

## Chapter XXIV

How the accomplished gentleman spent the evening in the midst of a dazzling and brilliant circle; how he enchanted all those with whom he mingled by the grace of his deportment, the politeness of his manner, the vivacity of his conversation, and the sweetness of his voice; how it was observed in every corner, that Chester was a man of that happy disposition that nothing ruffled him, that he was one on whom the world's cares and errors sat lightly as his dress, and in whose smiling face a calm and tranquil mind was constantly reflected; how honest men, who by instinct knew him better, bowed down before him nevertheless, deferred to his every word, and courted his favourable notice; how people, who really had good in them, went with the stream, and fawned and flattered, and approved, and despised themselves while they did so, and yet had not the courage to resist; how, in short, he was one of those who are received and cherished in society (as the phrase is) by scores who individually would shrink from and be repelled by the object of their lavish regard; are things of course, which will suggest themselves. Matter so commonplace needs but a passing glance, and there an end.

The despisers of mankind - apart from the mere fools and mimics, of that creed - are of two sorts. They who believe their merit neglected and unappreciated, make up one class; they who receive adulation and flattery, knowing their own worthlessness, compose the other. Be sure that the coldest-hearted misanthropes are ever of this last order.

Mr Chester sat up in bed next morning, sipping his coffee, and remembering with a kind of contemptuous satisfaction how he had shone last night, and how he had been caressed and courted, when his servant brought in a very small scrap of dirty paper, tightly sealed in two places, on the inside whereof was inscribed in pretty large text these words: 'A friend. Desiring of a conference. Immediate. Private. Burn it when you've read it.'

'Where in the name of the Gunpowder Plot did you pick up this?' said his master.

It was given him by a person then waiting at the door, the man replied.

'With a cloak and dagger?' said Mr Chester.

With nothing more threatening about him, it appeared, than a leather apron and a dirty face. 'Let him come in.' In he came - Mr Tappertit; with his hair still on end, and a great lock in his hand, which he put down on the floor in the middle of the chamber as if he were about to go through some performances in which it was a necessary agent.

'Sir,' said Mr Tappertit with a low bow, 'I thank you for this condescension, and am glad to see you. Pardon the menial office in which I am engaged, sir, and extend your sympathies to one, who, humble as his appearance is, has inn'ard workings far above his station.'

Mr Chester held the bed-curtain farther back, and looked at him with a vague impression that he was some maniac, who had not only broken open the door of his place of confinement, but had brought away the lock. Mr Tappertit bowed again, and displayed his legs to the best advantage.

'You have heard, sir,' said Mr Tappertit, laying his hand upon his breast, 'of G. Varden Locksmith and bell-hanger and repairs neatly executed in town and country, Clerkenwell, London?'

'What then?' asked Mr Chester.

'I'm his 'prentice, sir.'

'What THEN?'

'Ahem!' said Mr Tappertit. 'Would you permit me to shut the door, sir, and will you further, sir, give me your honour bright, that what passes between us is in the strictest confidence?'

Mr Chester laid himself calmly down in bed again, and turning a perfectly undisturbed face towards the strange apparition, which had by this time closed the door, begged him to speak out, and to be as rational as he could, without putting himself to any very great personal inconvenience.

'In the first place, sir,' said Mr Tappertit, producing a small pocket-handkerchief and shaking it out of the folds, 'as I have not a card about me (for the envy of masters debases us below that level) allow me to offer the best substitute that circumstances will admit of. If you will take that in your own hand, sir, and cast your eye on the right-hand corner,' said Mr Tappertit, offering it with a graceful air, 'you will meet with my credentials.'

'Thank you,' answered Mr Chester, politely accepting it, and turning to some blood-red characters at one end. 'Four. Simon Tappertit. One.' Is that the - '

'Without the numbers, sir, that is my name,' replied the 'prentice. 'They are merely intended as directions to the washerwoman, and have no connection with myself or family. YOUR name, sir,' said Mr Tappertit, looking very hard at his nightcap, 'is Chester, I suppose?'

You needn't pull it off, sir, thank you. I observe E. C. from here. We will take the rest for granted.'

'Pray, Mr Tappertit,' said Mr Chester, 'has that complicated piece of ironmongery which you have done me the favour to bring with you, any immediate connection with the business we are to discuss?'

'It has not, sir,' rejoined the 'prentice. 'It's going to be fitted on a ware'us-door in Thames Street.'

'Perhaps, as that is the case,' said Mr Chester, 'and as it has a stronger flavour of oil than I usually refresh my bedroom with, you will oblige me so far as to put it outside the door?'

'By all means, sir,' said Mr Tappertit, suiting the action to the word.

'You'll excuse my mentioning it, I hope?'

'Don't apologise, sir, I beg. And now, if you please, to business.'

During the whole of this dialogue, Mr Chester had suffered nothing but his smile of unvarying serenity and politeness to appear upon his face. Sim Tappertit, who had far too good an opinion of himself to suspect that anybody could be playing upon him, thought within himself that this was something like the respect to which he was entitled, and drew a comparison from this courteous demeanour of a stranger, by no means favourable to the worthy locksmith.

'From what passes in our house,' said Mr Tappertit, 'I am aware, sir, that your son keeps company with a young lady against your inclinations. Sir, your son has not used me well.'

'Mr Tappertit,' said the other, 'you grieve me beyond description.'

'Thank you, sir,' replied the 'prentice. 'I'm glad to hear you say so. He's very proud, sir, is your son; very haughty.'

'I am afraid he IS haughty,' said Mr Chester. 'Do you know I was really afraid of that before; and you confirm me?'

'To recount the menial offices I've had to do for your son, sir,' said Mr Tappertit; 'the chairs I've had to hand him, the coaches I've had to call for him, the numerous degrading duties, wholly unconnected with my indenters, that I've had to do for him, would fill a family Bible. Besides which, sir, he is but a young man himself and I do not consider 'thank'ee Sim,' a proper form of address on those occasions.'

'Mr Tappertit, your wisdom is beyond your years. Pray go on.'

'I thank you for your good opinion, sir,' said Sim, much gratified, 'and will endeavour so to do. Now sir, on this account (and perhaps for another reason or two which I needn't go into) I am on your side. And what I tell you is this - that as long as our people go backwards and forwards, to and fro, up and down, to that there jolly old Maypole, lettering, and messaging, and fetching and carrying, you couldn't help your son keeping company with that young lady by deputy, - not if he was minded night and day by all the Horse Guards, and every man of 'em in the very fullest uniform.'

Mr Tappertit stopped to take breath after this, and then started fresh again.

'Now, sir, I am a coming to the point. You will inquire of me, 'how is this to be prevented?' I'll tell you how. If an honest, civil, smiling gentleman like you - '

'Mr Tappertit - really - '

'No, no, I'm serious,' rejoined the 'prentice, 'I am, upon my soul. If an honest, civil, smiling gentleman like you, was to talk but ten minutes to our old woman - that's Mrs Varden - and flatter her up a bit, you'd gain her over for ever. Then there's this point got - that her daughter Dolly,' - here a flush came over Mr Tappertit's face - 'wouldn't be allowed to be a go-between from that time forward; and till that point's got, there's nothing ever will prevent her. Mind that.'

'Mr Tappertit, your knowledge of human nature - '

'Wait a minute,' said Sim, folding his arms with a dreadful calmness. 'Now I come to THE point. Sir, there is a villain at that Maypole, a monster in human shape, a vagabond of the deepest dye, that unless you get rid of and have kidnapped and carried off at the very least - nothing less will do - will marry your son to that young woman, as certainly and as surely as if he was the Archbishop of Canterbury himself. He will, sir, for the hatred and malice that he bears to you; let alone the pleasure of doing a bad action, which to him is its own reward. If you knew how this chap, this Joseph Willet - that's his name - comes backwards and forwards to our house, libelling, and denouncing, and threatening you, and how I shudder when I hear him, you'd hate him worse than I do, - worse than I do, sir,' said Mr Tappertit wildly, putting his hair up straighter, and making a crunching noise with his teeth; 'if sich a thing is possible.'

'A little private vengeance in this, Mr Tappertit?'

'Private vengeance, sir, or public sentiment, or both combined - destroy him,' said Mr Tappertit. 'Miggs says so too. Miggs and me both

say so. We can't bear the plotting and undermining that takes place. Our souls recoil from it. Barnaby Rudge and Mrs Rudge are in it likewise; but the villain, Joseph Willet, is the ringleader. Their plottings and schemes are known to me and Miggs. If you want information of 'em, apply to us. Put Joseph Willet down, sir. Destroy him. Crush him. And be happy.'

With these words, Mr Tappertit, who seemed to expect no reply, and to hold it as a necessary consequence of his eloquence that his hearer should be utterly stunned, dumbfounded, and overwhelmed, folded his arms so that the palm of each hand rested on the opposite shoulder, and disappeared after the manner of those mysterious warners of whom he had read in cheap story-books.

'That fellow,' said Mr Chester, relaxing his face when he was fairly gone, 'is good practice. I HAVE some command of my features, beyond all doubt. He fully confirms what I suspected, though; and blunt tools are sometimes found of use, where sharper instruments would fail. I fear I may be obliged to make great havoc among these worthy people. A troublesome necessity! I quite feel for them.'

With that he fell into a quiet slumber: - subsided into such a gentle, pleasant sleep, that it was quite infantine.