

### Chapter XIII

If Joseph Willet, the denounced and proscribed of 'prentices, had happened to be at home when his father's courtly guest presented himself before the Maypole door - that is, if it had not perversely chanced to be one of the half-dozen days in the whole year on which he was at liberty to absent himself for as many hours without question or reproach - he would have contrived, by hook or crook, to dive to the very bottom of Mr Chester's mystery, and to come at his purpose with as much certainty as though he had been his confidential adviser. In that fortunate case, the lovers would have had quick warning of the ills that threatened them, and the aid of various timely and wise suggestions to boot; for all Joe's readiness of thought and action, and all his sympathies and good wishes, were enlisted in favour of the young people, and were staunch in devotion to their cause. Whether this disposition arose out of his old prepossessions in favour of the young lady, whose history had surrounded her in his mind, almost from his cradle, with circumstances of unusual interest; or from his attachment towards the young gentleman, into whose confidence he had, through his shrewdness and alacrity, and the rendering of sundry important services as a spy and messenger, almost imperceptibly glided; whether they had their origin in either of these sources, or in the habit natural to youth, or in the constant badgering and worrying of his venerable parent, or in any hidden little love affair of his own which gave him something of a fellow-feeling in the matter, it is needless to inquire - especially as Joe was out of the way, and had no opportunity on that particular occasion of testifying to his sentiments either on one side or the other.

It was, in fact, the twenty-fifth of March, which, as most people know to their cost, is, and has been time out of mind, one of those unpleasant epochs termed quarter-days. On this twenty-fifth of March, it was John Willet's pride annually to settle, in hard cash, his account with a certain vintner and distiller in the city of London; to give into whose hands a canvas bag containing its exact amount, and not a penny more or less, was the end and object of a journey for Joe, so surely as the year and day came round.

This journey was performed upon an old grey mare, concerning whom John had an indistinct set of ideas hovering about him, to the effect that she could win a plate or cup if she tried. She never had tried, and probably never would now, being some fourteen or fifteen years of age, short in wind, long in body, and rather the worse for wear in respect of her mane and tail. Notwithstanding these slight defects, John perfectly gloried in the animal; and when she was brought round to the door by Hugh, actually retired into the bar, and there, in a secret grove of lemons, laughed with pride.

'There's a bit of horseflesh, Hugh!' said John, when he had recovered enough self-command to appear at the door again. 'There's a comely creature! There's high mettle! There's bone!'

There was bone enough beyond all doubt; and so Hugh seemed to think, as he sat sideways in the saddle, lazily doubled up with his chin nearly touching his knees; and heedless of the dangling stirrups and loose bridle-rein, sauntered up and down on the little green before the door.

'Mind you take good care of her, sir,' said John, appealing from this insensible person to his son and heir, who now appeared, fully equipped and ready. 'Don't you ride hard.'

'I should be puzzled to do that, I think, father,' Joe replied, casting a disconsolate look at the animal.

'None of your impudence, sir, if you please,' retorted old John. 'What would you ride, sir? A wild ass or zebra would be too tame for you, wouldn't he, eh sir? You'd like to ride a roaring lion, wouldn't you, sir, eh sir? Hold your tongue, sir.' When Mr Willet, in his differences with his son, had exhausted all the questions that occurred to him, and Joe had said nothing at all in answer, he generally wound up by bidding him hold his tongue.

'And what does the boy mean,' added Mr Willet, after he had stared at him for a little time, in a species of stupefaction, 'by cocking his hat, to such an extent! Are you going to kill the wintner, sir?'

'No,' said Joe, tartly; 'I'm not. Now your mind's at ease, father.'

'With a military air, too!' said Mr Willet, surveying him from top to toe; 'with a swaggering, fire-eating, biling-water drinking sort of way with him! And what do you mean by pulling up the crocuses and snowdrops, eh sir?'

'It's only a little nosegay,' said Joe, reddening. 'There's no harm in that, I hope?'

'You're a boy of business, you are, sir!' said Mr Willet, disdainfully, 'to go supposing that wintners care for nosegays.'

'I don't suppose anything of the kind,' returned Joe. 'Let them keep their red noses for bottles and tankards. These are going to Mr Varden's house.'

'And do you suppose HE minds such things as crocuses?' demanded John.

'I don't know, and to say the truth, I don't care,' said Joe. 'Come, father, give me the money, and in the name of patience let me go.'

'There it is, sir,' replied John; 'and take care of it; and mind you don't make too much haste back, but give the mare a long rest. - Do you mind?'

'Ay, I mind,' returned Joe. 'She'll need it, Heaven knows.'

'And don't you score up too much at the Black Lion,' said John. 'Mind that too.'

'Then why don't you let me have some money of my own?' retorted Joe, sorrowfully; 'why don't you, father? What do you send me into London for, giving me only the right to call for my dinner at the Black Lion, which you're to pay for next time you go, as if I was not to be trusted with a few shillings? Why do you use me like this? It's not right of you. You can't expect me to be quiet under it.'

'Let him have money!' cried John, in a drowsy reverie. 'What does he call money - guineas? Hasn't he got money? Over and above the tolls, hasn't he one and sixpence?'

'One and sixpence!' repeated his son contemptuously.

'Yes, sir,' returned John, 'one and sixpence. When I was your age, I had never seen so much money, in a heap. A shilling of it is in case of accidents - the mare casting a shoe, or the like of that. The other sixpence is to spend in the diversions of London; and the diversion I recommend is going to the top of the Monument, and sitting there. There's no temptation there, sir - no drink - no young women - no bad characters of any sort - nothing but imagination. That's the way I enjoyed myself when I was your age, sir.'

To this, Joe made no answer, but beckoning Hugh, leaped into the saddle and rode away; and a very stalwart, manly horseman he looked, deserving a better charger than it was his fortune to bestride. John stood staring after him, or rather after the grey mare (for he had no eyes for her rider), until man and beast had been out of sight some twenty minutes, when he began to think they were gone, and slowly re-entering the house, fell into a gentle doze.

The unfortunate grey mare, who was the agony of Joe's life, floundered along at her own will and pleasure until the Maypole was no longer visible, and then, contracting her legs into what in a puppet would have been looked upon as a clumsy and awkward imitation of a canter, mended her pace all at once, and did it of her own accord. The acquaintance with her rider's usual mode of proceeding, which

suggested this improvement in hers, impelled her likewise to turn up a bye-way, leading - not to London, but through lanes running parallel with the road they had come, and passing within a few hundred yards of the Maypole, which led finally to an inclosure surrounding a large, old, red-brick mansion - the same of which mention was made as the Warren in the first chapter of this history. Coming to a dead stop in a little copse thereabout, she suffered her rider to dismount with right goodwill, and to tie her to the trunk of a tree.

'Stay there, old girl,' said Joe, 'and let us see whether there's any little commission for me to-day.' So saying, he left her to browse upon such stunted grass and weeds as happened to grow within the length of her tether, and passing through a wicket gate, entered the grounds on foot.

The pathway, after a very few minutes' walking, brought him close to the house, towards which, and especially towards one particular window, he directed many covert glances. It was a dreary, silent building, with echoing courtyards, desolated turret-chambers, and whole suites of rooms shut up and mouldering to ruin.

The terrace-garden, dark with the shade of overhanging trees, had an air of melancholy that was quite oppressive. Great iron gates, disused for many years, and red with rust, drooping on their hinges and overgrown with long rank grass, seemed as though they tried to sink into the ground, and hide their fallen state among the friendly weeds. The fantastic monsters on the walls, green with age and damp, and covered here and there with moss, looked grim and desolate. There was a sombre aspect even on that part of the mansion which was inhabited and kept in good repair, that struck the beholder with a sense of sadness; of something forlorn and failing, whence cheerfulness was banished. It would have been difficult to imagine a bright fire blazing in the dull and darkened rooms, or to picture any gaiety of heart or revelry that the frowning walls shut in. It seemed a place where such things had been, but could be no more - the very ghost of a house, haunting the old spot in its old outward form, and that was all.

Much of this decayed and sombre look was attributable, no doubt, to the death of its former master, and the temper of its present occupant; but remembering the tale connected with the mansion, it seemed the very place for such a deed, and one that might have been its predestined theatre years upon years ago. Viewed with reference to this legend, the sheet of water where the steward's body had been found appeared to wear a black and sullen character, such as no other pool might own; the bell upon the roof that had told the tale of murder to the midnight wind, became a very phantom whose voice

would raise the listener's hair on end; and every leafless bough that nodded to another, had its stealthy whispering of the crime.

Joe paced up and down the path, sometimes stopping in affected contemplation of the building or the prospect, sometimes leaning against a tree with an assumed air of idleness and indifference, but always keeping an eye upon the window he had singled out at first. After some quarter of an hour's delay, a small white hand was waved to him for an instant from this casement, and the young man, with a respectful bow, departed; saying under his breath as he crossed his horse again, 'No errand for me to-day!'

But the air of smartness, the cock of the hat to which John Willet had objected, and the spring nosegay, all betokened some little errand of his own, having a more interesting object than a vintner or even a locksmith. So, indeed, it turned out; for when he had settled with the vintner - whose place of business was down in some deep cellars hard by Thames Street, and who was as purple-faced an old gentleman as if he had all his life supported their arched roof on his head - when he had settled the account, and taken the receipt, and declined tasting more than three glasses of old sherry, to the unbounded astonishment of the purple-faced vintner, who, gimlet in hand, had projected an attack upon at least a score of dusty casks, and who stood transfixed, or morally gimleted as it were, to his own wall - when he had done all this, and disposed besides of a frugal dinner at the Black Lion in Whitechapel; spurning the Monument and John's advice, he turned his steps towards the locksmith's house, attracted by the eyes of blooming Dolly Varden.

Joe was by no means a sheepish fellow, but, for all that, when he got to the corner of the street in which the locksmith lived, he could by no means make up his mind to walk straight to the house. First, he resolved to stroll up another street for five minutes, then up another street for five minutes more, and so on until he had lost full half an hour, when he made a bold plunge and found himself with a red face and a beating heart in the smoky workshop.

'Joe Willet, or his ghost?' said Varden, rising from the desk at which he was busy with his books, and looking at him under his spectacles. 'Which is it? Joe in the flesh, eh? That's hearty. And how are all the Chigwell company, Joe?'

'Much as usual, sir - they and I agree as well as ever.'

'Well, well!' said the locksmith. 'We must be patient, Joe, and bear with old folks' foibles. How's the mare, Joe? Does she do the four miles an hour as easily as ever? Ha, ha, ha! Does she, Joe? Eh! - What have we there, Joe - a nosegay!'

'A very poor one, sir - I thought Miss Dolly - '

'No, no,' said Gabriel, dropping his voice, and shaking his head, 'not Dolly. Give 'em to her mother, Joe. A great deal better give 'em to her mother. Would you mind giving 'em to Mrs Varden, Joe?'

'Oh no, sir,' Joe replied, and endeavouring, but not with the greatest possible success, to hide his disappointment. 'I shall be very glad, I'm sure.'

'That's right,' said the locksmith, patting him on the back. 'It don't matter who has 'em, Joe?'

'Not a bit, sir.' - Dear heart, how the words stuck in his throat!

'Come in,' said Gabriel. 'I have just been called to tea. She's in the parlour.'

'She,' thought Joe. 'Which of 'em I wonder - Mrs or Miss?' The locksmith settled the doubt as neatly as if it had been expressed aloud, by leading him to the door, and saying, 'Martha, my dear, here's young Mr Willet.'

Now, Mrs Varden, regarding the Maypole as a sort of human mantrap, or decoy for husbands; viewing its proprietor, and all who aided and abetted him, in the light of so many poachers among Christian men; and believing, moreover, that the publicans coupled with sinners in Holy Writ were veritable licensed victuallers; was far from being favourably disposed towards her visitor. Wherefore she was taken faint directly; and being duly presented with the crocuses and snowdrops, divined on further consideration that they were the occasion of the languor which had seized upon her spirits. 'I'm afraid I couldn't bear the room another minute,' said the good lady, 'if they remained here. WOULD you excuse my putting them out of window?'

Joe begged she wouldn't mention it on any account, and smiled feebly as he saw them deposited on the sill outside. If anybody could have known the pains he had taken to make up that despised and misused bunch of flowers! -

'I feel it quite a relief to get rid of them, I assure you,' said Mrs Varden. 'I'm better already.' And indeed she did appear to have plucked up her spirits.

Joe expressed his gratitude to Providence for this favourable dispensation, and tried to look as if he didn't wonder where Dolly was.

'You're sad people at Chigwell, Mr Joseph,' said Mrs V.

'I hope not, ma'am,' returned Joe.

'You're the cruellest and most inconsiderate people in the world,' said Mrs Varden, bridling. 'I wonder old Mr Willet, having been a married man himself, doesn't know better than to conduct himself as he does. His doing it for profit is no excuse. I would rather pay the money twenty times over, and have Varden come home like a respectable and sober tradesman. If there is one character,' said Mrs Varden with great emphasis, 'that offends and disgusts me more than another, it is a sot.'

'Come, Martha, my dear,' said the locksmith cheerily, 'let us have tea, and don't let us talk about sots. There are none here, and Joe don't want to hear about them, I dare say.'

At this crisis, Miggs appeared with toast.

'I dare say he does not,' said Mrs Varden; 'and I dare say you do not, Varden. It's a very unpleasant subject, I have no doubt, though I won't say it's personal' - Miggs coughed - 'whatever I may be forced to think' - Miggs sneezed expressively. 'You never will know, Varden, and nobody at young Mr Willet's age - you'll excuse me, sir - can be expected to know, what a woman suffers when she is waiting at home under such circumstances. If you don't believe me, as I know you don't, here's Miggs, who is only too often a witness of it - ask her.'

'Oh! she were very bad the other night, sir, indeed she were, said Miggs. 'If you hadn't the sweetness of an angel in you, mim, I don't think you could abear it, I raly don't.'

'Miggs,' said Mrs Varden, 'you're profane.'

'Begging your pardon, mim,' returned Miggs, with shrill rapidity, 'such was not my intentions, and such I hope is not my character, though I am but a servant.'

'Answering me, Miggs, and providing yourself,' retorted her mistress, looking round with dignity, 'is one and the same thing. How dare you speak of angels in connection with your sinful fellow-beings - mere' - said Mrs Varden, glancing at herself in a neighbouring mirror, and arranging the ribbon of her cap in a more becoming fashion - 'mere worms and grovellers as we are!'

'I did not intend, mim, if you please, to give offence,' said Miggs, confident in the strength of her compliment, and developing strongly in the throat as usual, 'and I did not expect it would be took as such. I hope I know my own unworthiness, and that I hate and despise myself and all my fellow-creatures as every practicable Christian should.'

'You'll have the goodness, if you please,' said Mrs Varden, loftily, 'to step upstairs and see if Dolly has finished dressing, and to tell her that the chair that was ordered for her will be here in a minute, and that if she keeps it waiting, I shall send it away that instant. - I'm sorry to see that you don't take your tea, Varden, and that you don't take yours, Mr Joseph; though of course it would be foolish of me to expect that anything that can be had at home, and in the company of females, would please YOU.'

This pronoun was understood in the plural sense, and included both gentlemen, upon both of whom it was rather hard and undeserved, for Gabriel had applied himself to the meal with a very promising appetite, until it was spoilt by Mrs Varden herself, and Joe had as great a liking for the female society of the locksmith's house - or for a part of it at all events - as man could well entertain.

But he had no opportunity to say anything in his own defence, for at that moment Dolly herself appeared, and struck him quite dumb with her beauty. Never had Dolly looked so handsome as she did then, in all the glow and grace of youth, with all her charms increased a hundredfold by a most becoming dress, by a thousand little coquettish ways which nobody could assume with a better grace, and all the sparkling expectation of that accursed party. It is impossible to tell how Joe hated that party wherever it was, and all the other people who were going to it, whoever they were.

And she hardly looked at him - no, hardly looked at him. And when the chair was seen through the open door coming blundering into the workshop, she actually clapped her hands and seemed glad to go. But Joe gave her his arm - there was some comfort in that - and handed her into it. To see her seat herself inside, with her laughing eyes brighter than diamonds, and her hand - surely she had the prettiest hand in the world - on the ledge of the open window, and her little finger provokingly and pertly tilted up, as if it wondered why Joe didn't squeeze or kiss it! To think how well one or two of the modest snowdrops would have become that delicate bodice, and how they were lying neglected outside the parlour window! To see how Miggs looked on with a face expressive of knowing how all this loveliness was got up, and of being in the secret of every string and pin and hook and eye, and of saying it ain't half as real as you think, and I could look quite as well myself if I took the pains! To hear that provoking precious little scream when the chair was hoisted on its poles, and to catch that transient but not-to-be-forgotten vision of the happy face within - what torments and aggravations, and yet what delights were these! The very chairmen seemed favoured rivals as they bore her down the street.

There never was such an alteration in a small room in a small time as in that parlour when they went back to finish tea. So dark, so deserted, so perfectly disenchanted. It seemed such sheer nonsense to be sitting tamely there, when she was at a dance with more lovers than man could calculate fluttering about her - with the whole party doting on and adoring her, and wanting to marry her. Miggs was hovering about too; and the fact of her existence, the mere circumstance of her ever having been born, appeared, after Dolly, such an unaccountable practical joke. It was impossible to talk. It couldn't be done. He had nothing left for it but to stir his tea round, and round, and round, and ruminates on all the fascinations of the locksmith's lovely daughter.

Gabriel was dull too. It was a part of the certain uncertainty of Mrs Varden's temper, that when they were in this condition, she should be gay and sprightly.

'I need have a cheerful disposition, I am sure,' said the smiling housewife, 'to preserve any spirits at all; and how I do it I can scarcely tell.'

'Ah, mim,' sighed Miggs, 'begging your pardon for the interruption, there an't a many like you.'

'Take away, Miggs,' said Mrs Varden, rising, 'take away, pray. I know I'm a restraint here, and as I wish everybody to enjoy themselves as they best can, I feel I had better go.'

'No, no, Martha,' cried the locksmith. 'Stop here. I'm sure we shall be very sorry to lose you, eh Joe!' Joe started, and said 'Certainly.'

'Thank you, Varden, my dear,' returned his wife; 'but I know your wishes better. Tobacco and beer, or spirits, have much greater attractions than any I can boast of, and therefore I shall go and sit upstairs and look out of window, my love. Good night, Mr Joseph. I'm very glad to have seen you, and I only wish I could have provided something more suitable to your taste. Remember me very kindly if you please to old Mr Willet, and tell him that whenever he comes here I have a crow to pluck with him. Good night!'

Having uttered these words with great sweetness of manner, the good lady dropped a curtsey remarkable for its condescension, and serenely withdrew.

And it was for this Joe had looked forward to the twenty-fifth of March for weeks and weeks, and had gathered the flowers with so much care, and had cocked his hat, and made himself so smart! This was the end of all his bold determination, resolved upon for the hundredth

time, to speak out to Dolly and tell her how he loved her! To see her for a minute - for but a minute - to find her going out to a party and glad to go; to be looked upon as a common pipe-smoker, beer-bibber, spirit-guzzler, and tosspot! He bade farewell to his friend the locksmith, and hastened to take horse at the Black Lion, thinking as he turned towards home, as many another Joe has thought before and since, that here was an end to all his hopes - that the thing was impossible and never could be - that she didn't care for him - that he was wretched for life - and that the only congenial prospect left him, was to go for a soldier or a sailor, and get some obliging enemy to knock his brains out as soon as possible.