeed settled the order in which they should rush in when summoned - in which procession old John had carefully arranged that he should bring up the rear - were very much astonished to see Mr Haredale come down without a scratch, call for his horse, and ride away thoughtfully at a footpace. After some consideration, it was decided that he had left the gentleman above, for dead, and had adopted this stratagem to divert suspicion or pursuit.

As this conclusion involved the necessity of their going upstairs forthwith, they were about to ascend in the order they had agreed upon, when a smart ringing at the guest's bell, as if he had pulled it vigorously, overthrew all their speculations, and involved them in great uncertainty and doubt. At length Mr Willet agreed to go upstairs himself, escorted by Hugh and Barnaby, as the strongest and stoutest fellows on the premises, who were to make their appearance under pretence of clearing away the glasses.

Under this protection, the brave and broad-faced John boldly entered the room, half a foot in advance, and received an order for a boot-jack without trembling. But when it was brought, and he leant his sturdy shoulder to the guest, Mr Willet was observed to look very hard into his boots as he pulled them off, and, by opening his eyes much wider than usual, to appear to express some surprise and disappointment at not finding them full of blood. He took occasion, too, to examine the gentleman as closely as he could, expecting to discover sundry loopholes in his person, pierced by his adversary's sword. Finding none, however, and observing in course of time that his guest was as cool and unruffled, both in his dress and temper, as he had been all day, old John at last heaved a deep sigh, and began to think no duel had been fought that night.

'And now, Willet,' said Mr Chester, 'if the room's well aired, I'll try the merits of that famous bed.'

'The room, sir,' returned John, taking up a candle, and nudging Barnaby and Hugh to accompany them, in case the gentleman should unexpectedly drop down faint or dead from some internal wound, 'the room's as warm as any toast in a tankard. Barnaby, take you that other candle, and go on before. Hugh! Follow up, sir, with the easy-chair.'

In this order - and still, in his earnest inspection, holding his candle very close to the guest; now making him feel extremely warm about the legs, now threatening to set his wig on fire, and constantly begging his pardon with great awkwardness and embarrassment - John led the party to the best bedroom, which was nearly as large as the chamber from which they had come, and held, drawn out near the fire for warmth, a great old spectral bedstead, hung with faded brocade, and ornamented, at the top of each carved post, with a plume of feathers that had once been white, but with dust and age had now grown hearse-like and funereal.

'Good night, my friends,' said Mr Chester with a sweet smile, seating himself, when he had surveyed the room from end to end, in the easy-chair which his attendants wheeled before the fire. 'Good night! Barnaby, my good fellow, you say some prayers before you go to bed, I hope?'

Barnaby nodded. 'He has some nonsense that he calls his prayers, sir,' returned old John, officiously. 'I'm afraid there an't much good in em.'

'And Hugh?' said Mr Chester, turning to him.

'Not I,' he answered. 'I know his' - pointing to Barnaby - 'they're well enough. He sings 'em sometimes in the straw. I listen.'

'He's quite a animal, sir,' John whispered in his ear with dignity. 'You'll excuse him, I'm sure. If he has any soul at all, sir, it must be such a very small one, that it don't signify what he does or doesn't in that way. Good night, sir!'

The guest rejoined 'God bless you!' with a fervour that was quite affecting; and John, beckoning his guards to go before, bowed himself out of the room, and left him to his rest in the Maypole's ancient bed.