

Chapter XXI

It was for the moment an inexpressible relief to Dolly, to recognise in the person who forced himself into the path so abruptly, and now stood directly in her way, Hugh of the Maypole, whose name she uttered in a tone of delighted surprise that came from her heart.

'Was it you?' she said, 'how glad I am to see you! and how could you terrify me so!'

In answer to which, he said nothing at all, but stood quite still, looking at her.

'Did you come to meet me?' asked Dolly.

Hugh nodded, and muttered something to the effect that he had been waiting for her, and had expected her sooner.

'I thought it likely they would send,' said Dolly, greatly reassured by this.

'Nobody sent me,' was his sullen answer. 'I came of my own accord.'

The rough bearing of this fellow, and his wild, uncouth appearance, had often filled the girl with a vague apprehension even when other people were by, and had occasioned her to shrink from him involuntarily. The having him for an unbidden companion in so solitary a place, with the darkness fast gathering about them, renewed and even increased the alarm she had felt at first.

If his manner had been merely dogged and passively fierce, as usual, she would have had no greater dislike to his company than she always felt - perhaps, indeed, would have been rather glad to have had him at hand. But there was something of coarse bold admiration in his look, which terrified her very much. She glanced timidly towards him, uncertain whether to go forward or retreat, and he stood gazing at her like a handsome satyr; and so they remained for some short time without stirring or breaking silence. At length Dolly took courage, shot past him, and hurried on.

'Why do you spend so much breath in avoiding me?' said Hugh, accommodating his pace to hers, and keeping close at her side.

'I wish to get back as quickly as I can, and you walk too near me,' answered Dolly.'

'Too near!' said Hugh, stooping over her so that she could feel his breath upon her forehead. 'Why too near? You're always proud to ME, mistress.'

'I am proud to no one. You mistake me,' answered Dolly. 'Fall back, if you please, or go on.'

'Nay, mistress,' he rejoined, endeavouring to draw her arm through his, 'I'll walk with you.'

She released herself and clenching her little hand, struck him with right good will. At this, Maypole Hugh burst into a roar of laughter, and passing his arm about her waist, held her in his strong grasp as easily as if she had been a bird.

'Ha ha ha! Well done, mistress! Strike again. You shall beat my face, and tear my hair, and pluck my beard up by the roots, and welcome, for the sake of your bright eyes. Strike again, mistress. Do. Ha ha ha! I like it.'

'Let me go,' she cried, endeavouring with both her hands to push him off. 'Let me go this moment.'

'You had as good be kinder to me, Sweetlips,' said Hugh. 'You had, indeed. Come. Tell me now. Why are you always so proud? I don't quarrel with you for it. I love you when you're proud. Ha ha ha! You can't hide your beauty from a poor fellow; that's a comfort!'

She gave him no answer, but as he had not yet checked her progress, continued to press forward as rapidly as she could. At length, between the hurry she had made, her terror, and the tightness of his embrace, her strength failed her, and she could go no further.

'Hugh,' cried the panting girl, 'good Hugh; if you will leave me I will give you anything - everything I have - and never tell one word of this to any living creature.'

'You had best not,' he answered. 'Harkye, little dove, you had best not. All about here know me, and what I dare do if I have a mind. If ever you are going to tell, stop when the words are on your lips, and think of the mischief you'll bring, if you do, upon some innocent heads that you wouldn't wish to hurt a hair of. Bring trouble on me, and I'll bring trouble and something more on them in return. I care no more for them than for so many dogs; not so much - why should I? I'd sooner kill a man than a dog any day. I've never been sorry for a man's death in all my life, and I have for a dog's.'

There was something so thoroughly savage in the manner of these expressions, and the looks and gestures by which they were accompanied, that her great fear of him gave her new strength, and enabled her by a sudden effort to extricate herself and run fleetly from him. But Hugh was as nimble, strong, and swift of foot, as any man in broad England, and it was but a fruitless expenditure of energy, for he had her in his encircling arms again before she had gone a hundred yards.

'Softly, darling - gently - would you fly from rough Hugh, that loves you as well as any drawing-room gallant?'

'I would,' she answered, struggling to free herself again. 'I will. Help!'

'A fine for crying out,' said Hugh. 'Ha ha ha! A fine, pretty one, from your lips. I pay myself! Ha ha ha!'

'Help! help! help!' As she shrieked with the utmost violence she could exert, a shout was heard in answer, and another, and another.

'Thank Heaven!' cried the girl in an ecstasy. 'Joe, dear Joe, this way. Help!'

Her assailant paused, and stood irresolute for a moment, but the shouts drawing nearer and coming quick upon them, forced him to a speedy decision. He released her, whispered with a menacing look, 'Tell HIM: and see what follows!' and leaping the hedge, was gone in an instant. Dolly darted off, and fairly ran into Joe Willet's open arms.

'What is the matter? are you hurt? what was it? who was it? where is he? what was he like?' with a great many encouraging expressions and assurances of safety, were the first words Joe poured forth. But poor little Dolly was so breathless and terrified that for some time she was quite unable to answer him, and hung upon his shoulder, sobbing and crying as if her heart would break.

Joe had not the smallest objection to have her hanging on his shoulder; no, not the least, though it crushed the cherry-coloured ribbons sadly, and put the smart little hat out of all shape. But he couldn't bear to see her cry; it went to his very heart. He tried to console her, bent over her, whispered to her - some say kissed her, but that's a fable. At any rate he said all the kind and tender things he could think of and Dolly let him go on and didn't interrupt him once, and it was a good ten minutes before she was able to raise her head and thank him.

'What was it that frightened you?' said Joe.

A man whose person was unknown to her had followed her, she answered; he began by begging, and went on to threats of robbery, which he was on the point of carrying into execution, and would have executed, but for Joe's timely aid. The hesitation and confusion with which she said this, Joe attributed to the fright she had sustained, and no suspicion of the truth occurred to him for a moment.

'Stop when the words are on your lips.' A hundred times that night, and very often afterwards, when the disclosure was rising to her tongue, Dolly thought of that, and repressed it. A deeply rooted dread of the man; the conviction that his ferocious nature, once roused, would stop at nothing; and the strong assurance that if she impeached him, the full measure of his wrath and vengeance would be wreaked on Joe, who had preserved her; these were considerations she had not the courage to overcome, and inducements to secrecy too powerful for her to surmount.

Joe, for his part, was a great deal too happy to inquire very curiously into the matter; and Dolly being yet too tremulous to walk without assistance, they went forward very slowly, and in his mind very pleasantly, until the Maypole lights were near at hand, twinkling their cheerful welcome, when Dolly stopped suddenly and with a half scream exclaimed,

'The letter!'

'What letter?' cried Joe.

'That I was carrying - I had it in my hand. My bracelet too,' she said, clasping her wrist. 'I have lost them both.'

'Do you mean just now?' said Joe.

'Either I dropped them then, or they were taken from me,' answered Dolly, vainly searching her pocket and rustling her dress. 'They are gone, both gone. What an unhappy girl I am!' With these words poor Dolly, who to do her justice was quite as sorry for the loss of the letter as for her bracelet, fell a-crying again, and bemoaned her fate most movingly.

Joe tried to comfort her with the assurance that directly he had housed her in the Maypole, he would return to the spot with a lantern (for it was now quite dark) and make strict search for the missing articles, which there was great probability of his finding, as it was not likely that anybody had passed that way since, and she was not conscious that they had been forcibly taken from her. Dolly thanked him very heartily for this offer, though with no great hope of his quest being successful; and so with many lamentations on her side, and

many hopeful words on his, and much weakness on the part of Dolly and much tender supporting on the part of Joe, they reached the Maypole bar at last, where the locksmith and his wife and old John were yet keeping high festival.

Mr Willet received the intelligence of Dolly's trouble with that surprising presence of mind and readiness of speech for which he was so eminently distinguished above all other men. Mrs Varden expressed her sympathy for her daughter's distress by scolding her roundly for being so late; and the honest locksmith divided himself between condoling with and kissing Dolly, and shaking hands heartily with Joe, whom he could not sufficiently praise or thank.

In reference to this latter point, old John was far from agreeing with his friend; for besides that he by no means approved of an adventurous spirit in the abstract, it occurred to him that if his son and heir had been seriously damaged in a scuffle, the consequences would assuredly have been expensive and inconvenient, and might perhaps have proved detrimental to the Maypole business. Wherefore, and because he looked with no favourable eye upon young girls, but rather considered that they and the whole female sex were a kind of nonsensical mistake on the part of Nature, he took occasion to retire and shake his head in private at the boiler; inspired by which silent oracle, he was moved to give Joe various stealthy nudges with his elbow, as a parental reproof and gentle admonition to mind his own business and not make a fool of himself.

Joe, however, took down the lantern and lighted it; and arming himself with a stout stick, asked whether Hugh was in the stable.

'He's lying asleep before the kitchen fire, sir,' said Mr Willet. 'What do you want him for?'

'I want him to come with me to look after this bracelet and letter,' answered Joe. 'Halloa there! Hugh!'

Dolly turned pale as death, and felt as if she must faint forthwith. After a few moments, Hugh came staggering in, stretching himself and yawning according to custom, and presenting every appearance of having been roused from a sound nap.

'Here, sleepy-head,' said Joe, giving him the lantern. 'Carry this, and bring the dog, and that small cudgel of yours. And woe betide the fellow if we come upon him.'

'What fellow?' growled Hugh, rubbing his eyes and shaking himself.

'What fellow?' returned Joe, who was in a state of great valour and bustle; 'a fellow you ought to know of and be more alive about. It's well for the like of you, lazy giant that you are, to be snoring your time away in chimney-corners, when honest men's daughters can't cross even our quiet meadows at nightfall without being set upon by footpads, and frightened out of their precious lives.'

'They never rob me,' cried Hugh with a laugh. 'I have got nothing to lose. But I'd as lief knock them at head as any other men. How many are there?'

'Only one,' said Dolly faintly, for everybody looked at her.

'And what was he like, mistress?' said Hugh with a glance at young Willet, so slight and momentary that the scowl it conveyed was lost on all but her. 'About my height?'

'Not - not so tall,' Dolly replied, scarce knowing what she said.

'His dress,' said Hugh, looking at her keenly, 'like - like any of ours now? I know all the people hereabouts, and maybe could give a guess at the man, if I had anything to guide me.'

Dolly faltered and turned paler yet; then answered that he was wrapped in a loose coat and had his face hidden by a handkerchief and that she could give no other description of him.

'You wouldn't know him if you saw him then, belike?' said Hugh with a malicious grin.

'I should not,' answered Dolly, bursting into tears again. 'I don't wish to see him. I can't bear to think of him. I can't talk about him any more. Don't go to look for these things, Mr Joe, pray don't. I entreat you not to go with that man.'

'Not to go with me!' cried Hugh. 'I'm too rough for them all. They're all afraid of me. Why, bless you mistress, I've the tenderest heart alive. I love all the ladies, ma'am,' said Hugh, turning to the locksmith's wife.

Mrs Varden opined that if he did, he ought to be ashamed of himself; such sentiments being more consistent (so she argued) with a benighted Mussulman or wild Islander than with a stanch Protestant. Arguing from this imperfect state of his morals, Mrs Varden further opined that he had never studied the Manual. Hugh admitting that he never had, and moreover that he couldn't read, Mrs Varden declared with much severity, that he ought to be even more ashamed of himself than before, and strongly recommended him to save up his pocket-money for the purchase of one, and further to teach himself the

contents with all convenient diligence. She was still pursuing this train of discourse, when Hugh, somewhat unceremoniously and irreverently, followed his young master out, and left her to edify the rest of the company. This she proceeded to do, and finding that Mr Willet's eyes were fixed upon her with an appearance of deep attention, gradually addressed the whole of her discourse to him, whom she entertained with a moral and theological lecture of considerable length, in the conviction that great workings were taking place in his spirit. The simple truth was, however, that Mr Willet, although his eyes were wide open and he saw a woman before him whose head by long and steady looking at seemed to grow bigger and bigger until it filled the whole bar, was to all other intents and purposes fast asleep; and so sat leaning back in his chair with his hands in his pockets until his son's return caused him to wake up with a deep sigh, and a faint impression that he had been dreaming about pickled pork and greens - a vision of his slumbers which was no doubt referable to the circumstance of Mrs Varden's having frequently pronounced the word 'Grace' with much emphasis; which word, entering the portals of Mr Willet's brain as they stood ajar, and coupling itself with the words 'before meat,' which were there ranging about, did in time suggest a particular kind of meat together with that description of vegetable which is usually its companion.

The search was wholly unsuccessful. Joe had groped along the path a dozen times, and among the grass, and in the dry ditch, and in the hedge, but all in vain. Dolly, who was quite inconsolable for her loss, wrote a note to Miss Haredale giving her the same account of it that she had given at the Maypole, which Joe undertook to deliver as soon as the family were stirring next day. That done, they sat down to tea in the bar, where there was an uncommon display of buttered toast, and - in order that they might not grow faint for want of sustenance, and might have a decent halting-place or halfway house between dinner and supper - a few savoury trifles in the shape of great rashers of broiled ham, which being well cured, done to a turn, and smoking hot, sent forth a tempting and delicious fragrance.

Mrs Varden was seldom very Protestant at meals, unless it happened that they were underdone, or overdone, or indeed that anything occurred to put her out of humour. Her spirits rose considerably on beholding these goodly preparations, and from the nothingness of good works, she passed to the somethingness of ham and toast with great cheerfulness. Nay, under the influence of these wholesome stimulants, she sharply reprov'd her daughter for being low and despondent (which she considered an unacceptable frame of mind), and remarked, as she held her own plate for a fresh supply, that it would be well for Dolly, who pined over the loss of a toy and a sheet of paper, if she would reflect upon the voluntary sacrifices of the missionaries in foreign parts who lived chiefly on salads.

The proceedings of such a day occasion various fluctuations in the human thermometer, and especially in instruments so sensitively and delicately constructed as Mrs Varden. Thus, at dinner Mrs V. stood at summer heat; genial, smiling, and delightful. After dinner, in the sunshine of the wine, she went up at least half-a-dozen degrees, and was perfectly enchanting. As its effect subsided, she fell rapidly, went to sleep for an hour or so at temperate, and woke at something below freezing. Now she was at summer heat again, in the shade; and when tea was over, and old John, producing a bottle of cordial from one of the oaken cases, insisted on her sipping two glasses thereof in slow succession, she stood steadily at ninety for one hour and a quarter. Profiting by experience, the locksmith took advantage of this genial weather to smoke his pipe in the porch, and in consequence of this prudent management, he was fully prepared, when the glass went down again, to start homewards directly.

The horse was accordingly put in, and the chaise brought round to the door. Joe, who would on no account be dissuaded from escorting them until they had passed the most dreary and solitary part of the road, led out the grey mare at the same time; and having helped Dolly into her seat (more happiness!) sprung gaily into the saddle. Then, after many good nights, and admonitions to wrap up, and glancing of lights, and handing in of cloaks and shawls, the chaise rolled away, and Joe trotted beside it - on Dolly's side, no doubt, and pretty close to the wheel too.