

Chapter XV

At noon next day, John Willet's guest sat lingering over his breakfast in his own home, surrounded by a variety of comforts, which left the Maypole's highest flight and utmost stretch of accommodation at an infinite distance behind, and suggested comparisons very much to the disadvantage and disfavour of that venerable tavern.

In the broad old-fashioned window-seat - as capacious as many modern sofas, and cushioned to serve the purpose of a luxurious settee - in the broad old-fashioned window-seat of a roomy chamber, Mr Chester lounged, very much at his ease, over a well-furnished breakfast-table. He had exchanged his riding-coat for a handsome morning-gown, his boots for slippers; had been at great pains to atone for the having been obliged to make his toilet when he rose without the aid of dressing-case and tiring equipage; and, having gradually forgotten through these means the discomforts of an indifferent night and an early ride, was in a state of perfect complacency, indolence, and satisfaction.

The situation in which he found himself, indeed, was particularly favourable to the growth of these feelings; for, not to mention the lazy influence of a late and lonely breakfast, with the additional sedative of a newspaper, there was an air of repose about his place of residence peculiar to itself, and which hangs about it, even in these times, when it is more bustling and busy than it was in days of yore.

There are, still, worse places than the Temple, on a sultry day, for basking in the sun, or resting idly in the shade. There is yet a drowsiness in its courts, and a dreamy dulness in its trees and gardens; those who pace its lanes and squares may yet hear the echoes of their footsteps on the sounding stones, and read upon its gates, in passing from the tumult of the Strand or Fleet Street, 'Who enters here leaves noise behind.' There is still the plash of falling water in fair Fountain Court, and there are yet nooks and corners where dun-haunted students may look down from their dusty garrets, on a vagrant ray of sunlight patching the shade of the tall houses, and seldom troubled to reflect a passing stranger's form. There is yet, in the Temple, something of a clerkly monkish atmosphere, which public offices of law have not disturbed, and even legal firms have failed to scare away. In summer time, its pumps suggest to thirsty idlers, springs cooler, and more sparkling, and deeper than other wells; and as they trace the spillings of full pitchers on the heated ground, they snuff the freshness, and, sighing, cast sad looks towards the Thames, and think of baths and boats, and saunter on, despondent.

It was in a room in Paper Buildings - a row of goodly tenements, shaded in front by ancient trees, and looking, at the back, upon the

Temple Gardens - that this, our idler, lounged; now taking up again the paper he had laid down a hundred times; now trifling with the fragments of his meal; now pulling forth his golden toothpick, and glancing leisurely about the room, or out at window into the trim garden walks, where a few early loiterers were already pacing to and fro. Here a pair of lovers met to quarrel and make up; there a dark-eyed nursery-maid had better eyes for Templars than her charge; on this hand an ancient spinster, with her lapdog in a string, regarded both enormities with scornful sidelong looks; on that a weazen old gentleman, ogling the nursery-maid, looked with like scorn upon the spinster, and wondered she didn't know she was no longer young. Apart from all these, on the river's margin two or three couple of business-talkers walked slowly up and down in earnest conversation; and one young man sat thoughtfully on a bench, alone.

'Ned is amazingly patient!' said Mr Chester, glancing at this last-named person as he set down his teacup and plied the golden toothpick, 'immensely patient! He was sitting yonder when I began to dress, and has scarcely changed his posture since. A most eccentric dog!'

As he spoke, the figure rose, and came towards him with a rapid pace.

'Really, as if he had heard me,' said the father, resuming his newspaper with a yawn. 'Dear Ned!'

Presently the room-door opened, and the young man entered; to whom his father gently waved his hand, and smiled.

'Are you at leisure for a little conversation, sir?' said Edward.

'Surely, Ned. I am always at leisure. You know my constitution. - Have you breakfasted?'

'Three hours ago.'

'What a very early dog!' cried his father, contemplating him from behind the toothpick, with a languid smile.

'The truth is,' said Edward, bringing a chair forward, and seating himself near the table, 'that I slept but ill last night, and was glad to rise. The cause of my uneasiness cannot but be known to you, sir; and it is upon that I wish to speak.'

'My dear boy,' returned his father, 'confide in me, I beg. But you know my constitution - don't be prosy, Ned.'

'I will be plain, and brief,' said Edward.

'Don't say you will, my good fellow,' returned his father, crossing his legs, 'or you certainly will not. You are going to tell me' -

'Plainly this, then,' said the son, with an air of great concern, 'that I know where you were last night - from being on the spot, indeed - and whom you saw, and what your purpose was.'

'You don't say so!' cried his father. 'I am delighted to hear it. It saves us the worry, and terrible wear and tear of a long explanation, and is a great relief for both. At the very house! Why didn't you come up? I should have been charmed to see you.'

'I knew that what I had to say would be better said after a night's reflection, when both of us were cool,' returned the son.

'Fore Gad, Ned,' rejoined the father, 'I was cool enough last night. That detestable Maypole! By some infernal contrivance of the builder, it holds the wind, and keeps it fresh. You remember the sharp east wind that blew so hard five weeks ago? I give you my honour it was rampant in that old house last night, though out of doors there was a dead calm. But you were saying' -

'I was about to say, Heaven knows how seriously and earnestly, that you have made me wretched, sir. Will you hear me gravely for a moment?'

'My dear Ned,' said his father, 'I will hear you with the patience of an anchorite. Oblige me with the milk.'

'I saw Miss Haredale last night,' Edward resumed, when he had complied with this request; 'her uncle, in her presence, immediately after your interview, and, as of course I know, in consequence of it, forbade me the house, and, with circumstances of indignity which are of your creation I am sure, commanded me to leave it on the instant.'

'For his manner of doing so, I give you my honour, Ned, I am not accountable,' said his father. 'That you must excuse. He is a mere boor, a log, a brute, with no address in life. - Positively a fly in the jug. The first I have seen this year.'

Edward rose, and paced the room. His imperturbable parent sipped his tea.

'Father,' said the young man, stopping at length before him, 'we must not trifle in this matter. We must not deceive each other, or ourselves. Let me pursue the manly open part I wish to take, and do not repel me by this unkind indifference.'

'Whether I am indifferent or no,' returned the other, 'I leave you, my dear boy, to judge. A ride of twenty-five or thirty miles, through miry roads - a Maypole dinner - a tete-a-tete with Haredale, which, vanity apart, was quite a Valentine and Orson business - a Maypole bed - a Maypole landlord, and a Maypole retinue of idiots and centaurs; - whether the voluntary endurance of these things looks like indifference, dear Ned, or like the excessive anxiety, and devotion, and all that sort of thing, of a parent, you shall determine for yourself.'

'I wish you to consider, sir,' said Edward, 'in what a cruel situation I am placed. Loving Miss Haredale as I do' -

'My dear fellow,' interrupted his father with a compassionate smile, 'you do nothing of the kind. You don't know anything about it. There's no such thing, I assure you. Now, do take my word for it. You have good sense, Ned, - great good sense. I wonder you should be guilty of such amazing absurdities. You really surprise me.'

'I repeat,' said his son firmly, 'that I love her. You have interposed to part us, and have, to the extent I have just now told you of, succeeded. May I induce you, sir, in time, to think more favourably of our attachment, or is it your intention and your fixed design to hold us asunder if you can?'

'My dear Ned,' returned his father, taking a pinch of snuff and pushing his box towards him, 'that is my purpose most undoubtedly.'

'The time that has elapsed,' rejoined his son, 'since I began to know her worth, has flown in such a dream that until now I have hardly once paused to reflect upon my true position. What is it? From my childhood I have been accustomed to luxury and idleness, and have been bred as though my fortune were large, and my expectations almost without a limit. The idea of wealth has been familiarised to me from my cradle. I have been taught to look upon those means, by which men raise themselves to riches and distinction, as being beyond my heeding, and beneath my care. I have been, as the phrase is, liberally educated, and am fit for nothing. I find myself at last wholly dependent upon you, with no resource but in your favour. In this momentous question of my life we do not, and it would seem we never can, agree. I have shrunk instinctively alike from those to whom you have urged me to pay court, and from the motives of interest and gain which have rendered them in your eyes visible objects for my suit. If there never has been thus much plain-speaking between us before, sir, the fault has not been mine, indeed. If I seem to speak too plainly now, it is, believe me father, in the hope that there may be a franker spirit, a worthier reliance, and a kinder confidence between us in time to come.'

'My good fellow,' said his smiling father, 'you quite affect me. Go on, my dear Edward, I beg. But remember your promise. There is great earnestness, vast candour, a manifest sincerity in all you say, but I fear I observe the faintest indications of a tendency to prose.'

'I am very sorry, sir.'

'I am very sorry, too, Ned, but you know that I cannot fix my mind for any long period upon one subject. If you'll come to the point at once, I'll imagine all that ought to go before, and conclude it said. Oblige me with the milk again. Listening, invariably makes me feverish.'

'What I would say then, tends to this,' said Edward. 'I cannot bear this absolute dependence, sir, even upon you. Time has been lost and opportunity thrown away, but I am yet a young man, and may retrieve it. Will you give me the means of devoting such abilities and energies as I possess, to some worthy pursuit? Will you let me try to make for myself an honourable path in life? For any term you please to name - say for five years if you will - I will pledge myself to move no further in the matter of our difference without your fall concurrence. During that period, I will endeavour earnestly and patiently, if ever man did, to open some prospect for myself, and free you from the burden you fear I should become if I married one whose worth and beauty are her chief endowments. Will you do this, sir? At the expiration of the term we agree upon, let us discuss this subject again. Till then, unless it is revived by you, let it never be renewed between us.'

'My dear Ned,' returned his father, laying down the newspaper at which he had been glancing carelessly, and throwing himself back in the window-seat, 'I believe you know how very much I dislike what are called family affairs, which are only fit for plebeian Christmas days, and have no manner of business with people of our condition. But as you are proceeding upon a mistake, Ned - altogether upon a mistake - I will conquer my repugnance to entering on such matters, and give you a perfectly plain and candid answer, if you will do me the favour to shut the door.'

Edward having obeyed him, he took an elegant little knife from his pocket, and paring his nails, continued:

'You have to thank me, Ned, for being of good family; for your mother, charming person as she was, and almost broken-hearted, and so forth, as she left me, when she was prematurely compelled to become immortal - had nothing to boast of in that respect.'

'Her father was at least an eminent lawyer, sir,' said Edward.

'Quite right, Ned; perfectly so. He stood high at the bar, had a great name and great wealth, but having risen from nothing - I have always closed my eyes to the circumstance and steadily resisted its contemplation, but I fear his father dealt in pork, and that his business did once involve cow-heel and sausages - he wished to marry his daughter into a good family. He had his heart's desire, Ned. I was a younger son's younger son, and I married her. We each had our object, and gained it. She stepped at once into the politest and best circles, and I stepped into a fortune which I assure you was very necessary to my comfort - quite indispensable. Now, my good fellow, that fortune is among the things that have been. It is gone, Ned, and has been gone - how old are you? I always forget.'

'Seven-and-twenty, sir.'

'Are you indeed?' cried his father, raising his eyelids in a languishing surprise. 'So much! Then I should say, Ned, that as nearly as I remember, its skirts vanished from human knowledge, about eighteen or nineteen years ago. It was about that time when I came to live in these chambers (once your grandfather's, and bequeathed by that extremely respectable person to me), and commenced to live upon an inconsiderable annuity and my past reputation.'

'You are jesting with me, sir,' said Edward.

'Not in the slightest degree, I assure you,' returned his father with great composure. 'These family topics are so extremely dry, that I am sorry to say they don't admit of any such relief. It is for that reason, and because they have an appearance of business, that I dislike them so very much. Well! You know the rest. A son, Ned, unless he is old enough to be a companion - that is to say, unless he is some two or three and twenty - is not the kind of thing to have about one. He is a restraint upon his father, his father is a restraint upon him, and they make each other mutually uncomfortable. Therefore, until within the last four years or so - I have a poor memory for dates, and if I mistake, you will correct me in your own mind - you pursued your studies at a distance, and picked up a great variety of accomplishments. Occasionally we passed a week or two together here, and disconcerted each other as only such near relations can. At last you came home. I candidly tell you, my dear boy, that if you had been awkward and overgrown, I should have exported you to some distant part of the world.'

'I wish with all my soul you had, sir,' said Edward.

'No you don't, Ned,' said his father coolly; 'you are mistaken, I assure you. I found you a handsome, prepossessing, elegant fellow, and I threw you into the society I can still command. Having done that, my

dear fellow, I consider that I have provided for you in life, and rely upon your doing something to provide for me in return.'

'I do not understand your meaning, sir.'

'My meaning, Ned, is obvious - I observe another fly in the cream-jug, but have the goodness not to take it out as you did the first, for their walk when their legs are milky, is extremely ungraceful and disagreeable - my meaning is, that you must do as I did; that you must marry well and make the most of yourself.'

'A mere fortune-hunter!' cried the son, indignantly.

'What in the devil's name, Ned, would you be!' returned the father. 'All men are fortune-hunters, are they not? The law, the church, the court, the camp - see how they are all crowded with fortune-hunters, jostling each other in the pursuit. The stock-exchange, the pulpit, the counting-house, the royal drawing-room, the senate, - what but fortune-hunters are they filled with? A fortune-hunter! Yes. You ARE one; and you would be nothing else, my dear Ned, if you were the greatest courtier, lawyer, legislator, prelate, or merchant, in existence. If you are squeamish and moral, Ned, console yourself with the reflection that at the very worst your fortune-hunting can make but one person miserable or unhappy. How many people do you suppose these other kinds of huntsmen crush in following their sport - hundreds at a step? Or thousands?'

The young man leant his head upon his hand, and made no answer.

'I am quite charmed,' said the father rising, and walking slowly to and fro - stopping now and then to glance at himself in the mirror, or survey a picture through his glass, with the air of a connoisseur, 'that we have had this conversation, Ned, unpromising as it was. It establishes a confidence between us which is quite delightful, and was certainly necessary, though how you can ever have mistaken our positions and designs, I confess I cannot understand. I conceived, until I found your fancy for this girl, that all these points were tacitly agreed upon between us.'

'I knew you were embarrassed, sir,' returned the son, raising his head for a moment, and then falling into his former attitude, 'but I had no idea we were the beggared wretches you describe. How could I suppose it, bred as I have been; witnessing the life you have always led; and the appearance you have always made?'

'My dear child,' said the father - 'for you really talk so like a child that I must call you one - you were bred upon a careful principle; the very manner of your education, I assure you, maintained my credit

surprisingly. As to the life I lead, I must lead it, Ned. I must have these little refinements about me. I have always been used to them, and I cannot exist without them. They must surround me, you observe, and therefore they are here. With regard to our circumstances, Ned, you may set your mind at rest upon that score. They are desperate. Your own appearance is by no means despicable, and our joint pocket-money alone devours our income. That's the truth.'

'Why have I never known this before? Why have you encouraged me, sir, to an expenditure and mode of life to which we have no right or title?'

'My good fellow,' returned his father more compassionately than ever, 'if you made no appearance, how could you possibly succeed in the pursuit for which I destined you? As to our mode of life, every man has a right to live in the best way he can; and to make himself as comfortable as he can, or he is an unnatural scoundrel. Our debts, I grant, are very great, and therefore it the more behoves you, as a young man of principle and honour, to pay them off as speedily as possible.'

'The villain's part,' muttered Edward, 'that I have unconsciously played! I to win the heart of Emma Haredale! I would, for her sake, I had died first!'

'I am glad you see, Ned,' returned his father, 'how perfectly self-evident it is, that nothing can be done in that quarter. But apart from this, and the necessity of your speedily bestowing yourself on another (as you know you could to-morrow, if you chose), I wish you'd look upon it pleasantly. In a religious point of view alone, how could you ever think of uniting yourself to a Catholic, unless she was amazingly rich? You ought to be so very Protestant, coming of such a Protestant family as you do. Let us be moral, Ned, or we are nothing. Even if one could set that objection aside, which is impossible, we come to another which is quite conclusive. The very idea of marrying a girl whose father was killed, like meat! Good God, Ned, how disagreeable! Consider the impossibility of having any respect for your father-in-law under such unpleasant circumstances - think of his having been 'viewed' by jurors, and 'sat upon' by coroners, and of his very doubtful position in the family ever afterwards. It seems to me such an indelicate sort of thing that I really think the girl ought to have been put to death by the state to prevent its happening. But I tease you perhaps. You would rather be alone? My dear Ned, most willingly. God bless you. I shall be going out presently, but we shall meet to-night, or if not to-night, certainly to-morrow. Take care of yourself in the mean time, for both our sakes. You are a person of great consequence to me, Ned - of vast consequence indeed. God bless you!'

With these words, the father, who had been arranging his cravat in the glass, while he uttered them in a disconnected careless manner, withdrew, humming a tune as he went. The son, who had appeared so lost in thought as not to hear or understand them, remained quite still and silent. After the lapse of half an hour or so, the elder Chester, gaily dressed, went out. The younger still sat with his head resting on his hands, in what appeared to be a kind of stupor.