

## Chapter XIV

Joe Willet rode leisurely along in his desponding mood, picturing the locksmith's daughter going down long country-dances, and poussetting dreadfully with bold strangers - which was almost too much to bear - when he heard the tramp of a horse's feet behind him, and looking back, saw a well-mounted gentleman advancing at a smart canter. As this rider passed, he checked his steed, and called him of the Maypole by his name. Joe set spurs to the grey mare, and was at his side directly.

'I thought it was you, sir,' he said, touching his hat. 'A fair evening, sir. Glad to see you out of doors again.'

The gentleman smiled and nodded. 'What gay doings have been going on to-day, Joe? Is she as pretty as ever? Nay, don't blush, man.'

'If I coloured at all, Mr Edward,' said Joe, 'which I didn't know I did, it was to think I should have been such a fool as ever to have any hope of her. She's as far out of my reach as - as Heaven is.'

'Well, Joe, I hope that's not altogether beyond it,' said Edward, good-humouredly. 'Eh?'

'Ah!' sighed Joe. 'It's all very fine talking, sir. Proverbs are easily made in cold blood. But it can't be helped. Are you bound for our house, sir?'

'Yes. As I am not quite strong yet, I shall stay there to-night, and ride home coolly in the morning.'

'If you're in no particular hurry,' said Joe after a short silence, 'and will bear with the pace of this poor jade, I shall be glad to ride on with you to the Warren, sir, and hold your horse when you dismount. It'll save you having to walk from the Maypole, there and back again. I can spare the time well, sir, for I am too soon.'

'And so am I,' returned Edward, 'though I was unconsciously riding fast just now, in compliment I suppose to the pace of my thoughts, which were travelling post. We will keep together, Joe, willingly, and be as good company as may be. And cheer up, cheer up, think of the locksmith's daughter with a stout heart, and you shall win her yet.'

Joe shook his head; but there was something so cheery in the buoyant hopeful manner of this speech, that his spirits rose under its influence, and communicated as it would seem some new impulse even to the grey mare, who, breaking from her sober amble into a

gentle trot, emulated the pace of Edward Chester's horse, and appeared to flatter herself that he was doing his very best.

It was a fine dry night, and the light of a young moon, which was then just rising, shed around that peace and tranquillity which gives to evening time its most delicious charm. The lengthened shadows of the trees, softened as if reflected in still water, threw their carpet on the path the travellers pursued, and the light wind stirred yet more softly than before, as though it were soothing Nature in her sleep. By little and little they ceased talking, and rode on side by side in a pleasant silence.

'The Maypole lights are brilliant to-night,' said Edward, as they rode along the lane from which, while the intervening trees were bare of leaves, that hostelry was visible.

'Brilliant indeed, sir,' returned Joe, rising in his stirrups to get a better view. 'Lights in the large room, and a fire glimmering in the best bedchamber? Why, what company can this be for, I wonder!'

'Some benighted horseman wending towards London, and deterred from going on to-night by the marvellous tales of my friend the highwayman, I suppose,' said Edward.

'He must be a horseman of good quality to have such accommodations. Your bed too, sir - !'

'No matter, Joe. Any other room will do for me. But come - there's nine striking. We may push on.'

They cantered forward at as brisk a pace as Joe's charger could attain, and presently stopped in the little copse where he had left her in the morning. Edward dismounted, gave his bridle to his companion, and walked with a light step towards the house.

A female servant was waiting at a side gate in the garden-wall, and admitted him without delay. He hurried along the terrace-walk, and darted up a flight of broad steps leading into an old and gloomy hall, whose walls were ornamented with rusty suits of armour, antlers, weapons of the chase, and suchlike garniture. Here he paused, but not long; for as he looked round, as if expecting the attendant to have followed, and wondering she had not done so, a lovely girl appeared, whose dark hair next moment rested on his breast. Almost at the same instant a heavy hand was laid upon her arm, Edward felt himself thrust away, and Mr Haredale stood between them.

He regarded the young man sternly without removing his hat; with one hand clasped his niece, and with the other, in which he held his

riding-whip, motioned him towards the door. The young man drew himself up, and returned his gaze.

'This is well done of you, sir, to corrupt my servants, and enter my house unbidden and in secret, like a thief!' said Mr Haredale. 'Leave it, sir, and return no more.'

'Miss Haredale's presence,' returned the young man, 'and your relationship to her, give you a licence which, if you are a brave man, you will not abuse. You have compelled me to this course, and the fault is yours - not mine.'

'It is neither generous, nor honourable, nor the act of a true man, sir,' retorted the other, 'to tamper with the affections of a weak, trusting girl, while you shrink, in your unworthiness, from her guardian and protector, and dare not meet the light of day. More than this I will not say to you, save that I forbid you this house, and require you to be gone.'

'It is neither generous, nor honourable, nor the act of a true man to play the spy,' said Edward. 'Your words imply dishonour, and I reject them with the scorn they merit.'

'You will find,' said Mr Haredale, calmly, 'your trusty go-between in waiting at the gate by which you entered. I have played no spy's part, sir. I chanced to see you pass the gate, and followed. You might have heard me knocking for admission, had you been less swift of foot, or lingered in the garden. Please to withdraw. Your presence here is offensive to me and distressful to my niece.' As he said these words, he passed his arm about the waist of the terrified and weeping girl, and drew her closer to him; and though the habitual severity of his manner was scarcely changed, there was yet apparent in the action an air of kindness and sympathy for her distress.

'Mr Haredale,' said Edward, 'your arm encircles her on whom I have set my every hope and thought, and to purchase one minute's happiness for whom I would gladly lay down my life; this house is the casket that holds the precious jewel of my existence. Your niece has plighted her faith to me, and I have plighted mine to her. What have I done that you should hold me in this light esteem, and give me these discourteous words?'

'You have done that, sir,' answered Mr Haredale, 'which must be undone. You have tied a lover'-knot here which must be cut asunder. Take good heed of what I say. Must. I cancel the bond between ye. I reject you, and all of your kith and kin - all the false, hollow, heartless stock.'

'High words, sir,' said Edward, scornfully.

'Words of purpose and meaning, as you will find,' replied the other. 'Lay them to heart.'

'Lay you then, these,' said Edward. 'Your cold and sullen temper, which chills every breast about you, which turns affection into fear, and changes duty into dread, has forced us on this secret course, repugnant to our nature and our wish, and far more foreign, sir, to us than you. I am not a false, a hollow, or a heartless man; the character is yours, who poorly venture on these injurious terms, against the truth, and under the shelter whereof I reminded you just now. You shall not cancel the bond between us. I will not abandon this pursuit. I rely upon your niece's truth and honour, and set your influence at nought. I leave her with a confidence in her pure faith, which you will never weaken, and with no concern but that I do not leave her in some gentler care.'

With that, he pressed her cold hand to his lips, and once more encountering and returning Mr Haredale's steady look, withdrew.

A few words to Joe as he mounted his horse sufficiently explained what had passed, and renewed all that young gentleman's despondency with tenfold aggravation. They rode back to the Maypole without exchanging a syllable, and arrived at the door with heavy hearts.

Old John, who had peeped from behind the red curtain as they rode up shouting for Hugh, was out directly, and said with great importance as he held the young man's stirrup,

'He's comfortable in bed - the best bed. A thorough gentleman; the smilingest, affablest gentleman I ever had to do with.'

'Who, Willet?' said Edward carelessly, as he dismounted.

'Your worthy father, sir,' replied John. 'Your honourable, venerable father.'

'What does he mean?' said Edward, looking with a mixture of alarm and doubt, at Joe.

'What DO you mean?' said Joe. 'Don't you see Mr Edward doesn't understand, father?'

'Why, didn't you know of it, sir?' said John, opening his eyes wide. 'How very singular! Bless you, he's been here ever since noon to-day,

and Mr Haredale has been having a long talk with him, and hasn't been gone an hour.'

'My father, Willet!'

'Yes, sir, he told me so - a handsome, slim, upright gentleman, in green-and-gold. In your old room up yonder, sir. No doubt you can go in, sir,' said John, walking backwards into the road and looking up at the window. 'He hasn't put out his candles yet, I see.'

Edward glanced at the window also, and hastily murmuring that he had changed his mind - forgotten something - and must return to London, mounted his horse again and rode away; leaving the Willets, father and son, looking at each other in mute astonishment.