

Chapter XXIII

Twilight had given place to night some hours, and it was high noon in those quarters of the town in which 'the world' condescended to dwell - the world being then, as now, of very limited dimensions and easily lodged - when Mr Chester reclined upon a sofa in his dressing-room in the Temple, entertaining himself with a book.

He was dressing, as it seemed, by easy stages, and having performed half the journey was taking a long rest. Completely attired as to his legs and feet in the trimmest fashion of the day, he had yet the remainder of his toilet to perform. The coat was stretched, like a refined scarecrow, on its separate horse; the waistcoat was displayed to the best advantage; the various ornamental articles of dress were severally set out in most alluring order; and yet he lay dangling his legs between the sofa and the ground, as intent upon his book as if there were nothing but bed before him.

'Upon my honour,' he said, at length raising his eyes to the ceiling with the air of a man who was reflecting seriously on what he had read; 'upon my honour, the most masterly composition, the most delicate thoughts, the finest code of morality, and the most gentlemanly sentiments in the universe! Ah Ned, Ned, if you would but form your mind by such precepts, we should have but one common feeling on every subject that could possibly arise between us!'

This apostrophe was addressed, like the rest of his remarks, to empty air: for Edward was not present, and the father was quite alone. 'My Lord Chesterfield,' he said, pressing his hand tenderly upon the book as he laid it down, 'if I could but have profited by your genius soon enough to have formed my son on the model you have left to all wise fathers, both he and I would have been rich men. Shakespeare was undoubtedly very fine in his way; Milton good, though prosy; Lord Bacon deep, and decidedly knowing; but the writer who should be his country's pride, is my Lord Chesterfield.'

He became thoughtful again, and the toothpick was in requisition.

'I thought I was tolerably accomplished as a man of the world,' he continued, 'I flattered myself that I was pretty well versed in all those little arts and graces which distinguish men of the world from boors and peasants, and separate their character from those intensely vulgar sentiments which are called the national character. Apart from any natural prepossession in my own favour, I believed I was. Still, in every page of this enlightened writer, I find some captivating hypocrisy which has never occurred to me before, or some superlative piece of selfishness to which I was utterly a stranger. I should quite blush for myself before this stupendous creature, if remembering his precepts,

one might blush at anything. An amazing man! a nobleman indeed! any King or Queen may make a Lord, but only the Devil himself - and the Graces - can make a Chesterfield.'

Men who are thoroughly false and hollow, seldom try to hide those vices from themselves; and yet in the very act of avowing them, they lay claim to the virtues they feign most to despise. 'For,' say they, 'this is honesty, this is truth. All mankind are like us, but they have not the candour to avow it.' The more they affect to deny the existence of any sincerity in the world, the more they would be thought to possess it in its boldest shape; and this is an unconscious compliment to Truth on the part of these philosophers, which will turn the laugh against them to the Day of Judgment.

Mr Chester, having extolled his favourite author, as above recited, took up the book again in the excess of his admiration and was composing himself for a further perusal of its sublime morality, when he was disturbed by a noise at the outer door; occasioned as it seemed by the endeavours of his servant to obstruct the entrance of some unwelcome visitor.

'A late hour for an importunate creditor,' he said, raising his eyebrows with as indolent an expression of wonder as if the noise were in the street, and one with which he had not the smallest possible concern. 'Much after their accustomed time. The usual pretence I suppose. No doubt a heavy payment to make up tomorrow. Poor fellow, he loses time, and time is money as the good proverb says - I never found it out though. Well. What now? You know I am not at home.'

'A man, sir,' replied the servant, who was to the full as cool and negligent in his way as his master, 'has brought home the riding-whip you lost the other day. I told him you were out, but he said he was to wait while I brought it in, and wouldn't go till I did.'

'He was quite right,' returned his master, 'and you're a blockhead, possessing no judgment or discretion whatever. Tell him to come in, and see that he rubs his shoes for exactly five minutes first.'

The man laid the whip on a chair, and withdrew. The master, who had only heard his foot upon the ground and had not taken the trouble to turn round and look at him, shut his book, and pursued the train of ideas his entrance had disturbed.

'If time were money,' he said, handling his snuff-box, 'I would compound with my creditors, and give them - let me see - how much a day? There's my nap after dinner - an hour - they're extremely welcome to that, and to make the most of it. In the morning, between my breakfast and the paper, I could spare them another hour; in the

evening before dinner say another. Three hours a day. They might pay themselves in calls, with interest, in twelve months. I think I shall propose it to them. Ah, my centaur, are you there?'

'Here I am,' replied Hugh, striding in, followed by a dog, as rough and sullen as himself; 'and trouble enough I've had to get here. What do you ask me to come for, and keep me out when I DO come?'

'My good fellow,' returned the other, raising his head a little from the cushion and carelessly surveying him from top to toe, 'I am delighted to see you, and to have, in your being here, the very best proof that you are not kept out. How are you?'

'I'm well enough,' said Hugh impatiently.

'You look a perfect marvel of health. Sit down.'

'I'd rather stand,' said Hugh.

'Please yourself my good fellow,' returned Mr Chester rising, slowly pulling off the loose robe he wore, and sitting down before the dressing-glass. 'Please yourself by all means.'

Having said this in the politest and blindest tone possible, he went on dressing, and took no further notice of his guest, who stood in the same spot as uncertain what to do next, eyeing him sulkily from time to time.

'Are you going to speak to me, master?' he said, after a long silence.

'My worthy creature,' returned Mr Chester, 'you are a little ruffled and out of humour. I'll wait till you're quite yourself again. I am in no hurry.'

This behaviour had its intended effect. It humbled and abashed the man, and made him still more irresolute and uncertain. Hard words he could have returned, violence he would have repaid with interest; but this cool, complacent, contemptuous, self-possessed reception, caused him to feel his inferiority more completely than the most elaborate arguments. Everything contributed to this effect. His own rough speech, contrasted with the soft persuasive accents of the other; his rude bearing, and Mr Chester's polished manner; the disorder and negligence of his ragged dress, and the elegant attire he saw before him; with all the unaccustomed luxuries and comforts of the room, and the silence that gave him leisure to observe these things, and feel how ill at ease they made him; all these influences, which have too often some effect on tutored minds and become of almost resistless power when brought to bear on such a mind as his,

quelled Hugh completely. He moved by little and little nearer to Mr Chester's chair, and glancing over his shoulder at the reflection of his face in the glass, as if seeking for some encouragement in its expression, said at length, with a rough attempt at conciliation,

'ARE you going to speak to me, master, or am I to go away?'

'Speak you,' said Mr Chester, 'speak you, good fellow. I have spoken, have I not? I am waiting for you.'

'Why, look'ee, sir,' returned Hugh with increased embarrassment, 'am I the man that you privately left your whip with before you rode away from the Maypole, and told to bring it back whenever he might want to see you on a certain subject?'

'No doubt the same, or you have a twin brother,' said Mr Chester, glancing at the reflection of his anxious face; 'which is not probable, I should say.'

'Then I have come, sir,' said Hugh, 'and I have brought it back, and something else along with it. A letter, sir, it is, that I took from the person who had charge of it.' As he spoke, he laid upon the dressing-table, Dolly's lost epistle. The very letter that had cost her so much trouble.

'Did you obtain this by force, my good fellow?' said Mr Chester, casting his eye upon it without the least perceptible surprise or pleasure.

'Not quite,' said Hugh. 'Partly.'

'Who was the messenger from whom you took it?'

'A woman. One Varden's daughter.'

'Oh indeed!' said Mr Chester gaily. 'What else did you take from her?'

'What else?'

'Yes,' said the other, in a drawling manner, for he was fixing a very small patch of sticking plaster on a very small pimple near the corner of his mouth. 'What else?'

'Well a kiss,' replied Hugh, after some hesitation.

'And what else?'

'Nothing.'

'I think,' said Mr Chester, in the same easy tone, and smiling twice or thrice to try if the patch adhered - 'I think there was something else. I have heard a trifle of jewellery spoken of - a mere trifle - a thing of such little value, indeed, that you may have forgotten it. Do you remember anything of the kind - such as a bracelet now, for instance?'

Hugh with a muttered oath thrust his hand into his breast, and drawing the bracelet forth, wrapped in a scrap of hay, was about to lay it on the table likewise, when his patron stopped his hand and bade him put it up again.

'You took that for yourself my excellent friend,' he said, 'and may keep it. I am neither a thief nor a receiver. Don't show it to me. You had better hide it again, and lose no time. Don't let me see where you put it either,' he added, turning away his head.

'You're not a receiver!' said Hugh bluntly, despite the increasing awe in which he held him. 'What do you call THAT, master?' striking the letter with his heavy hand.

'I call that quite another thing,' said Mr Chester coolly. 'I shall prove it presently, as you will see. You are thirsty, I suppose?'

Hugh drew his sleeve across his lips, and gruffly answered yes.

'Step to that closet and bring me a bottle you will see there, and a glass.'

He obeyed. His patron followed him with his eyes, and when his back was turned, smiled as he had never done when he stood beside the mirror. On his return he filled the glass, and bade him drink. That dram despatched, he poured him out another, and another.

'How many can you bear?' he said, filling the glass again.

'As many as you like to give me. Pour on. Fill high. A bumper with a bead in the middle! Give me enough of this,' he added, as he tossed it down his hairy throat, 'and I'll do murder if you ask me!'

'As I don't mean to ask you, and you might possibly do it without being invited if you went on much further,' said Mr Chester with great composure, 'we will stop, if agreeable to you, my good friend, at the next glass. You were drinking before you came here.'

'I always am when I can get it,' cried Hugh boisterously, waving the empty glass above his head, and throwing himself into a rude dancing attitude. 'I always am. Why not? Ha ha ha! What's so good to me as

this? What ever has been? What else has kept away the cold on bitter nights, and driven hunger off in starving times? What else has given me the strength and courage of a man, when men would have left me to die, a puny child? I should never have had a man's heart but for this. I should have died in a ditch. Where's he who when I was a weak and sickly wretch, with trembling legs and fading sight, bade me cheer up, as this did? I never knew him; not I. I drink to the drink, master. Ha ha ha!

'You are an exceedingly cheerful young man,' said Mr Chester, putting on his cravat with great deliberation, and slightly moving his head from side to side to settle his chin in its proper place. 'Quite a boon companion.'

'Do you see this hand, master,' said Hugh, 'and this arm?' baring the brawny limb to the elbow. 'It was once mere skin and bone, and would have been dust in some poor churchyard by this time, but for the drink.'

'You may cover it,' said Mr Chester, 'it's sufficiently real in your sleeve.'

'I should never have been spirited up to take a kiss from the proud little beauty, master, but for the drink,' cried Hugh. 'Ha ha ha! It was a good one. As sweet as honeysuckle, I warrant you. I thank the drink for it. I'll drink to the drink again, master. Fill me one more. Come. One more!'

'You are such a promising fellow,' said his patron, putting on his waistcoat with great nicety, and taking no heed of this request, 'that I must caution you against having too many impulses from the drink, and getting hung before your time. What's your age?'

'I don't know.'

'At any rate,' said Mr Chester, 'you are young enough to escape what I may call a natural death for some years to come. How can you trust yourself in my hands on so short an acquaintance, with a halter round your neck? What a confiding nature yours must be!'

Hugh fell back a pace or two and surveyed him with a look of mingled terror, indignation, and surprise. Regarding himself in the glass with the same complacency as before, and speaking as smoothly as if he were discussing some pleasant chit-chat of the town, his patron went on:

'Robbery on the king's highway, my young friend, is a very dangerous and ticklish occupation. It is pleasant, I have no doubt, while it lasts;

but like many other pleasures in this transitory world, it seldom lasts long. And really if in the ingenuousness of youth, you open your heart so readily on the subject, I am afraid your career will be an extremely short one.'

'How's this?' said Hugh. 'What do you talk of master? Who was it set me on?'

'Who?' said Mr Chester, wheeling sharply round, and looking full at him for the first time. 'I didn't hear you. Who was it?'

Hugh faltered, and muttered something which was not audible.

'Who was it? I am curious to know,' said Mr Chester, with surpassing affability. 'Some rustic beauty perhaps? But be cautious, my good friend. They are not always to be trusted. Do take my advice now, and be careful of yourself.' With these words he turned to the glass again, and went on with his toilet.

Hugh would have answered him that he, the questioner himself had set him on, but the words stuck in his throat. The consummate art with which his patron had led him to this point, and managed the whole conversation, perfectly baffled him. He did not doubt that if he had made the retort which was on his lips when Mr Chester turned round and questioned him so keenly, he would straightway have given him into custody and had him dragged before a justice with the stolen property upon him; in which case it was as certain he would have been hung as it was that he had been born. The ascendancy which it was the purpose of the man of the world to establish over this savage instrument, was gained from that time. Hugh's submission was complete. He dreaded him beyond description; and felt that accident and artifice had spun a web about him, which at a touch from such a master-hand as his, would bind him to the gallows.

With these thoughts passing through his mind, and yet wondering at the very same time how he who came there rioting in the confidence of this man (as he thought), should be so soon and so thoroughly subdued, Hugh stood cowering before him, regarding him uneasily from time to time, while he finished dressing. When he had done so, he took up the letter, broke the seal, and throwing himself back in his chair, read it leisurely through.

'Very neatly worded upon my life! Quite a woman's letter, full of what people call tenderness, and disinterestedness, and heart, and all that sort of thing!'

As he spoke, he twisted it up, and glancing lazily round at Hugh as though he would say 'You see this?' held it in the flame of the candle.

When it was in a full blaze, he tossed it into the grate, and there it smouldered away.

'It was directed to my son,' he said, turning to Hugh, 'and you did quite right to bring it here. I opened it on my own responsibility, and you see what I have done with it. Take this, for your trouble.'

Hugh stepped forward to receive the piece of money he held out to him. As he put it in his hand, he added:

'If you should happen to find anything else of this sort, or to pick up any kind of information you may think I would like to have, bring it here, will you, my good fellow?'

This was said with a smile which implied - or Hugh thought it did - 'fail to do so at your peril!' He answered that he would.

'And don't,' said his patron, with an air of the very kindest patronage, 'don't be at all downcast or uneasy respecting that little rashness we have been speaking of. Your neck is as safe in my hands, my good fellow, as though a baby's fingers clasped it, I assure you. - Take another glass. You are quieter now.'

Hugh accepted it from his hand, and looking stealthily at his smiling face, drank the contents in silence.

'Don't you - ha, ha! - don't you drink to the drink any more?' said Mr Chester, in his most winning manner.

'To you, sir,' was the sullen answer, with something approaching to a bow. 'I drink to you.'

'Thank you. God bless you. By the bye, what is your name, my good soul? You are called Hugh, I know, of course - your other name?'

'I have no other name.'

'A very strange fellow! Do you mean that you never knew one, or that you don't choose to tell it? Which?'

'I'd tell it if I could,' said Hugh, quickly. 'I can't. I have been always called Hugh; nothing more. I never knew, nor saw, nor thought about a father; and I was a boy of six - that's not very old - when they hung my mother up at Tyburn for a couple of thousand men to stare at. They might have let her live. She was poor enough.' 'How very sad!' exclaimed his patron, with a condescending smile. 'I have no doubt she was an exceedingly fine woman.'

'You see that dog of mine?' said Hugh, abruptly.

'Faithful, I dare say?' rejoined his patron, looking at him through his glass; 'and immensely clever? Virtuous and gifted animals, whether man or beast, always are so very hideous.'

'Such a dog as that, and one of the same breed, was the only living thing except me that howled that day,' said Hugh. 'Out of the two thousand odd - there was a larger crowd for its being a woman - the dog and I alone had any pity. If he'd have been a man, he'd have been glad to be quit of her, for she had been forced to keep him lean and half-starved; but being a dog, and not having a man's sense, he was sorry.'

'It was dull of the brute, certainly,' said Mr Chester, 'and very like a brute.'

Hugh made no rejoinder, but whistling to his dog, who sprung up at the sound and came jumping and sporting about him, bade his sympathising friend good night.

'Good night; he returned. 'Remember; you're safe with me - quite safe. So long as you deserve it, my good fellow, as I hope you always will, you have a friend in me, on whose silence you may rely. Now do be careful of yourself, pray do, and consider what jeopardy you might have stood in. Good night! bless you!'

Hugh truckled before the hidden meaning of these words as much as such a being could, and crept out of the door so submissively and subserviently - with an air, in short, so different from that with which he had entered - that his patron on being left alone, smiled more than ever.

'And yet,' he said, as he took a pinch of snuff, 'I do not like their having hanged his mother. The fellow has a fine eye, and I am sure she was handsome. But very probably she was coarse - red-nosed perhaps, and had clumsy feet. Aye, it was all for the best, no doubt.'

With this comforting reflection, he put on his coat, took a farewell glance at the glass, and summoned his man, who promptly attended, followed by a chair and its two bearers.

'Foh!' said Mr Chester. 'The very atmosphere that centaur has breathed, seems tainted with the cart and ladder. Here, Peak. Bring some scent and sprinkle the floor; and take away the chair he sat upon, and air it; and dash a little of that mixture upon me. I am stifled!'

The man obeyed; and the room and its master being both purified, nothing remained for Mr Chester but to demand his hat, to fold it jauntily under his arm, to take his seat in the chair and be carried off; humming a fashionable tune.