

Chapter XXII

It was a fine bright night, and for all her lowness of spirits Dolly kept looking up at the stars in a manner so bewitching (and SHE knew it!) that Joe was clean out of his senses, and plainly showed that if ever a man were - not to say over head and ears, but over the Monument and the top of Saint Paul's in love, that man was himself. The road was a very good one; not at all a jolting road, or an uneven one; and yet Dolly held the side of the chaise with one little hand, all the way. If there had been an executioner behind him with an uplifted axe ready to chop off his head if he touched that hand, Joe couldn't have helped doing it. From putting his own hand upon it as if by chance, and taking it away again after a minute or so, he got to riding along without taking it off at all; as if he, the escort, were bound to do that as an important part of his duty, and had come out for the purpose. The most curious circumstance about this little incident was, that Dolly didn't seem to know of it. She looked so innocent and unconscious when she turned her eyes on Joe, that it was quite provoking.

She talked though; talked about her fright, and about Joe's coming up to rescue her, and about her gratitude, and about her fear that she might not have thanked him enough, and about their always being friends from that time forth - and about all that sort of thing. And when Joe said, not friends he hoped, Dolly was quite surprised, and said not enemies she hoped; and when Joe said, couldn't they be something much better than either, Dolly all of a sudden found out a star which was brighter than all the other stars, and begged to call his attention to the same, and was ten thousand times more innocent and unconscious than ever. In this manner they travelled along, talking very little above a whisper, and wishing the road could be stretched out to some dozen times its natural length - at least that was Joe's desire - when, as they were getting clear of the forest and emerging on the more frequented road, they heard behind them the sound of a horse's feet at a round trot, which growing rapidly louder as it drew nearer, elicited a scream from Mrs Varden, and the cry 'a friend!' from the rider, who now came panting up, and checked his horse beside them.

'This man again!' cried Dolly, shuddering.

'Hugh!' said Joe. 'What errand are you upon?'

'I come to ride back with you,' he answered, glancing covertly at the locksmith's daughter. 'HE sent me.'

'My father!' said poor Joe; adding under his breath, with a very unfilial apostrophe, 'Will he never think me man enough to take care of myself!'

'Aye!' returned Hugh to the first part of the inquiry. 'The roads are not safe just now, he says, and you'd better have a companion.'

'Ride on then,' said Joe. 'I'm not going to turn yet.'

Hugh complied, and they went on again. It was his whim or humour to ride immediately before the chaise, and from this position he constantly turned his head, and looked back. Dolly felt that he looked at her, but she averted her eyes and feared to raise them once, so great was the dread with which he had inspired her.

This interruption, and the consequent wakefulness of Mrs Varden, who had been nodding in her sleep up to this point, except for a minute or two at a time, when she roused herself to scold the locksmith for audaciously taking hold of her to prevent her nodding herself out of the chaise, put a restraint upon the whispered conversation, and made it difficult of resumption. Indeed, before they had gone another mile, Gabriel stopped at his wife's desire, and that good lady protested she would not hear of Joe's going a step further on any account whatever. It was in vain for Joe to protest on the other hand that he was by no means tired, and would turn back presently, and would see them safely past such a point, and so forth. Mrs Varden was obdurate, and being so was not to be overcome by mortal agency.

'Good night - if I must say it,' said Joe, sorrowfully.

'Good night,' said Dolly. She would have added, 'Take care of that man, and pray don't trust him,' but he had turned his horse's head, and was standing close to them. She had therefore nothing for it but to suffer Joe to give her hand a gentle squeeze, and when the chaise had gone on for some distance, to look back and wave it, as he still lingered on the spot where they had parted, with the tall dark figure of Hugh beside him.

What she thought about, going home; and whether the coach-maker held as favourable a place in her meditations as he had occupied in the morning, is unknown. They reached home at last - at last, for it was a long way, made none the shorter by Mrs Varden's grumbling. Miggs hearing the sound of wheels was at the door immediately.

'Here they are, Simmun! Here they are!' cried Miggs, clapping her hands, and issuing forth to help her mistress to alight. 'Bring a chair, Simmun. Now, an't you the better for it, mim? Don't you feel more

yourself than you would have done if you'd have stopped at home? Oh, gracious! how cold you are! Goodness me, sir, she's a perfect heap of ice.'

'I can't help it, my good girl. You had better take her in to the fire,' said the locksmith.

'Master sounds unfeeling, mim,' said Miggs, in a tone of commiseration, 'but such is not his intentions, I'm sure. After what he has seen of you this day, I never will believe but that he has a deal more affection in his heart than to speak unkind. Come in and sit yourself down by the fire; there's a good dear - do.'

Mrs Varden complied. The locksmith followed with his hands in his pockets, and Mr Tappertit trundled off with the chaise to a neighbouring stable.

'Martha, my dear,' said the locksmith, when they reached the parlour, 'if you'll look to Dolly yourself or let somebody else do it, perhaps it will be only kind and reasonable. She has been frightened, you know, and is not at all well to-night.'

In fact, Dolly had thrown herself upon the sofa, quite regardless of all the little finery of which she had been so proud in the morning, and with her face buried in her hands was crying very much.

At first sight of this phenomenon (for Dolly was by no means accustomed to displays of this sort, rather learning from her mother's example to avoid them as much as possible) Mrs Varden expressed her belief that never was any woman so beset as she; that her life was a continued scene of trial; that whenever she was disposed to be well and cheerful, so sure were the people around her to throw, by some means or other, a damp upon her spirits; and that, as she had enjoyed herself that day, and Heaven knew it was very seldom she did enjoy herself so she was now to pay the penalty. To all such propositions Miggs assented freely. Poor Dolly, however, grew none the better for these restoratives, but rather worse, indeed; and seeing that she was really ill, both Mrs Varden and Miggs were moved to compassion, and tended her in earnest.

But even then, their very kindness shaped itself into their usual course of policy, and though Dolly was in a swoon, it was rendered clear to the meanest capacity, that Mrs Varden was the sufferer. Thus when Dolly began to get a little better, and passed into that stage in which matrons hold that remonstrance and argument may be successfully applied, her mother represented to her, with tears in her eyes, that if she had been flurried and worried that day, she must remember it was the common lot of humanity, and in especial of

womankind, who through the whole of their existence must expect no less, and were bound to make up their minds to meek endurance and patient resignation. Mrs Varden entreated her to remember that one of these days she would, in all probability, have to do violence to her feelings so far as to be married; and that marriage, as she might see every day of her life (and truly she did) was a state requiring great fortitude and forbearance. She represented to her in lively colours, that if she (Mrs V.) had not, in steering her course through this vale of tears, been supported by a strong principle of duty which alone upheld and prevented her from drooping, she must have been in her grave many years ago; in which case she desired to know what would have become of that errant spirit (meaning the locksmith), of whose eye she was the very apple, and in whose path she was, as it were, a shining light and guiding star?

Miss Miggs also put in her word to the same effect. She said that indeed and indeed Miss Dolly might take pattern by her blessed mother, who, she always had said, and always would say, though she were to be hanged, drawn, and quartered for it next minute, was the mildest, amiablest, forgivingest-spirited, longest-sufferingest female as ever she could have believed; the mere narration of whose excellencies had worked such a wholesome change in the mind of her own sister-in-law, that, whereas, before, she and her husband lived like cat and dog, and were in the habit of exchanging brass candlesticks, pot-lids, flat-irons, and other such strong resentments, they were now the happiest and affectionatest couple upon earth; as could be proved any day on application at Golden Lion Court, number twenty-sivin, second bell-handle on the right-hand doorpost. After glancing at herself as a comparatively worthless vessel, but still as one of some desert, she besought her to bear in mind that her aforesaid dear and only mother was of a weakly constitution and excitable temperament, who had constantly to sustain afflictions in domestic life, compared with which thieves and robbers were as nothing, and yet never sunk down or gave way to despair or wrath, but, in prize-fighting phraseology, always came up to time with a cheerful countenance, and went in to win as if nothing had happened. When Miggs finished her solo, her mistress struck in again, and the two together performed a duet to the same purpose; the burden being, that Mrs Varden was persecuted perfection, and Mr Varden, as the representative of mankind in that apartment, a creature of vicious and brutal habits, utterly insensible to the blessings he enjoyed. Of so refined a character, indeed, was their talent of assault under the mask of sympathy, that when Dolly, recovering, embraced her father tenderly, as in vindication of his goodness, Mrs Varden expressed her solemn hope that this would be a lesson to him for the remainder of his life, and that he would do some little justice to a woman's nature ever afterwards - in which aspiration Miss Miggs, by divers sniffs and coughs, more significant than the longest oration, expressed her entire concurrence.

But the great joy of Miggs's heart was, that she not only picked up a full account of what had happened, but had the exquisite delight of conveying it to Mr Tappertit for his jealousy and torture. For that gentleman, on account of Dolly's indisposition, had been requested to take his supper in the workshop, and it was conveyed thither by Miss Miggs's own fair hands.

'Oh Simmun!' said the young lady, 'such goings on to-day! Oh, gracious me, Simmun!'

Mr Tappertit, who was not in the best of humours, and who disliked Miss Miggs more when she laid her hand on her heart and panted for breath than at any other time, as her deficiency of outline was most apparent under such circumstances, eyed her over in his loftiest style, and deigned to express no curiosity whatever.

'I never heard the like, nor nobody else,' pursued Miggs. 'The idea of interfering with HER. What people can see in her to make it worth their while to do so, that's the joke - he he he!'

Finding there was a lady in the case, Mr Tappertit haughtily requested his fair friend to be more explicit, and demanded to know what she meant by 'her.'

'Why, that Dolly,' said Miggs, with an extremely sharp emphasis on the name. 'But, oh upon my word and honour, young Joseph Willet is a brave one; and he do deserve her, that he do.'

'Woman!' said Mr Tappertit, jumping off the counter on which he was seated; 'beware!'

'My stars, Simmun!' cried Miggs, in affected astonishment. 'You frighten me to death! What's the matter?'

'There are strings,' said Mr Tappertit, flourishing his bread-and-cheese knife in the air, 'in the human heart that had better not be wibrated. That's what's the matter.'

'Oh, very well - if you're in a huff,' cried Miggs, turning away.

'Huff or no huff,' said Mr Tappertit, detaining her by the wrist. 'What do you mean, Jezebel? What were you going to say? Answer me!'

Notwithstanding this uncivil exhortation, Miggs gladly did as she was required; and told him how that their young mistress, being alone in the meadows after dark, had been attacked by three or four tall men, who would have certainly borne her away and perhaps murdered her, but for the timely arrival of Joseph Willet, who with his own single

hand put them all to flight, and rescued her; to the lasting admiration of his fellow-creatures generally, and to the eternal love and gratitude of Dolly Varden.

'Very good,' said Mr Tappertit, fetching a long breath when the tale was told, and rubbing his hair up till it stood stiff and straight on end all over his head. 'His days are numbered.'

'Oh, Simmun!'

'I tell you,' said the 'prentice, 'his days are numbered. Leave me. Get along with you.'

Miggs departed at his bidding, but less because of his bidding than because she desired to chuckle in secret. When she had given vent to her satisfaction, she returned to the parlour; where the locksmith, stimulated by quietness and Toby, had become talkative, and was disposed to take a cheerful review of the occurrences of the day. But Mrs Varden, whose practical religion (as is not uncommon) was usually of the retrospective order, cut him short by declaiming on the sinfulness of such junketings, and holding that it was high time to go to bed. To bed therefore she withdrew, with an aspect as grim and gloomy as that of the Maypole's own state couch; and to bed the rest of the establishment soon afterwards repaired.