

## Chapter XXVII

Mr Haredale stood in the widow's parlour with the door-key in his hand, gazing by turns at Mr Chester and at Gabriel Varden, and occasionally glancing downward at the key as in the hope that of its own accord it would unlock the mystery; until Mr Chester, putting on his hat and gloves, and sweetly inquiring whether they were walking in the same direction, recalled him to himself.

'No,' he said. 'Our roads diverge - widely, as you know. For the present, I shall remain here.'

'You will be hipped, Haredale; you will be miserable, melancholy, utterly wretched,' returned the other. 'It's a place of the very last description for a man of your temper. I know it will make you very miserable.'

'Let it,' said Mr Haredale, sitting down; 'and thrive upon the thought. Good night!'

Feigning to be wholly unconscious of the abrupt wave of the hand which rendered this farewell tantamount to a dismissal, Mr Chester retorted with a bland and heartfelt benediction, and inquired of Gabriel in what direction HE was going.

'Yours, sir, would be too much honour for the like of me,' replied the locksmith, hesitating.

'I wish you to remain here a little while, Varden,' said Mr Haredale, without looking towards them. 'I have a word or two to say to you.'

'I will not intrude upon your conference another moment,' said Mr Chester with inconceivable politeness. 'May it be satisfactory to you both! God bless you!' So saying, and bestowing upon the locksmith a most refulgent smile, he left them.

'A deplorably constituted creature, that rugged person,' he said, as he walked along the street; 'he is an atrocity that carries its own punishment along with it - a bear that gnaws himself. And here is one of the inestimable advantages of having a perfect command over one's inclinations. I have been tempted in these two short interviews, to draw upon that fellow, fifty times. Five men in six would have yielded to the impulse. By suppressing mine, I wound him deeper and more keenly than if I were the best swordsman in all Europe, and he the worst. You are the wise man's very last resource,' he said, tapping the hilt of his weapon; 'we can but appeal to you when all else is said and done. To come to you before, and thereby spare our adversaries so

much, is a barbarian mode of warfare, quite unworthy of any man with the remotest pretensions to delicacy of feeling, or refinement.'

He smiled so very pleasantly as he communed with himself after this manner, that a beggar was emboldened to follow for alms, and to dog his footsteps for some distance. He was gratified by the circumstance, feeling it complimentary to his power of feature, and as a reward suffered the man to follow him until he called a chair, when he graciously dismissed him with a fervent blessing.

'Which is as easy as cursing,' he wisely added, as he took his seat, 'and more becoming to the face. - To Clerkenwell, my good creatures, if you please!' The chairmen were rendered quite vivacious by having such a courteous burden, and to Clerkenwell they went at a fair round trot.

Alighting at a certain point he had indicated to them upon the road, and paying them something less than they expected from a fare of such gentle speech, he turned into the street in which the locksmith dwelt, and presently stood beneath the shadow of the Golden Key. Mr Tappertit, who was hard at work by lamplight, in a corner of the workshop, remained unconscious of his presence until a hand upon his shoulder made him start and turn his head.

'Industry,' said Mr Chester, 'is the soul of business, and the keystone of prosperity. Mr Tappertit, I shall expect you to invite me to dinner when you are Lord Mayor of London.'

'Sir,' returned the 'prentice, laying down his hammer, and rubbing his nose on the back of a very sooty hand, 'I scorn the Lord Mayor and everything that belongs to him. We must have another state of society, sir, before you catch me being Lord Mayor. How de do, sir?'

'The better, Mr Tappertit, for looking into your ingenuous face once more. I hope you are well.'

'I am as well, sir,' said Sim, standing up to get nearer to his ear, and whispering hoarsely, 'as any man can be under the aggrawations to which I am exposed. My life's a burden to me. If it wasn't for vengeance, I'd play at pitch and toss with it on the losing hazard.'

'Is Mrs Varden at home?' said Mr Chester.

'Sir,' returned Sim, eyeing him over with a look of concentrated expression, - 'she is. Did you wish to see her?'

Mr Chester nodded.

'Then come this way, sir,' said Sim, wiping his face upon his apron. 'Follow me, sir. - Would you permit me to whisper in your ear, one half a second?'

'By all means.'

Mr Tappertit raised himself on tiptoe, applied his lips to Mr Chester's ear, drew back his head without saying anything, looked hard at him, applied them to his ear again, again drew back, and finally whispered - 'The name is Joseph Willet. Hush! I say no more.'

Having said that much, he beckoned the visitor with a mysterious aspect to follow him to the parlour-door, where he announced him in the voice of a gentleman-usher. 'Mr Chester.'

'And not Mr Ed'dard, mind,' said Sim, looking into the door again, and adding this by way of postscript in his own person; 'it's his father.'

'But do not let his father,' said Mr Chester, advancing hat in hand, as he observed the effect of this last explanatory announcement, 'do not let his father be any check or restraint on your domestic occupations, Miss Varden.'

'Oh! Now! There! An't I always a-saying it!' exclaimed Miggs, clapping her hands. 'If he an't been and took Missis for her own daughter. Well, she DO look like it, that she do. Only think of that, mim!'

'Is it possible,' said Mr Chester in his softest tones, 'that this is Mrs Varden! I am amazed. That is not your daughter, Mrs Varden? No, no. Your sister.'

'My daughter, indeed, sir,' returned Mrs V., blushing with great juvenility.

'Ah, Mrs Varden!' cried the visitor. 'Ah, ma'am - humanity is indeed a happy lot, when we can repeat ourselves in others, and still be young as they. You must allow me to salute you - the custom of the country, my dear madam - your daughter too.'

Dolly showed some reluctance to perform this ceremony, but was sharply reprov'd by Mrs Varden, who insisted on her undergoing it that minute. For pride, she said with great severity, was one of the seven deadly sins, and humility and lowliness of heart were virtues. Wherefore she desired that Dolly would be kissed immediately, on pain of her just displeasure; at the same time giving her to understand that whatever she saw her mother do, she might safely do herself, without being at the trouble of any reasoning or reflection on

the subject - which, indeed, was offensive and undutiful, and in direct contravention of the church catechism.

Thus admonished, Dolly complied, though by no means willingly; for there was a broad, bold look of admiration in Mr Chester's face, refined and polished though it sought to be, which distressed her very much. As she stood with downcast eyes, not liking to look up and meet his, he gazed upon her with an approving air, and then turned to her mother.

'My friend Gabriel (whose acquaintance I only made this very evening) should be a happy man, Mrs Varden.'

'Ah!' sighed Mrs V., shaking her head.

'Ah!' echoed Miggs.

'Is that the case?' said Mr Chester, compassionately. 'Dear me!'

'Master has no intentions, sir,' murmured Miggs as she sidled up to him, 'but to be as grateful as his nature will let him, for everything he owns which it is in his power to appreciate. But we never, sir' - said Miggs, looking sideways at Mrs Varden, and interlarding her discourse with a sigh - 'we never know the full value of SOME wines and fig-trees till we lose 'em. So much the worse, sir, for them as has the slighting of 'em on their consciences when they're gone to be in full blow elsewhere.' And Miss Miggs cast up her eyes to signify where that might be.

As Mrs Varden distinctly heard, and was intended to hear, all that Miggs said, and as these words appeared to convey in metaphorical terms a presage or foreboding that she would at some early period droop beneath her trials and take an easy flight towards the stars, she immediately began to languish, and taking a volume of the Manual from a neighbouring table, leant her arm upon it as though she were Hope and that her Anchor. Mr Chester perceiving this, and seeing how the volume was lettered on the back, took it gently from her hand, and turned the fluttering leaves.

'My favourite book, dear madam. How often, how very often in his early life - before he can remember' - (this clause was strictly true) 'have I deduced little easy moral lessons from its pages, for my dear son Ned! You know Ned?'

Mrs Varden had that honour, and a fine affable young gentleman he was.

'You're a mother, Mrs Varden,' said Mr Chester, taking a pinch of snuff, 'and you know what I, as a father, feel, when he is praised. He gives me some uneasiness - much uneasiness - he's of a roving nature, ma'am - from flower to flower - from sweet to sweet - but his is the butterfly time of life, and we must not be hard upon such trifling.'

He glanced at Dolly. She was attending evidently to what he said. Just what he desired!

'The only thing I object to in this little trait of Ned's, is,' said Mr Chester, ' - and the mention of his name reminds me, by the way, that I am about to beg the favour of a minute's talk with you alone - the only thing I object to in it, is, that it DOES partake of insincerity. Now, however I may attempt to disguise the fact from myself in my affection for Ned, still I always revert to this - that if we are not sincere, we are nothing. Nothing upon earth. Let us be sincere, my dear madam - '

' - and Protestant,' murmured Mrs Varden.

' - and Protestant above all things. Let us be sincere and Protestant, strictly moral, strictly just (though always with a leaning towards mercy), strictly honest, and strictly true, and we gain - it is a slight point, certainly, but still it is something tangible; we throw up a groundwork and foundation, so to speak, of goodness, on which we may afterwards erect some worthy superstructure.'

Now, to be sure, Mrs Varden thought, here is a perfect character. Here is a meek, righteous, thoroughgoing Christian, who, having mastered all these qualities, so difficult of attainment; who, having dropped a pinch of salt on the tails of all the cardinal virtues, and caught them every one; makes light of their possession, and pants for more morality. For the good woman never doubted (as many good men and women never do), that this slighting kind of profession, this setting so little store by great matters, this seeming to say, 'I am not proud, I am what you hear, but I consider myself no better than other people; let us change the subject, pray' - was perfectly genuine and true. He so contrived it, and said it in that way that it appeared to have been forced from him, and its effect was marvellous.

Aware of the impression he had made - few men were quicker than he at such discoveries - Mr Chester followed up the blow by propounding certain virtuous maxims, somewhat vague and general in their nature, doubtless, and occasionally partaking of the character of truisms, worn a little out at elbow, but delivered in so charming a voice and with such uncommon serenity and peace of mind, that they answered as well as the best. Nor is this to be wondered at; for as hollow vessels produce a far more musical sound in falling than those which are substantial, so it will oftentimes be found that sentiments which have

nothing in them make the loudest ringing in the world, and are the most relished.

Mr Chester, with the volume gently extended in one hand, and with the other planted lightly on his breast, talked to them in the most delicious manner possible; and quite enchanted all his hearers, notwithstanding their conflicting interests and thoughts. Even Dolly, who, between his keen regards and her eyeing over by Mr Tappertit, was put quite out of countenance, could not help owning within herself that he was the sweetest-spoken gentleman she had ever seen. Even Miss Miggs, who was divided between admiration of Mr Chester and a mortal jealousy of her young mistress, had sufficient leisure to be propitiated. Even Mr Tappertit, though occupied as we have seen in gazing at his heart's delight, could not wholly divert his thoughts from the voice of the other charmer. Mrs Varden, to her own private thinking, had never been so improved in all her life; and when Mr Chester, rising and craving permission to speak with her apart, took her by the hand and led her at arm's length upstairs to the best sitting-room, she almost deemed him something more than human.

'Dear madam,' he said, pressing her hand delicately to his lips; 'be seated.'

Mrs Varden called up quite a courtly air, and became seated.

'You guess my object?' said Mr Chester, drawing a chair towards her. 'You divine my purpose? I am an affectionate parent, my dear Mrs Varden.'

'That I am sure you are, sir,' said Mrs V.

'Thank you,' returned Mr Chester, tapping his snuff-box lid. 'Heavy moral responsibilities rest with parents, Mrs Varden.'

Mrs Varden slightly raised her hands, shook her head, and looked at the ground as though she saw straight through the globe, out at the other end, and into the immensity of space beyond.

'I may confide in you,' said Mr Chester, 'without reserve. I love my son, ma'am, dearly; and loving him as I do, I would save him from working certain misery. You know of his attachment to Miss Haredale. You have abetted him in it, and very kind of you it was to do so. I am deeply obliged to you - most deeply obliged to you - for your interest in his behalf; but my dear ma'am, it is a mistaken one, I do assure you.'

Mrs Varden stammered that she was sorry - '

'Sorry, my dear ma'am,' he interposed. 'Never be sorry for what is so very amiable, so very good in intention, so perfectly like yourself. But there are grave and weighty reasons, pressing family considerations, and apart even from these, points of religious difference, which interpose themselves, and render their union impossible; utterly impossible. I should have mentioned these circumstances to your husband; but he has - you will excuse my saying this so freely - he has NOT your quickness of apprehension or depth of moral sense. What an extremely airy house this is, and how beautifully kept! For one like myself - a widower so long - these tokens of female care and superintendence have inexpressible charms.'

Mrs Varden began to think (she scarcely knew why) that the young Mr Chester must be in the wrong and the old Mr Chester must be in the right.

'My son Ned,' resumed her tempter with his most winning air, 'has had, I am told, your lovely daughter's aid, and your open-hearted husband's.'

' - Much more than mine, sir,' said Mrs Varden; 'a great deal more. I have often had my doubts. It's a - '

'A bad example,' suggested Mr Chester. 'It is. No doubt it is. Your daughter is at that age when to set before her an encouragement for young persons to rebel against their parents on this most important point, is particularly injudicious. You are quite right. I ought to have thought of that myself, but it escaped me, I confess - so far superior are your sex to ours, dear madam, in point of penetration and sagacity.'

Mrs Varden looked as wise as if she had really said something to deserve this compliment - firmly believed she had, in short - and her faith in her own shrewdness increased considerably.

'My dear ma'am,' said Mr Chester, 'you embolden me to be plain with you. My son and I are at variance on this point. The young lady and her natural guardian differ upon it, also. And the closing point is, that my son is bound by his duty to me, by his honour, by every solemn tie and obligation, to marry some one else.'

'Engaged to marry another lady!' quoth Mrs Varden, holding up her hands.

'My dear madam, brought up, educated, and trained, expressly for that purpose. Expressly for that purpose. - Miss Haredale, I am told, is a very charming creature.'

'I am her foster-mother, and should know - the best young lady in the world,' said Mrs Varden.

'I have not the smallest doubt of it. I am sure she is. And you, who have stood in that tender relation towards her, are bound to consult her happiness. Now, can I - as I have said to Haredale, who quite agrees - can I possibly stand by, and suffer her to throw herself away (although she IS of a Catholic family), upon a young fellow who, as yet, has no heart at all? It is no imputation upon him to say he has not, because young men who have plunged deeply into the frivolities and conventionalities of society, very seldom have. Their hearts never grow, my dear ma'am, till after thirty. I don't believe, no, I do NOT believe, that I had any heart myself when I was Ned's age.'

'Oh sir,' said Mrs Varden, 'I think you must have had. It's impossible that you, who have so much now, can ever have been without any.'

'I hope,' he answered, shrugging his shoulders meekly, 'I have a little; I hope, a very little - Heaven knows! But to return to Ned; I have no doubt you thought, and therefore interfered benevolently in his behalf, that I objected to Miss Haredale. How very natural! My dear madam, I object to him - to him - emphatically to Ned himself.'

Mrs Varden was perfectly aghast at the disclosure.

'He has, if he honourably fulfils this solemn obligation of which I have told you - and he must be honourable, dear Mrs Varden, or he is no son of mine - a fortune within his reach. He is of most expensive, ruinously expensive habits; and if, in a moment of caprice and wilfulness, he were to marry this young lady, and so deprive himself of the means of gratifying the tastes to which he has been so long accustomed, he would - my dear madam, he would break the gentle creature's heart. Mrs Varden, my good lady, my dear soul, I put it to you - is such a sacrifice to be endured? Is the female heart a thing to be trifled with in this way? Ask your own, my dear madam. Ask your own, I beseech you.'

'Truly,' thought Mrs Varden, 'this gentleman is a saint. But,' she added aloud, and not unnaturally, 'if you take Miss Emma's lover away, sir, what becomes of the poor thing's heart then?'

'The very point,' said Mr Chester, not at all abashed, 'to which I wished to lead you. A marriage with my son, whom I should be compelled to disown, would be followed by years of misery; they would be separated, my dear madam, in a twelvemonth. To break off this attachment, which is more fancied than real, as you and I know very well, will cost the dear girl but a few tears, and she is happy again. Take the case of your own daughter, the young lady downstairs, who



is your breathing image' - Mrs Varden coughed and simpered - 'there is a young man (I am sorry to say, a dissolute fellow, of very indifferent character) of whom I have heard Ned speak - Bullet was it - Pullet - Mullet - '

'There is a young man of the name of Joseph Willet, sir,' said Mrs Varden, folding her hands loftily.

'That's he,' cried Mr Chester. 'Suppose this Joseph Willet now, were to aspire to the affections of your charming daughter, and were to engage them.'

'It would be like his impudence,' interposed Mrs Varden, bridling, 'to dare to think of such a thing!'

'My dear madam, that's the whole case. I know it would be like his impudence. It is like Ned's impudence to do as he has done; but you would not on that account, or because of a few tears from your beautiful daughter, refrain from checking their inclinations in their birth. I meant to have reasoned thus with your husband when I saw him at Mrs Rudge's this evening - '

'My husband,' said Mrs Varden, interposing with emotion, 'would be a great deal better at home than going to Mrs Rudge's so often. I don't know what he does there. I don't see what occasion he has to busy himself in her affairs at all, sir.'

'If I don't appear to express my concurrence in those last sentiments of yours,' returned Mr Chester, 'quite so strongly as you might desire, it is because his being there, my dear madam, and not proving conversational, led me hither, and procured me the happiness of this interview with one, in whom the whole management, conduct, and prosperity of her family are centred, I perceive.'

With that he took Mrs Varden's hand again, and having pressed it to his lips with the highflown gallantry of the day - a little burlesqued to render it the more striking in the good lady's unaccustomed eyes - proceeded in the same strain of mingled sophistry, cajolery, and flattery, to entreat that her utmost influence might be exerted to restrain her husband and daughter from any further promotion of Edward's suit to Miss Haredale, and from aiding or abetting either party in any way. Mrs Varden was but a woman, and had her share of vanity, obstinacy, and love of power. She entered into a secret treaty of alliance, offensive and defensive, with her insinuating visitor; and really did believe, as many others would have done who saw and heard him, that in so doing she furthered the ends of truth, justice, and morality, in a very uncommon degree.

Overjoyed by the success of his negotiation, and mightily amused within himself, Mr Chester conducted her downstairs in the same state as before; and having repeated the previous ceremony of salutation, which also as before comprehended Dolly, took his leave; first completing the conquest of Miss Miggs's heart, by inquiring if 'this young lady' would light him to the door.

'Oh, mim,' said Miggs, returning with the candle. 'Oh gracious me, mim, there's a gentleman! Was there ever such an angel to talk as he is - and such a sweet-looking man! So upright and noble, that he seems to despise the very ground he walks on; and yet so mild and condescending, that he seems to say 'but I will take notice on it too.' And to think of his taking you for Miss Dolly, and Miss Dolly for your sister - Oh, my goodness me, if I was master wouldn't I be jealous of him!'

Mrs Varden reprov'd her handmaid for this vain-speaking; but very gently and mildly - quite smilingly indeed - remarking that she was a foolish, giddy, light-headed girl, whose spirits carried her beyond all bounds, and who didn't mean half she said, or she would be quite angry with her.

'For my part,' said Dolly, in a thoughtful manner, 'I half believe Mr Chester is something like Miggs in that respect. For all his politeness and pleasant speaking, I am pretty sure he was making game of us, more than once.'

'If you venture to say such a thing again, and to speak ill of people behind their backs in my presence, miss,' said Mrs Varden, 'I shall insist upon your taking a candle and going to bed directly. How dare you, Dolly? I'm astonished at you. The rudeness of your whole behaviour this evening has been disgraceful. Did anybody ever hear,' cried the enraged matron, bursting into tears, 'of a daughter telling her own mother she has been made game of!'

What a very uncertain temper Mrs Varden's was!