

Chapter XVII

It was a chilly night, and the fire in the widow's parlour had burnt low. Her strange companion placed her in a chair, and stooping down before the half-extinguished ashes, raked them together and fanned them with his hat. From time to time he glanced at her over his shoulder, as though to assure himself of her remaining quiet and making no effort to depart; and that done, busied himself about the fire again.

It was not without reason that he took these pains, for his dress was dank and drenched with wet, his jaws rattled with cold, and he shivered from head to foot. It had rained hard during the previous night and for some hours in the morning, but since noon it had been fine. Wheresoever he had passed the hours of darkness, his condition sufficiently betokened that many of them had been spent beneath the open sky. Besmeared with mire; his saturated clothes clinging with a damp embrace about his limbs; his beard unshaven, his face unwashed, his meagre cheeks worn into deep hollows, - a more miserable wretch could hardly be, than this man who now cowered down upon the widow's hearth, and watched the struggling flame with bloodshot eyes.

She had covered her face with her hands, fearing, as it seemed, to look towards him. So they remained for some short time in silence. Glancing round again, he asked at length:

'Is this your house?'

'It is. Why, in the name of Heaven, do you darken it?'

'Give me meat and drink,' he answered sullenly, 'or I dare do more than that. The very marrow in my bones is cold, with wet and hunger. I must have warmth and food, and I will have them here.'

'You were the robber on the Chigwell road.'

'I was.'

'And nearly a murderer then.'

'The will was not wanting. There was one came upon me and raised the hue-and-cry', that it would have gone hard with, but for his nimbleness. I made a thrust at him.'

'You thrust your sword at HIM!' cried the widow, looking upwards. 'You hear this man! you hear and saw!'

He looked at her, as, with her head thrown back, and her hands tight clenched together, she uttered these words in an agony of appeal. Then, starting to his feet as she had done, he advanced towards her.

'Beware!' she cried in a suppressed voice, whose firmness stopped him midway. 'Do not so much as touch me with a finger, or you are lost; body and soul, you are lost.'

'Hear me,' he replied, menacing her with his hand. 'I, that in the form of a man live the life of a hunted beast; that in the body am a spirit, a ghost upon the earth, a thing from which all creatures shrink, save those curst beings of another world, who will not leave me; - I am, in my desperation of this night, past all fear but that of the hell in which I exist from day to day. Give the alarm, cry out, refuse to shelter me. I will not hurt you. But I will not be taken alive; and so surely as you threaten me above your breath, I fall a dead man on this floor. The blood with which I sprinkle it, be on you and yours, in the name of the Evil Spirit that tempts men to their ruin!'

As he spoke, he took a pistol from his breast, and firmly clutched it in his hand.

'Remove this man from me, good Heaven!' cried the widow. 'In thy grace and mercy, give him one minute's penitence, and strike him dead!'

'It has no such purpose,' he said, confronting her. 'It is deaf. Give me to eat and drink, lest I do that it cannot help my doing, and will not do for you.'

'Will you leave me, if I do thus much? Will you leave me and return no more?'

'I will promise nothing,' he rejoined, seating himself at the table, 'nothing but this - I will execute my threat if you betray me.'

She rose at length, and going to a closet or pantry in the room, brought out some fragments of cold meat and bread and put them on the table. He asked for brandy, and for water. These she produced likewise; and he ate and drank with the voracity of a famished hound. All the time he was so engaged she kept at the uttermost distance of the chamber, and sat there shuddering, but with her face towards him. She never turned her back upon him once; and although when she passed him (as she was obliged to do in going to and from the cupboard) she gathered the skirts of her garment about her, as if even its touching his by chance were horrible to think of, still, in the midst of all this dread and terror, she kept her face towards his own, and watched his every movement.

His repast ended - if that can be called one, which was a mere ravenous satisfying of the calls of hunger - he moved his chair towards the fire again, and warming himself before the blaze which had now sprung brightly up, accosted her once more.

'I am an outcast, to whom a roof above his head is often an uncommon luxury, and the food a beggar would reject is delicate fare. You live here at your ease. Do you live alone?'

'I do not,' she made answer with an effort.

'Who dwells here besides?'

'One - it is no matter who. You had best begone, or he may find you here. Why do you linger?'

'For warmth,' he replied, spreading out his hands before the fire. 'For warmth. You are rich, perhaps?'

'Very,' she said faintly. 'Very rich. No doubt I am very rich.'

'At least you are not penniless. You have some money. You were making purchases to-night.'

'I have a little left. It is but a few shillings.'

'Give me your purse. You had it in your hand at the door. Give it to me.'

She stepped to the table and laid it down. He reached across, took it up, and told the contents into his hand. As he was counting them, she listened for a moment, and sprung towards him.

'Take what there is, take all, take more if more were there, but go before it is too late. I have heard a wayward step without, I know full well. It will return directly. Begone.'

'What do you mean?'

'Do not stop to ask. I will not answer. Much as I dread to touch you, I would drag you to the door if I possessed the strength, rather than you should lose an instant. Miserable wretch! fly from this place.'

'If there are spies without, I am safer here,' replied the man, standing aghast. 'I will remain here, and will not fly till the danger is past.'

'It is too late!' cried the widow, who had listened for the step, and not to him. 'Hark to that foot upon the ground. Do you tremble to hear it! It is my son, my idiot son!'

As she said this wildly, there came a heavy knocking at the door. He looked at her, and she at him.

'Let him come in,' said the man, hoarsely. 'I fear him less than the dark, houseless night. He knocks again. Let him come in!'

'The dread of this hour,' returned the widow, 'has been upon me all my life, and I will not. Evil will fall upon him, if you stand eye to eye. My blighted boy! Oh! all good angels who know the truth - hear a poor mother's prayer, and spare my boy from knowledge of this man!'

'He rattles at the shutters!' cried the man. 'He calls you. That voice and cry! It was he who grappled with me in the road. Was it he?'

She had sunk upon her knees, and so knelt down, moving her lips, but uttering no sound. As he gazed upon her, uncertain what to do or where to turn, the shutters flew open. He had barely time to catch a knife from the table, sheathe it in the loose sleeve of his coat, hide in the closet, and do all with the lightning's speed, when Barnaby tapped at the bare glass, and raised the sash exultingly.

'Why, who can keep out Grip and me!' he cried, thrusting in his head, and staring round the room. 'Are you there, mother? How long you keep us from the fire and light.'

She stammered some excuse and tendered him her hand. But Barnaby sprung lightly in without assistance, and putting his arms about her neck, kissed her a hundred times.

'We have been afield, mother - leaping ditches, scrambling through hedges, running down steep banks, up and away, and hurrying on. The wind has been blowing, and the rushes and young plants bowing and bending to it, lest it should do them harm, the cowards - and Grip - ha ha ha! - brave Grip, who cares for nothing, and when the wind rolls him over in the dust, turns manfully to bite it - Grip, bold Grip, has quarrelled with every little bowing twig - thinking, he told me, that it mocked him - and has worried it like a bulldog. Ha ha ha!'

The raven, in his little basket at his master's back, hearing this frequent mention of his name in a tone of exultation, expressed his sympathy by crowing like a cock, and afterwards running over his various phrases of speech with such rapidity, and in so many varieties of hoarseness, that they sounded like the murmurs of a crowd of people.

'He takes such care of me besides!' said Barnaby. 'Such care, mother! He watches all the time I sleep, and when I shut my eyes and make-believe to slumber, he practises new learning softly; but he keeps his eye on me the while, and if he sees me laugh, though never so little, stops directly. He won't surprise me till he's perfect.'

The raven crowed again in a rapturous manner which plainly said, 'Those are certainly some of my characteristics, and I glory in them.' In the meantime, Barnaby closed the window and secured it, and coming to the fireplace, prepared to sit down with his face to the closet. But his mother prevented this, by hastily taking that side herself, and motioning him towards the other.

'How pale you are to-night!' said Barnaby, leaning on his stick. 'We have been cruel, Grip, and made her anxious!'

Anxious in good truth, and sick at heart! The listener held the door of his hiding-place open with his hand, and closely watched her son. Grip - alive to everything his master was unconscious of - had his head out of the basket, and in return was watching him intently with his glistening eye.

'He flaps his wings,' said Barnaby, turning almost quickly enough to catch the retreating form and closing door, 'as if there were strangers here, but Grip is wiser than to fancy that. Jump then!'

Accepting this invitation with a dignity peculiar to himself, the bird hopped up on his master's shoulder, from that to his extended hand, and so to the ground. Barnaby unstrapping the basket and putting it down in a corner with the lid open, Grip's first care was to shut it down with all possible despatch, and then to stand upon it. Believing, no doubt, that he had now rendered it utterly impossible, and beyond the power of mortal man, to shut him up in it any more, he drew a great many corks in triumph, and uttered a corresponding number of hurrahs.

'Mother!' said Barnaby, laying aside his hat and stick, and returning to the chair from which he had risen, 'I'll tell you where we have been to-day, and what we have been doing, - shall I?'

She took his hand in hers, and holding it, nodded the word she could not speak.

'You mustn't tell,' said Barnaby, holding up his finger, 'for it's a secret, mind, and only known to me, and Grip, and Hugh. We had the dog with us, but he's not like Grip, clever as he is, and doesn't guess it yet, I'll wager. - Why do you look behind me so?'

'Did I?' she answered faintly. 'I didn't know I did. Come nearer me.'

'You are frightened!' said Barnaby, changing colour. 'Mother - you don't see' -

'See what?'

'There's - there's none of this about, is there?' he answered in a whisper, drawing closer to her and clasping the mark upon his wrist. 'I am afraid there is, somewhere. You make my hair stand on end, and my flesh creep. Why do you look like that? Is it in the room as I have seen it in my dreams, dashing the ceiling and the walls with red? Tell me. Is it?'

He fell into a shivering fit as he put the question, and shutting out the light with his hands, sat shaking in every limb until it had passed away. After a time, he raised his head and looked about him.

'Is it gone?'

'There has been nothing here,' rejoined his mother, soothing him. 'Nothing indeed, dear Barnaby. Look! You see there are but you and me.'

He gazed at her vacantly, and, becoming reassured by degrees, burst into a wild laugh.

'But let us see,' he said, thoughtfully. 'Were we talking? Was it you and me? Where have we been?'

'Nowhere but here.'

'Aye, but Hugh, and I,' said Barnaby, - 'that's it. Maypole Hugh, and I, you know, and Grip - we have been lying in the forest, and among the trees by the road side, with a dark lantern after night came on, and the dog in a noose ready to slip him when the man came by.'

'What man?'

'The robber; him that the stars winked at. We have waited for him after dark these many nights, and we shall have him. I'd know him in a thousand. Mother, see here! This is the man. Look!'

He twisted his handkerchief round his head, pulled his hat upon his brow, wrapped his coat about him, and stood up before her: so like the original he counterfeited, that the dark figure peering out behind him might have passed for his own shadow.

'Ha ha ha! We shall have him,' he cried, ridding himself of the semblance as hastily as he had assumed it. 'You shall see him, mother, bound hand and foot, and brought to London at a saddle-girth; and you shall hear of him at Tyburn Tree if we have luck. So Hugh says. You're pale again, and trembling. And why DO you look behind me so?'

'It is nothing,' she answered. 'I am not quite well. Go you to bed, dear, and leave me here.'

'To bed!' he answered. 'I don't like bed. I like to lie before the fire, watching the prospects in the burning coals - the rivers, hills, and dells, in the deep, red sunset, and the wild faces. I am hungry too, and Grip has eaten nothing since broad noon. Let us to supper. Grip! To supper, lad!'

The raven flapped his wings, and, croaking his satisfaction, hopped to the feet of his master, and there held his bill open, ready for snapping up such lumps of meat as he should throw him. Of these he received about a score in rapid succession, without the smallest discomposure.

'That's all,' said Barnaby.

'More!' cried Grip. 'More!'

But it appearing for a certainty that no more was to be had, he retreated with his store; and disgorging the morsels one by one from his pouch, hid them in various corners - taking particular care, however, to avoid the closet, as being doubtful of the hidden man's propensities and power of resisting temptation. When he had concluded these arrangements, he took a turn or two across the room with an elaborate assumption of having nothing on his mind (but with one eye hard upon his treasure all the time), and then, and not till then, began to drag it out, piece by piece, and eat it with the utmost relish.

Barnaby, for his part, having pressed his mother to eat in vain, made a hearty supper too. Once during the progress of his meal, he wanted more bread from the closet and rose to get it. She hurriedly interposed to prevent him, and summoning her utmost fortitude, passed into the recess, and brought it out herself.

'Mother,' said Barnaby, looking at her steadfastly as she sat down beside him after doing so; 'is to-day my birthday?'

'To-day!' she answered. 'Don't you recollect it was but a week or so ago, and that summer, autumn, and winter have to pass before it comes again?'

'I remember that it has been so till now,' said Barnaby. 'But I think to-day must be my birthday too, for all that.'

She asked him why? 'I'll tell you why,' he said. 'I have always seen you - I didn't let you know it, but I have - on the evening of that day grow very sad. I have seen you cry when Grip and I were most glad; and look frightened with no reason; and I have touched your hand, and felt that it was cold - as it is now. Once, mother (on a birthday that was, also), Grip and I thought of this after we went upstairs to bed, and when it was midnight, striking one o'clock, we came down to your door to see if you were well. You were on your knees. I forget what it was you said. Grip, what was it we heard her say that night?'

'I'm a devil!' rejoined the raven promptly.

'No, no,' said Barnaby. 'But you said something in a prayer; and when you rose and walked about, you looked (as you have done ever since, mother, towards night on my birthday) just as you do now. I have found that out, you see, though I am silly. So I say you're wrong; and this must be my birthday - my birthday, Grip!'

The bird received this information with a crow of such duration as a cock, gifted with intelligence beyond all others of his kind, might usher in the longest day with. Then, as if he had well considered the sentiment, and regarded it as apposite to birthdays, he cried, 'Never say die!' a great many times, and flapped his wings for emphasis.

The widow tried to make light of Barnaby's remark, and endeavoured to divert his attention to some new subject; too easy a task at all times, as she knew. His supper done, Barnaby, regardless of her entreaties, stretched himself on the mat before the fire; Grip perched upon his leg, and divided his time between dozing in the grateful warmth, and endeavouring (as it presently appeared) to recall a new accomplishment he had been studying all day.

A long and profound silence ensued, broken only by some change of position on the part of Barnaby, whose eyes were still wide open and intently fixed upon the fire; or by an effort of recollection on the part of Grip, who would cry in a low voice from time to time, 'Polly put the ket - ' and there stop short, forgetting the remainder, and go off in a doze again.

After a long interval, Barnaby's breathing grew more deep and regular, and his eyes were closed. But even then the unquiet spirit of the raven interposed. 'Polly put the ket - ' cried Grip, and his master was broad awake again.

At length Barnaby slept soundly, and the bird with his bill sunk upon his breast, his breast itself puffed out into a comfortable alderman-like form, and his bright eye growing smaller and smaller, really seemed to be subsiding into a state of repose. Now and then he muttered in a sepulchral voice, 'Polly put the ket - ' but very drowsily, and more like a drunken man than a reflecting raven.

The widow, scarcely venturing to breathe, rose from her seat. The man glided from the closet, and extinguished the candle.

' - tle on,' cried Grip, suddenly struck with an idea and very much excited. ' - tle on. Hurrah! Polly put the ket-tle on, we'll all have tea; Polly put the ket-tle on, we'll all have tea. Hurrah, hurrah, hurrah! I'm a devil, I'm a devil, I'm a ket-tle on, Keep up your spirits, Never say die, Bow, wow, wow, I'm a devil, I'm a ket-tle, I'm a - Polly put the ket-tle on, we'll all have tea.'

They stood rooted to the ground, as though it had been a voice from the grave.

But even this failed to awaken the sleeper. He turned over towards the fire, his arm fell to the ground, and his head drooped heavily upon it. The widow and her unwelcome visitor gazed at him and at each other for a moment, and then she motioned him towards the door.

'Stay,' he whispered. 'You teach your son well.'

'I have taught him nothing that you heard to-night. Depart instantly, or I will rouse him.'

'You are free to do so. Shall I rouse him?'

'You dare not do that.'

'I dare do anything, I have told you. He knows me well, it seems. At least I will know him.'

'Would you kill him in his sleep?' cried the widow, throwing herself between them.

'Woman,' he returned between his teeth, as he motioned her aside, 'I would see him nearer, and I will. If you want one of us to kill the other, wake him.'

With that he advanced, and bending down over the prostrate form, softly turned back the head and looked into the face. The light of the fire was upon it, and its every lineament was revealed distinctly. He contemplated it for a brief space, and hastily uprose.

'Observe,' he whispered in the widow's ear: 'In him, of whose existence I was ignorant until to-night, I have you in my power. Be careful how you use me. Be careful how you use me. I am destitute and starving, and a wanderer upon the earth. I may take a sure and slow revenge.'

'There is some dreadful meaning in your words. I do not fathom it.'

'There is a meaning in them, and I see you fathom it to its very depth. You have anticipated it for years; you have told me as much. I leave you to digest it. Do not forget my warning.'

He pointed, as he left her, to the slumbering form, and stealthily withdrawing, made his way into the street. She fell on her knees beside the sleeper, and remained like one stricken into stone, until the tears which fear had frozen so long, came tenderly to her relief.

'Oh Thou,' she cried, 'who hast taught me such deep love for this one remnant of the promise of a happy life, out of whose affliction, even, perhaps the comfort springs that he is ever a relying, loving child to me - never growing old or cold at heart, but needing my care and duty in his manly strength as in his cradle-time - help him, in his darkened walk through this sad world, or he is doomed, and my poor heart is broken!'