

Chapter XXVI

'And you're not surprised to hear this, Varden?' said Mr Haredale. 'Well! You and she have always been the best friends, and you should understand her if anybody does.'

'I ask your pardon, sir,' rejoined the locksmith. 'I didn't say I understood her. I wouldn't have the presumption to say that of any woman. It's not so easily done. But I am not so much surprised, sir, as you expected me to be, certainly.'

'May I ask why not, my good friend?'

'I have seen, sir,' returned the locksmith with evident reluctance, 'I have seen in connection with her, something that has filled me with distrust and uneasiness. She has made bad friends, how, or when, I don't know; but that her house is a refuge for one robber and cut-throat at least, I am certain. There, sir! Now it's out.'

'Varden!'

'My own eyes, sir, are my witnesses, and for her sake I would be willingly half-blind, if I could but have the pleasure of mistrusting 'em. I have kept the secret till now, and it will go no further than yourself, I know; but I tell you that with my own eyes - broad awake - I saw, in the passage of her house one evening after dark, the highwayman who robbed and wounded Mr Edward Chester, and on the same night threatened me.'

'And you made no effort to detain him?' said Mr Haredale quickly.

'Sir,' returned the locksmith, 'she herself prevented me - held me, with all her strength, and hung about me until he had got clear off.' And having gone so far, he related circumstantially all that had passed upon the night in question.

This dialogue was held in a low tone in the locksmith's little parlour, into which honest Gabriel had shown his visitor on his arrival. Mr Haredale had called upon him to entreat his company to the widow's, that he might have the assistance of his persuasion and influence; and out of this circumstance the conversation had arisen.

'I forbore,' said Gabriel, 'from repeating one word of this to anybody, as it could do her no good and might do her great harm. I thought and hoped, to say the truth, that she would come to me, and talk to me about it, and tell me how it was; but though I have purposely put myself in her way more than once or twice, she has never touched upon the subject - except by a look. And indeed,' said the good-

natured locksmith, 'there was a good deal in the look, more than could have been put into a great many words. It said among other matters 'Don't ask me anything' so imploringly, that I didn't ask her anything. You'll think me an old fool, I know, sir. If it's any relief to call me one, pray do.'

'I am greatly disturbed by what you tell me,' said Mr Haredale, after a silence. 'What meaning do you attach to it?'

The locksmith shook his head, and looked doubtfully out of window at the failing light.

'She cannot have married again,' said Mr Haredale.

'Not without our knowledge surely, sir.'

'She may have done so, in the fear that it would lead, if known, to some objection or estrangement. Suppose she married incautiously - it is not improbable, for her existence has been a lonely and monotonous one for many years - and the man turned out a ruffian, she would be anxious to screen him, and yet would revolt from his crimes. This might be. It bears strongly on the whole drift of her discourse yesterday, and would quite explain her conduct. Do you suppose Barnaby is privy to these circumstances?'

'Quite impossible to say, sir,' returned the locksmith, shaking his head again: 'and next to impossible to find out from him. If what you suppose is really the case, I tremble for the lad - a notable person, sir, to put to bad uses - '

'It is not possible, Varden,' said Mr Haredale, in a still lower tone of voice than he had spoken yet, 'that we have been blinded and deceived by this woman from the beginning? It is not possible that this connection was formed in her husband's lifetime, and led to his and my brother's - '

'Good God, sir,' cried Gabriel, interrupting him, 'don't entertain such dark thoughts for a moment. Five-and-twenty years ago, where was there a girl like her? A gay, handsome, laughing, bright-eyed damsel! Think what she was, sir. It makes my heart ache now, even now, though I'm an old man, with a woman for a daughter, to think what she was and what she is. We all change, but that's with Time; Time does his work honestly, and I don't mind him. A fig for Time, sir. Use him well, and he's a hearty fellow, and scorns to have you at a disadvantage. But care and suffering (and those have changed her) are devils, sir - secret, stealthy, undermining devils - who tread down the brightest flowers in Eden, and do more havoc in a month than Time does in a year. Picture to yourself for one minute what Mary was

before they went to work with her fresh heart and face - do her that justice - and say whether such a thing is possible.'

'You're a good fellow, Varden,' said Mr Haredale, 'and are quite right. I have brooded on that subject so long, that every breath of suspicion carries me back to it. You are quite right.'

'It isn't, sir,' cried the locksmith with brightened eyes, and sturdy, honest voice; 'it isn't because I courted her before Rudge, and failed, that I say she was too good for him. She would have been as much too good for me. But she WAS too good for him; he wasn't free and frank enough for her. I don't reproach his memory with it, poor fellow; I only want to put her before you as she really was. For myself, I'll keep her old picture in my mind; and thinking of that, and what has altered her, I'll stand her friend, and try to win her back to peace. And damme, sir,' cried Gabriel, 'with your pardon for the word, I'd do the same if she had married fifty highwaymen in a twelvemonth; and think it in the Protestant Manual too, though Martha said it wasn't, tooth and nail, till doomsday!'

If the dark little parlour had been filled with a dense fog, which, clearing away in an instant, left it all radiance and brightness, it could not have been more suddenly cheered than by this outbreak on the part of the hearty locksmith. In a voice nearly as full and round as his own, Mr Haredale cried 'Well said!' and bade him come away without more parley. The locksmith complied right willingly; and both getting into a hackney coach which was waiting at the door, drove off straightway.

They alighted at the street corner, and dismissing their conveyance, walked to the house. To their first knock at the door there was no response. A second met with the like result. But in answer to the third, which was of a more vigorous kind, the parlour window-sash was gently raised, and a musical voice cried:

'Haredale, my dear fellow, I am extremely glad to see you. How very much you have improved in your appearance since our last meeting! I never saw you looking better. HOW do you do?'

Mr Haredale turned his eyes towards the casement whence the voice proceeded, though there was no need to do so, to recognise the speaker, and Mr Chester waved his hand, and smiled a courteous welcome.

'The door will be opened immediately,' he said. 'There is nobody but a very dilapidated female to perform such offices. You will excuse her infirmities? If she were in a more elevated station of society, she would be gouty. Being but a hewer of wood and drawer of water, she is

rheumatic. My dear Haredale, these are natural class distinctions, depend upon it.'

Mr Haredale, whose face resumed its lowering and distrustful look the moment he heard the voice, inclined his head stiffly, and turned his back upon the speaker.

'Not opened yet,' said Mr Chester. 'Dear me! I hope the aged soul has not caught her foot in some unlucky cobweb by the way. She is there at last! Come in, I beg!'

Mr Haredale entered, followed by the locksmith. Turning with a look of great astonishment to the old woman who had opened the door, he inquired for Mrs Rudge - for Barnaby. They were both gone, she replied, wagging her ancient head, for good. There was a gentleman in the parlour, who perhaps could tell them more. That was all SHE knew.

'Pray, sir,' said Mr Haredale, presenting himself before this new tenant, 'where is the person whom I came here to see?'

'My dear friend,' he returned, 'I have not the least idea.'

'Your trifling is ill-timed,' retorted the other in a suppressed tone and voice, 'and its subject ill-chosen. Reserve it for those who are your friends, and do not expend it on me. I lay no claim to the distinction, and have the self-denial to reject it.'

'My dear, good sir,' said Mr Chester, 'you are heated with walking. Sit down, I beg. Our friend is - '

'Is but a plain honest man,' returned Mr Haredale, 'and quite unworthy of your notice.'

'Gabriel Varden by name, sir,' said the locksmith bluntly.

'A worthy English yeoman!' said Mr Chester. 'A most worthy yeoman, of whom I have frequently heard my son Ned - darling fellow - speak, and have often wished to see. Varden, my good friend, I am glad to know you. You wonder now,' he said, turning languidly to Mr Haredale, 'to see me here. Now, I am sure you do.'

Mr Haredale glanced at him - not fondly or admiringly - smiled, and held his peace.

'The mystery is solved in a moment,' said Mr Chester; 'in a moment. Will you step aside with me one instant. You remember our little compact in reference to Ned, and your dear niece, Haredale? You

remember the list of assistants in their innocent intrigue? You remember these two people being among them? My dear fellow, congratulate yourself, and me. I have bought them off.'

'You have done what?' said Mr Haredale.

'Bought them off,' returned his smiling friend. 'I have found it necessary to take some active steps towards setting this boy and girl attachment quite at rest, and have begun by removing these two agents. You are surprised? Who CAN withstand the influence of a little money! They wanted it, and have been bought off. We have nothing more to fear from them. They are gone.'

'Gone!' echoed Mr Haredale. 'Where?'

'My dear fellow - and you must permit me to say again, that you never looked so young; so positively boyish as you do to-night - the Lord knows where; I believe Columbus himself wouldn't find them. Between you and me they have their hidden reasons, but upon that point I have pledged myself to secrecy. She appointed to see you here to-night, I know, but found it inconvenient, and couldn't wait. Here is the key of the door. I am afraid you'll find it inconveniently large; but as the tenement is yours, your good-nature will excuse that, Haredale, I am certain!'