

Chapter XVI

A series of pictures representing the streets of London in the night, even at the comparatively recent date of this tale, would present to the eye something so very different in character from the reality which is witnessed in these times, that it would be difficult for the beholder to recognise his most familiar walks in the altered aspect of little more than half a century ago.

They were, one and all, from the broadest and best to the narrowest and least frequented, very dark. The oil and cotton lamps, though regularly trimmed twice or thrice in the long winter nights, burnt feebly at the best; and at a late hour, when they were unassisted by the lamps and candles in the shops, cast but a narrow track of doubtful light upon the footway, leaving the projecting doors and house-fronts in the deepest gloom. Many of the courts and lanes were left in total darkness; those of the meaner sort, where one glimmering light twinkled for a score of houses, being favoured in no slight degree. Even in these places, the inhabitants had often good reason for extinguishing their lamp as soon as it was lighted; and the watch being utterly inefficient and powerless to prevent them, they did so at their pleasure. Thus, in the lightest thoroughfares, there was at every turn some obscure and dangerous spot whither a thief might fly or shelter, and few would care to follow; and the city being belted round by fields, green lanes, waste grounds, and lonely roads, dividing it at that time from the suburbs that have joined it since, escape, even where the pursuit was hot, was rendered easy.

It is no wonder that with these favouring circumstances in full and constant operation, street robberies, often accompanied by cruel wounds, and not unfrequently by loss of life, should have been of nightly occurrence in the very heart of London, or that quiet folks should have had great dread of traversing its streets after the shops were closed. It was not unusual for those who wended home alone at midnight, to keep the middle of the road, the better to guard against surprise from lurking footpads; few would venture to repair at a late hour to Kentish Town or Hampstead, or even to Kensington or Chelsea, unarmed and unattended; while he who had been loudest and most valiant at the supper-table or the tavern, and had but a mile or so to go, was glad to fee a link-boy to escort him home.

There were many other characteristics - not quite so disagreeable - about the thoroughfares of London then, with which they had been long familiar. Some of the shops, especially those to the eastward of Temple Bar, still adhered to the old practice of hanging out a sign; and the creaking and swinging of these boards in their iron frames on windy nights, formed a strange and mournful concert for the ears of those who lay awake in bed or hurried through the streets. Long

stands of hackney-chairs and groups of chairmen, compared with whom the coachmen of our day are gentle and polite, obstructed the way and filled the air with clamour; night-cellars, indicated by a little stream of light crossing the pavement, and stretching out half-way into the road, and by the stifled roar of voices from below, yawned for the reception and entertainment of the most abandoned of both sexes; under every shed and bulk small groups of link-boys gamed away the earnings of the day; or one more weary than the rest, gave way to sleep, and let the fragment of his torch fall hissing on the puddled ground.

Then there was the watch with staff and lantern crying the hour, and the kind of weather; and those who woke up at his voice and turned them round in bed, were glad to hear it rained, or snowed, or blew, or froze, for very comfort's sake. The solitary passenger was startled by the chairmen's cry of 'By your leave there!' as two came trotting past him with their empty vehicle - carried backwards to show its being disengaged - and hurried to the nearest stand. Many a private chair, too, inclosing some fine lady, monstrously hooped and furbelowed, and preceded by running-footmen bearing flambeaux - for which extinguishers are yet suspended before the doors of a few houses of the better sort - made the way gay and light as it danced along, and darker and more dismal when it had passed. It was not unusual for these running gentry, who carried it with a very high hand, to quarrel in the servants' hall while waiting for their masters and mistresses; and, falling to blows either there or in the street without, to strew the place of skirmish with hair-powder, fragments of bag-wigs, and scattered nosegays. Gaming, the vice which ran so high among all classes (the fashion being of course set by the upper), was generally the cause of these disputes; for cards and dice were as openly used, and worked as much mischief, and yielded as much excitement below stairs, as above. While incidents like these, arising out of drums and masquerades and parties at quadrille, were passing at the west end of the town, heavy stagecoaches and scarce heavier waggons were lumbering slowly towards the city, the coachmen, guard, and passengers, armed to the teeth, and the coach - a day or so perhaps behind its time, but that was nothing - despoiled by highwaymen; who made no scruple to attack, alone and single-handed, a whole caravan of goods and men, and sometimes shot a passenger or two, and were sometimes shot themselves, as the case might be. On the morrow, rumours of this new act of daring on the road yielded matter for a few hours' conversation through the town, and a Public Progress of some fine gentleman (half-drunk) to Tyburn, dressed in the newest fashion, and damning the ordinary with unspeakable gallantry and grace, furnished to the populace, at once a pleasant excitement and a wholesome and profound example.

Among all the dangerous characters who, in such a state of society, prowled and skulked in the metropolis at night, there was one man from whom many as uncouth and fierce as he, shrunk with an involuntary dread. Who he was, or whence he came, was a question often asked, but which none could answer. His name was unknown, he had never been seen until within about eight days or thereabouts, and was equally a stranger to the old ruffians, upon whose haunts he ventured fearlessly, as to the young. He could be no spy, for he never removed his slouched hat to look about him, entered into conversation with no man, heeded nothing that passed, listened to no discourse, regarded nobody that came or went. But so surely as the dead of night set in, so surely this man was in the midst of the loose concourse in the night-cellar where outcasts of every grade resorted; and there he sat till morning.

He was not only a spectre at their licentious feasts; a something in the midst of their revelry and riot that chilled and haunted them; but out of doors he was the same. Directly it was dark, he was abroad - never in company with any one, but always alone; never lingering or loitering, but always walking swiftly; and looking (so they said who had seen him) over his shoulder from time to time, and as he did so quickening his pace. In the fields, the lanes, the roads, in all quarters of the town - east, west, north, and south - that man was seen gliding on like a shadow. He was always hurrying away. Those who encountered him, saw him steal past, caught sight of the backward glance, and so lost him in the darkness.

This constant restlessness, and flitting to and fro, gave rise to strange stories. He was seen in such distant and remote places, at times so nearly tallying with each other, that some doubted whether there were not two of them, or more - some, whether he had not unearthly means of travelling from spot to spot. The footpad hiding in a ditch had marked him passing like a ghost along its brink; the vagrant had met him on the dark high-road; the beggar had seen him pause upon the bridge to look down at the water, and then sweep on again; they who dealt in bodies with the surgeons could swear he slept in churchyards, and that they had beheld him glide away among the tombs on their approach. And as they told these stories to each other, one who had looked about him would pull his neighbour by the sleeve, and there he would be among them.

At last, one man - he was one of those whose commerce lay among the graves - resolved to question this strange companion. Next night, when he had eat his poor meal voraciously (he was accustomed to do that, they had observed, as though he had no other in the day), this fellow sat down at his elbow.

'A black night, master!'

'It is a black night.'

'Blacker than last, though that was pitchy too. Didn't I pass you near the turnpike in the Oxford Road?' 'It's like you may. I don't know.'

'Come, come, master,' cried the fellow, urged on by the looks of his comrades, and slapping him on the shoulder; 'be more companionable and communicative. Be more the gentleman in this good company. There are tales among us that you have sold yourself to the devil, and I know not what.'

'We all have, have we not?' returned the stranger, looking up. 'If we were fewer in number, perhaps he would give better wages.'

'It goes rather hard with you, indeed,' said the fellow, as the stranger disclosed his haggard unwashed face, and torn clothes. 'What of that? Be merry, master. A stave of a roaring song now' -

'Sing you, if you desire to hear one,' replied the other, shaking him roughly off; 'and don't touch me if you're a prudent man; I carry arms which go off easily - they have done so, before now - and make it dangerous for strangers who don't know the trick of them, to lay hands upon me.'

'Do you threaten?' said the fellow.

'Yes,' returned the other, rising and turning upon him, and looking fiercely round as if in apprehension of a general attack.

His voice, and look, and bearing - all expressive of the wildest recklessness and desperation - daunted while they repelled the bystanders. Although in a very different sphere of action now, they were not without much of the effect they had wrought at the Maypole Inn.

'I am what you all are, and live as you all do,' said the man sternly, after a short silence. 'I am in hiding here like the rest, and if we were surprised would perhaps do my part with the best of ye. If it's my humour to be left to myself, let me have it. Otherwise,' - and here he swore a tremendous oath - 'there'll be mischief done in this place, though there ARE odds of a score against me.'

A low murmur, having its origin perhaps in a dread of the man and the mystery that surrounded him, or perhaps in a sincere opinion on the part of some of those present, that it would be an inconvenient precedent to meddle too curiously with a gentleman's private affairs if he saw reason to conceal them, warned the fellow who had occasioned this discussion that he had best pursue it no further. After a short

time the strange man lay down upon a bench to sleep, and when they thought of him again, they found he was gone.

Next night, as soon as it was dark, he was abroad again and traversing the streets; he was before the locksmith's house more than once, but the family were out, and it was close shut. This night he crossed London Bridge and passed into Southwark. As he glided down a bye street, a woman with a little basket on her arm, turned into it at the other end. Directly he observed her, he sought the shelter of an archway, and stood aside until she had passed. Then he emerged cautiously from his hiding-place, and followed.

She went into several shops to purchase various kinds of household necessaries, and round every place at which she stopped he hovered like her evil spirit; following her when she reappeared. It was nigh eleven o'clock, and the passengers in the streets were thinning fast, when she turned, doubtless to go home. The phantom still followed her.

She turned into the same bye street in which he had seen her first, which, being free from shops, and narrow, was extremely dark. She quickened her pace here, as though distrustful of being stopped, and robbed of such trifling property as she carried with her. He crept along on the other side of the road. Had she been gifted with the speed of wind, it seemed as if his terrible shadow would have tracked her down.

At length the widow - for she it was - reached her own door, and, panting for breath, paused to take the key from her basket. In a flush and glow, with the haste she had made, and the pleasure of being safe at home, she stooped to draw it out, when, raising her head, she saw him standing silently beside her: the apparition of a dream.

His hand was on her mouth, but that was needless, for her tongue clove to its roof, and her power of utterance was gone. 'I have been looking for you many nights. Is the house empty? Answer me. Is any one inside?'

She could only answer by a rattle in her throat.

'Make me a sign.'

She seemed to indicate that there was no one there. He took the key, unlocked the door, carried her in, and secured it carefully behind them.