

## Chapter XIX

Dolly Varden's pretty little head was yet bewildered by various recollections of the party, and her bright eyes were yet dazzled by a crowd of images, dancing before them like motes in the sunbeams, among which the effigy of one partner in particular did especially figure, the same being a young coachmaker (a master in his own right) who had given her to understand, when he handed her into the chair at parting, that it was his fixed resolve to neglect his business from that time, and die slowly for the love of her - Dolly's head, and eyes, and thoughts, and seven senses, were all in a state of flutter and confusion for which the party was accountable, although it was now three days old, when, as she was sitting listlessly at breakfast, reading all manner of fortunes (that is to say, of married and flourishing fortunes) in the grounds of her teacup, a step was heard in the workshop, and Mr Edward Chester was descried through the glass door, standing among the rusty locks and keys, like love among the roses - for which apt comparison the historian may by no means take any credit to himself, the same being the invention, in a sentimental mood, of the chaste and modest Miggs, who, beholding him from the doorsteps she was then cleaning, did, in her maiden meditation, give utterance to the simile.

The locksmith, who happened at the moment to have his eyes thrown upward and his head backward, in an intense communing with Toby, did not see his visitor, until Mrs Varden, more watchful than the rest, had desired Sim Tappertit to open the glass door and give him admission - from which untoward circumstance the good lady argued (for she could deduce a precious moral from the most trifling event) that to take a draught of small ale in the morning was to observe a pernicious, irreligious, and Pagan custom, the relish whereof should be left to swine, and Satan, or at least to Popish persons, and should be shunned by the righteous as a work of sin and evil. She would no doubt have pursued her admonition much further, and would have founded on it a long list of precious precepts of inestimable value, but that the young gentleman standing by in a somewhat uncomfortable and discomfited manner while she read her spouse this lecture, occasioned her to bring it to a premature conclusion.

'I'm sure you'll excuse me, sir,' said Mrs Varden, rising and curtseying. 'Varden is so very thoughtless, and needs so much reminding - Sim, bring a chair here.'

Mr Tappertit obeyed, with a flourish implying that he did so, under protest.

'And you can go, Sim,' said the locksmith.

Mr Tappertit obeyed again, still under protest; and betaking himself to the workshop, began seriously to fear that he might find it necessary to poison his master, before his time was out.

In the meantime, Edward returned suitable replies to Mrs Varden's courtesies, and that lady brightened up very much; so that when he accepted a dish of tea from the fair hands of Dolly, she was perfectly agreeable.

'I am sure if there's anything we can do, - Varden, or I, or Dolly either, - to serve you, sir, at any time, you have only to say it, and it shall be done,' said Mrs V.

'I am much obliged to you, I am sure,' returned Edward. 'You encourage me to say that I have come here now, to beg your good offices.'

Mrs Varden was delighted beyond measure.

'It occurred to me that probably your fair daughter might be going to the Warren, either to-day or to-morrow,' said Edward, glancing at Dolly; 'and if so, and you will allow her to take charge of this letter, ma'am, you will oblige me more than I can tell you. The truth is, that while I am very anxious it should reach its destination, I have particular reasons for not trusting it to any other conveyance; so that without your help, I am wholly at a loss.'

'She was not going that way, sir, either to-day, or to-morrow, nor indeed all next week,' the lady graciously rejoined, 'but we shall be very glad to put ourselves out of the way on your account, and if you wish it, you may depend upon its going to-day. You might suppose,' said Mrs Varden, frowning at her husband, 'from Varden's sitting there so glum and silent, that he objected to this arrangement; but you must not mind that, sir, if you please. It's his way at home. Out of doors, he can be cheerful and talkative enough.'

Now, the fact was, that the unfortunate locksmith, blessing his stars to find his helpmate in such good humour, had been sitting with a beaming face, hearing this discourse with a joy past all expression. Wherefore this sudden attack quite took him by surprise.

'My dear Martha - ' he said.

'Oh yes, I dare say,' interrupted Mrs Varden, with a smile of mingled scorn and pleasantry. 'Very dear! We all know that.'

'No, but my good soul,' said Gabriel, 'you are quite mistaken. You are indeed. I was delighted to find you so kind and ready. I waited, my dear, anxiously, I assure you, to hear what you would say.'

'You waited anxiously,' repeated Mrs V. 'Yes! Thank you, Varden. You waited, as you always do, that I might bear the blame, if any came of it. But I am used to it,' said the lady with a kind of solemn titter, 'and that's my comfort!'

'I give you my word, Martha - ' said Gabriel.

'Let me give you MY word, my dear,' interposed his wife with a Christian smile, 'that such discussions as these between married people, are much better left alone. Therefore, if you please, Varden, we'll drop the subject. I have no wish to pursue it. I could. I might say a great deal. But I would rather not. Pray don't say any more.'

'I don't want to say any more,' rejoined the goaded locksmith.

'Well then, don't,' said Mrs Varden.

'Nor did I begin it, Martha,' added the locksmith, good-humouredly, 'I must say that.'

'You did not begin it, Varden!' exclaimed his wife, opening her eyes very wide and looking round upon the company, as though she would say, 'You hear this man! 'You did not begin it, Varden! But you shall not say I was out of temper. No, you did not begin it, oh dear no, not you, my dear!'

'Well, well,' said the locksmith. 'That's settled then.'

'Oh yes,' rejoined his wife, 'quite. If you like to say Dolly began it, my dear, I shall not contradict you. I know my duty. I need know it, I am sure. I am often obliged to bear it in mind, when my inclination perhaps would be for the moment to forget it. Thank you, Varden.' And so, with a mighty show of humility and forgiveness, she folded her hands, and looked round again, with a smile which plainly said, 'If you desire to see the first and foremost among female martyrs, here she is, on view!'

This little incident, illustrative though it was of Mrs Varden's extraordinary sweetness and amiability, had so strong a tendency to check the conversation and to disconcert all parties but that excellent lady, that only a few monosyllables were uttered until Edward withdrew; which he presently did, thanking the lady of the house a great many times for her condescension, and whispering in Dolly's ear that he would call on the morrow, in case there should happen to be

an answer to the note - which, indeed, she knew without his telling, as Barnaby and his friend Grip had dropped in on the previous night to prepare her for the visit which was then terminating.

Gabriel, who had attended Edward to the door, came back with his hands in his pockets; and, after fidgeting about the room in a very uneasy manner, and casting a great many sidelong looks at Mrs Varden (who with the calmest countenance in the world was five fathoms deep in the Protestant Manual), inquired of Dolly how she meant to go. Dolly supposed by the stage-coach, and looked at her lady mother, who finding herself silently appealed to, dived down at least another fathom into the Manual, and became unconscious of all earthly things.

'Martha - ' said the locksmith.

'I hear you, Varden,' said his wife, without rising to the surface.

'I am sorry, my dear, you have such an objection to the Maypole and old John, for otherways as it's a very fine morning, and Saturday's not a busy day with us, we might have all three gone to Chigwell in the chaise, and had quite a happy day of it.'

Mrs Varden immediately closed the Manual, and bursting into tears, requested to be led upstairs.

'What is the matter now, Martha?' inquired the locksmith.

To which Martha rejoined, 'Oh! don't speak to me,' and protested in agony that if anybody had told her so, she wouldn't have believed it.

'But, Martha,' said Gabriel, putting himself in the way as she was moving off with the aid of Dolly's shoulder, 'wouldn't have believed what? Tell me what's wrong now. Do tell me. Upon my soul I don't know. Do you know, child? Damme!' cried the locksmith, plucking at his wig in a kind of frenzy, 'nobody does know, I verily believe, but Miggs!'

'Miggs,' said Mrs Varden faintly, and with symptoms of approaching incoherence, 'is attached to me, and that is sufficient to draw down hatred upon her in this house. She is a comfort to me, whatever she may be to others.'

'She's no comfort to me,' cried Gabriel, made bold by despair. 'She's the misery of my life. She's all the plagues of Egypt in one.'

'She's considered so, I have no doubt,' said Mrs Varden. 'I was prepared for that; it's natural; it's of a piece with the rest. When you

taunt me as you do to my face, how can I wonder that you taunt her behind her back!' And here the incoherence coming on very strong, Mrs Varden wept, and laughed, and sobbed, and shivered, and hiccoughed, and choked; and said she knew it was very foolish but she couldn't help it; and that when she was dead and gone, perhaps they would be sorry for it - which really under the circumstances did not appear quite so probable as she seemed to think - with a great deal more to the same effect. In a word, she passed with great decency through all the ceremonies incidental to such occasions; and being supported upstairs, was deposited in a highly spasmodic state on her own bed, where Miss Miggs shortly afterwards flung herself upon the body.

The philosophy of all this was, that Mrs Varden wanted to go to Chigwell; that she did not want to make any concession or explanation; that she would only go on being implored and entreated so to do; and that she would accept no other terms. Accordingly, after a vast amount of moaning and crying upstairs, and much damping of foreheads, and vinegaring of temples, and hartshorning of noses, and so forth; and after most pathetic adjurations from Miggs, assisted by warm brandy-and-water not over-weak, and divers other cordials, also of a stimulating quality, administered at first in teaspoonfuls and afterwards in increasing doses, and of which Miss Miggs herself partook as a preventive measure (for fainting is infectious); after all these remedies, and many more too numerous to mention, but not to take, had been applied; and many verbal consolations, moral, religious, and miscellaneous, had been super-added thereto; the locksmith humbled himself, and the end was gained.

'If it's only for the sake of peace and quietness, father,' said Dolly, urging him to go upstairs.

'Oh, Doll, Doll,' said her good-natured father. 'If you ever have a husband of your own - '

Dolly glanced at the glass.

' - Well, WHEN you have,' said the locksmith, 'never faint, my darling. More domestic unhappiness has come of easy fainting, Doll, than from all the greater passions put together. Remember that, my dear, if you would be really happy, which you never can be, if your husband isn't. And a word in your ear, my precious. Never have a Miggs about you!'

With this advice he kissed his blooming daughter on the cheek, and slowly repaired to Mrs Varden's room; where that lady, lying all pale and languid on her couch, was refreshing herself with a sight of her last new bonnet, which Miggs, as a means of calming her scattered spirits, displayed to the best advantage at her bedside.

'Here's master, mim,' said Miggs. 'Oh, what a happiness it is when man and wife come round again! Oh gracious, to think that him and her should ever have a word together!' In the energy of these sentiments, which were uttered as an apostrophe to the Heavens in general, Miss Miggs perched the bonnet on the top of her own head, and folding her hands, turned on her tears.

'I can't help it,' cried Miggs. 'I couldn't, if I was to be drowned in 'em. She has such a forgiving spirit! She'll forget all that has passed, and go along with you, sir - Oh, if it was to the world's end, she'd go along with you.'

Mrs Varden with a faint smile gently reproved her attendant for this enthusiasm, and reminded her at the same time that she was far too unwell to venture out that day.

'Oh no, you're not, mim, indeed you're not,' said Miggs; 'I repeat to master; master knows you're not, mim. The hair, and motion of the shay, will do you good, mim, and you must not give way, you must not raly. She must keep up, mustn't she, sir, for all out sakes? I was a telling her that, just now. She must remember us, even if she forgets herself. Master will persuade you, mim, I'm sure. There's Miss Dolly's a-going you know, and master, and you, and all so happy and so comfortable. Oh!' cried Miggs, turning on the tears again, previous to quitting the room in great emotion, 'I never see such a blessed one as she is for the forgiveness of her spirit, I never, never, never did. Not more did master neither; no, nor no one - never!'

For five minutes or thereabouts, Mrs Varden remained mildly opposed to all her husband's prayers that she would oblige him by taking a day's pleasure, but relenting at length, she suffered herself to be persuaded, and granting him her free forgiveness (the merit whereof, she meekly said, rested with the Manual and not with her), desired that Miggs might come and help her dress. The handmaid attended promptly, and it is but justice to their joint exertions to record that, when the good lady came downstairs in course of time, completely decked out for the journey, she really looked as if nothing had happened, and appeared in the very best health imaginable.

As to Dolly, there she was again, the very pink and pattern of good looks, in a smart little cherry-coloured mantle, with a hood of the same drawn over her head, and upon the top of that hood, a little straw hat trimmed with cherry-coloured ribbons, and worn the merest trifle on one side - just enough in short to make it the wickedest and most provoking head-dress that ever malicious milliner devised. And not to speak of the manner in which these cherry-coloured decorations brightened her eyes, or vied with her lips, or shed a new bloom on her face, she wore such a cruel little muff, and such a heart-

rending pair of shoes, and was so surrounded and hemmed in, as it were, by aggravations of all kinds, that when Mr Tappettit, holding the horse's head, saw her come out of the house alone, such impulses came over him to decoy her into the chaise and drive off like mad, that he would unquestionably have done it, but for certain uneasy doubts besetting him as to the shortest way to Gretna Green; whether it was up the street or down, or up the right-hand turning or the left; and whether, supposing all the turnpikes to be carried by storm, the blacksmith in the end would marry them on credit; which by reason of his clerical office appeared, even to his excited imagination, so unlikely, that he hesitated. And while he stood hesitating, and looking post-chaises-and-six at Dolly, out came his master and his mistress, and the constant Miggs, and the opportunity was gone for ever. For now the chaise creaked upon its springs, and Mrs Varden was inside; and now it creaked again, and more than ever, and the locksmith was inside; and now it bounded once, as if its heart beat lightly, and Dolly was inside; and now it was gone and its place was empty, and he and that dreary Miggs were standing in the street together.

The hearty locksmith was in as good a humour as if nothing had occurred for the last twelve months to put him out of his way, Dolly was all smiles and graces, and Mrs Varden was agreeable beyond all precedent. As they jogged through the streets talking of this thing and of that, who should be descried upon the pavement but that very coachmaker, looking so genteel that nobody would have believed he had ever had anything to do with a coach but riding in it, and bowing like any nobleman. To be sure Dolly was confused when she bowed again, and to be sure the cherry-coloured ribbons trembled a little when she met his mournful eye, which seemed to say, 'I have kept my word, I have begun, the business is going to the devil, and you're the cause of it.' There he stood, rooted to the ground: as Dolly said, like a statue; and as Mrs Varden said, like a pump; till they turned the corner: and when her father thought it was like his impudence, and her mother wondered what he meant by it, Dolly blushed again till her very hood was pale.

But on they went, not the less merrily for this, and there was the locksmith in the incautious fulness of his heart 'pulling-up' at all manner of places, and evincing a most intimate acquaintance with all the taverns on the road, and all the landlords and all the landladies, with whom, indeed, the little horse was on equally friendly terms, for he kept on stopping of his own accord. Never were people so glad to see other people as these landlords and landladies were to behold Mr Varden and Mrs Varden and Miss Varden; and wouldn't they get out, said one; and they really must walk upstairs, said another; and she would take it ill and be quite certain they were proud if they wouldn't have a little taste of something, said a third; and so on, that it was really quite a Progress rather than a ride, and one continued scene of

hospitality from beginning to end. It was pleasant enough to be held in such esteem, not to mention the refreshments; so Mrs Varden said nothing at the time, and was all affability and delight - but such a body of evidence as she collected against the unfortunate locksmith that day, to be used thereafter as occasion might require, never was got together for matrimonial purposes.

In course of time - and in course of a pretty long time too, for these agreeable interruptions delayed them not a little, - they arrived upon the skirts of the Forest, and riding pleasantly on among the trees, came at last to the Maypole, where the locksmith's cheerful 'Yoho!' speedily brought to the porch old John, and after him young Joe, both of whom were so transfixed at sight of the ladies, that for a moment they were perfectly unable to give them any welcome, and could do nothing but stare.

It was only for a moment, however, that Joe forgot himself, for speedily reviving he thrust his drowsy father aside - to Mr Willet's mighty and inexpressible indignation - and darting out, stood ready to help them to alight. It was necessary for Dolly to get out first. Joe had her in his arms; - yes, though for a space of time no longer than you could count one in, Joe had her in his arms. Here was a glimpse of happiness!

It would be difficult to describe what a flat and commonplace affair the helping Mrs Varden out afterwards was, but Joe did it, and did it too with the best grace in the world. Then old John, who, entertaining a dull and foggy sort of idea that Mrs Varden wasn't fond of him, had been in some doubt whether she might not have come for purposes of assault and battery, took courage, hoped she was well, and offered to conduct her into the house. This tender being amicably received, they marched in together; Joe and Dolly followed, arm-in-arm, (happiness again!) and Varden brought up the rear.

Old John would have it that they must sit in the bar, and nobody objecting, into the bar they went. All bars are snug places, but the Maypole's was the very snuggest, cosiest, and completest bar, that ever the wit of man devised. Such amazing bottles in old oaken pigeon-holes; such gleaming tankards dangling from pegs at about the same inclination as thirsty men would hold them to their lips; such sturdy little Dutch kegs ranged in rows on shelves; so many lemons hanging in separate nets, and forming the fragrant grove already mentioned in this chronicle, suggestive, with goodly loaves of snowy sugar stowed away hard by, of punch, idealised beyond all mortal knowledge; such closets, such presses, such drawers full of pipes, such places for putting things away in hollow window-seats, all crammed to the throat with eatables, drinkables, or savoury condiments; lastly, and to crown all, as typical of the immense



resources of the establishment, and its defiances to all visitors to cut and come again, such a stupendous cheese!

It is a poor heart that never rejoices - it must have been the poorest, weakest, and most watery heart that ever beat, which would not have warmed towards the Maypole bar. Mrs Varden's did directly. She could no more have reproached John Willet among those household gods, the kegs and bottles, lemons, pipes, and cheese, than she could have stabbed him with his own bright carving-knife. The order for dinner too - it might have soothed a savage. 'A bit of fish,' said John to the cook, 'and some lamb chops (breaded, with plenty of ketchup), and a good salad, and a roast spring chicken, with a dish of sausages and mashed potatoes, or something of that sort.' Something of that sort! The resources of these inns! To talk carelessly about dishes, which in themselves were a first-rate holiday kind of dinner, suitable to one's wedding-day, as something of that sort: meaning, if you can't get a spring chicken, any other trifle in the way of poultry will do - such as a peacock, perhaps! The kitchen too, with its great broad cavernous chimney; the kitchen, where nothing in the way of cookery seemed impossible; where you could believe in anything to eat, they chose to tell you of. Mrs Varden returned from the contemplation of these wonders to the bar again, with a head quite dizzy and bewildered. Her housekeeping capacity was not large enough to comprehend them. She was obliged to go to sleep. Waking was pain, in the midst of such immensity.

Dolly in the meanwhile, whose gay heart and head ran upon other matters, passed out at the garden door, and glancing back now and then (but of course not wondering whether Joe saw her), tripped away by a path across the fields with which she was well acquainted, to discharge her mission at the Warren; and this deponent hath been informed and verily believes, that you might have seen many less pleasant objects than the cherry-coloured mantle and ribbons, as they went fluttering along the green meadows in the bright light of the day, like giddy things as they were.