

## Chapter XXVIII

Repairing to a noted coffee-house in Covent Garden when he left the locksmith's, Mr Chester sat long over a late dinner, entertaining himself exceedingly with the whimsical recollection of his recent proceedings, and congratulating himself very much on his great cleverness. Influenced by these thoughts, his face wore an expression so benign and tranquil, that the waiter in immediate attendance upon him felt he could almost have died in his defence, and settled in his own mind (until the receipt of the bill, and a very small fee for very great trouble disabused it of the idea) that such an apostolic customer was worth half-a-dozen of the ordinary run of visitors, at least.

A visit to the gaming-table - not as a heated, anxious venturer, but one whom it was quite a treat to see staking his two or three pieces in deference to the follies of society, and smiling with equal benevolence on winners and losers - made it late before he reached home. It was his custom to bid his servant go to bed at his own time unless he had orders to the contrary, and to leave a candle on the common stair. There was a lamp on the landing by which he could always light it when he came home late, and having a key of the door about him he could enter and go to bed at his pleasure.

He opened the glass of the dull lamp, whose wick, burnt up and swollen like a drunkard's nose, came flying off in little carbuncles at the candle's touch, and scattering hot sparks about, rendered it matter of some difficulty to kindle the lazy taper; when a noise, as of a man snoring deeply some steps higher up, caused him to pause and listen. It was the heavy breathing of a sleeper, close at hand. Some fellow had lain down on the open staircase, and was slumbering soundly. Having lighted the candle at length and opened his own door, he softly ascended, holding the taper high above his head, and peering cautiously about; curious to see what kind of man had chosen so comfortless a shelter for his lodging.

With his head upon the landing and his great limbs flung over half-a-dozen stairs, as carelessly as though he were a dead man whom drunken bearers had thrown down by chance, there lay Hugh, face uppermost, his long hair drooping like some wild weed upon his wooden pillow, and his huge chest heaving with the sounds which so unwontedly disturbed the place and hour.

He who came upon him so unexpectedly was about to break his rest by thrusting him with his foot, when, glancing at his upturned face, he arrested himself in the very action, and stooping down and shading the candle with his hand, examined his features closely. Close as his first inspection was, it did not suffice, for he passed the light, still

carefully shaded as before, across and across his face, and yet observed him with a searching eye.

While he was thus engaged, the sleeper, without any starting or turning round, awoke. There was a kind of fascination in meeting his steady gaze so suddenly, which took from the other the presence of mind to withdraw his eyes, and forced him, as it were, to meet his look. So they remained staring at each other, until Mr Chester at last broke silence, and asked him in a low voice, why he lay sleeping there.

'I thought,' said Hugh, struggling into a sitting posture and gazing at him intently, still, 'that you were a part of my dream. It was a curious one. I hope it may never come true, master.'

'What makes you shiver?'

'The - the cold, I suppose,' he growled, as he shook himself and rose. 'I hardly know where I am yet.'

'Do you know me?' said Mr Chester.

'Ay, I know you,' he answered. 'I was dreaming of you - we're not where I thought we were. That's a comfort.'

He looked round him as he spoke, and in particular looked above his head, as though he half expected to be standing under some object which had had existence in his dream. Then he rubbed his eyes and shook himself again, and followed his conductor into his own rooms.

Mr Chester lighted the candles which stood upon his dressing-table, and wheeling an easy-chair towards the fire, which was yet burning, stirred up a cheerful blaze, sat down before it, and bade his uncouth visitor 'Come here,' and draw his boots off.

'You have been drinking again, my fine fellow,' he said, as Hugh went down on one knee, and did as he was told.

'As I'm alive, master, I've walked the twelve long miles, and waited here I don't know how long, and had no drink between my lips since dinner-time at noon.'

'And can you do nothing better, my pleasant friend, than fall asleep, and shake the very building with your snores?' said Mr Chester. 'Can't you dream in your straw at home, dull dog as you are, that you need come here to do it? - Reach me those slippers, and tread softly.'

Hugh obeyed in silence.

'And harkee, my dear young gentleman,' said Mr Chester, as he put them on, 'the next time you dream, don't let it be of me, but of some dog or horse with whom you are better acquainted. Fill the glass once - you'll find it and the bottle in the same place - and empty it to keep yourself awake.'

Hugh obeyed again even more zealously - and having done so, presented himself before his patron.

'Now,' said Mr Chester, 'what do you want with me?'

'There was news to-day,' returned Hugh. 'Your son was at our house - came down on horseback. He tried to see the young woman, but couldn't get sight of her. He left some letter or some message which our Joe had charge of, but he and the old one quarrelled about it when your son had gone, and the old one wouldn't let it be delivered. He says (that's the old one does) that none of his people shall interfere and get him into trouble. He's a landlord, he says, and lives on everybody's custom.'

'He's a jewel,' smiled Mr Chester, 'and the better for being a dull one. - Well?'

'Varden's daughter - that's the girl I kissed - '

' - and stole the bracelet from upon the king's highway,' said Mr Chester, composedly. 'Yes; what of her?'

'She wrote a note at our house to the young woman, saying she lost the letter I brought to you, and you burnt. Our Joe was to carry it, but the old one kept him at home all next day, on purpose that he shouldn't. Next morning he gave it to me to take; and here it is.'

'You didn't deliver it then, my good friend?' said Mr Chester, twirling Dolly's note between his finger and thumb, and feigning to be surprised.

'I supposed you'd want to have it,' retorted Hugh. 'Burn one, burn all, I thought.'

'My devil-may-care acquaintance,' said Mr Chester - 'really if you do not draw some nicer distinctions, your career will be cut short with most surprising suddenness. Don't you know that the letter you brought to me, was directed to my son who resides in this very place? And can you descry no difference between his letters and those addressed to other people?'

'If you don't want it,' said Hugh, disconcerted by this reproof, for he had expected high praise, 'give it me back, and I'll deliver it. I don't know how to please you, master.'

'I shall deliver it,' returned his patron, putting it away after a moment's consideration, 'myself. Does the young lady walk out, on fine mornings?'

'Mostly - about noon is her usual time.'

'Alone?'

'Yes, alone.'

'Where?'

'In the grounds before the house. - Them that the footpath crosses.'

'If the weather should be fine, I may throw myself in her way to-morrow, perhaps,' said Mr Chester, as coolly as if she were one of his ordinary acquaintance. 'Mr Hugh, if I should ride up to the Maypole door, you will do me the favour only to have seen me once. You must suppress your gratitude, and endeavour to forget my forbearance in the matter of the bracelet. It is natural it should break out, and it does you honour; but when other folks are by, you must, for your own sake and safety, be as like your usual self as though you owed me no obligation whatever, and had never stood within these walls. You comprehend me?'

Hugh understood him perfectly. After a pause he muttered that he hoped his patron would involve him in no trouble about this last letter; for he had kept it back solely with the view of pleasing him. He was continuing in this strain, when Mr Chester with a most beneficent and patronising air cut him short by saying:

'My good fellow, you have my promise, my word, my sealed bond (for a verbal pledge with me is quite as good), that I will always protect you so long as you deserve it. Now, do set your mind at rest. Keep it at ease, I beg of you. When a man puts himself in my power so thoroughly as you have done, I really feel as though he had a kind of claim upon me. I am more disposed to mercy and forbearance under such circumstances than I can tell you, Hugh. Do look upon me as your protector, and rest assured, I entreat you, that on the subject of that indiscretion, you may preserve, as long as you and I are friends, the lightest heart that ever beat within a human breast. Fill that glass once more to cheer you on your road homewards - I am really quite ashamed to think how far you have to go - and then God bless you for the night.'

'They think,' said Hugh, when he had tossed the liquor down, 'that I am sleeping soundly in the stable. Ha ha ha! The stable door is shut, but the steed's gone, master.'

'You are a most convivial fellow,' returned his friend, 'and I love your humour of all things. Good night! Take the greatest possible care of yourself, for my sake!'

It was remarkable that during the whole interview, each had endeavoured to catch stolen glances of the other's face, and had never looked full at it. They interchanged one brief and hasty glance as Hugh went out, averted their eyes directly, and so separated. Hugh closed the double doors behind him, carefully and without noise; and Mr Chester remained in his easy-chair, with his gaze intently fixed upon the fire.

'Well!' he said, after meditating for a long time - and said with a deep sigh and an uneasy shifting of his attitude, as though he dismissed some other subject from his thoughts, and returned to that which had held possession of them all the day - the plot thickens; I have thrown the shell; it will explode, I think, in eight-and-forty hours, and should scatter these good folks amazingly. We shall see!'

He went to bed and fell asleep, but had not slept long when he started up and thought that Hugh was at the outer door, calling in a strange voice, very different from his own, to be admitted. The delusion was so strong upon him, and was so full of that vague terror of the night in which such visions have their being, that he rose, and taking his sheathed sword in his hand, opened the door, and looked out upon the staircase, and towards the spot where Hugh had lain asleep; and even spoke to him by name. But all was dark and quiet, and creeping back to bed again, he fell, after an hour's uneasy watching, into a second sleep, and woke no more till morning.