

Chapter XXIX

The thoughts of worldly men are for ever regulated by a moral law of gravitation, which, like the physical one, holds them down to earth. The bright glory of day, and the silent wonders of a starlit night, appeal to their minds in vain. There are no signs in the sun, or in the moon, or in the stars, for their reading. They are like some wise men, who, learning to know each planet by its Latin name, have quite forgotten such small heavenly constellations as Charity, Forbearance, Universal Love, and Mercy, although they shine by night and day so brightly that the blind may see them; and who, looking upward at the spangled sky, see nothing there but the reflection of their own great wisdom and book-learning.

It is curious to imagine these people of the world, busy in thought, turning their eyes towards the countless spheres that shine above us, and making them reflect the only images their minds contain. The man who lives but in the breath of princes, has nothing his sight but stars for courtiers' breasts. The envious man beholds his neighbours' honours even in the sky; to the money-hoarder, and the mass of worldly folk, the whole great universe above glitters with sterling coin - fresh from the mint - stamped with the sovereign's head - coming always between them and heaven, turn where they may. So do the shadows of our own desires stand between us and our better angels, and thus their brightness is eclipsed.

Everything was fresh and gay, as though the world were but that morning made, when Mr Chester rode at a tranquil pace along the Forest road. Though early in the season, it was warm and genial weather; the trees were budding into leaf, the hedges and the grass were green, the air was musical with songs of birds, and high above them all the lark poured out her richest melody. In shady spots, the morning dew sparkled on each young leaf and blade of grass; and where the sun was shining, some diamond drops yet glistened brightly, as in unwillingness to leave so fair a world, and have such brief existence. Even the light wind, whose rustling was as gentle to the ear as softly-falling water, had its hope and promise; and, leaving a pleasant fragrance in its track as it went fluttering by, whispered of its intercourse with Summer, and of his happy coming.

The solitary rider went glancing on among the trees, from sunlight into shade and back again, at the same even pace - looking about him, certainly, from time to time, but with no greater thought of the day or the scene through which he moved, than that he was fortunate (being choicely dressed) to have such favourable weather. He smiled very complacently at such times, but rather as if he were satisfied with himself than with anything else: and so went riding on, upon his chestnut cob, as pleasant to look upon as his own horse, and

probably far less sensitive to the many cheerful influences by which he was surrounded.

In the course of time, the Maypole's massive chimneys rose upon his view: but he quickened not his pace one jot, and with the same cool gravity rode up to the tavern porch. John Willet, who was toasting his red face before a great fire in the bar, and who, with surpassing foresight and quickness of apprehension, had been thinking, as he looked at the blue sky, that if that state of things lasted much longer, it might ultimately become necessary to leave off fires and throw the windows open, issued forth to hold his stirrup; calling lustily for Hugh.

'Oh, you're here, are you, sir?' said John, rather surprised by the quickness with which he appeared. 'Take this here valuable animal into the stable, and have more than particular care of him if you want to keep your place. A mortal lazy fellow, sir; he needs a deal of looking after.'

'But you have a son,' returned Mr Chester, giving his bridle to Hugh as he dismounted, and acknowledging his salute by a careless motion of his hand towards his hat. 'Why don't you make HIM useful?'

'Why, the truth is, sir,' replied John with great importance, 'that my son - what, you're a-listening are you, villain?'

'Who's listening?' returned Hugh angrily. 'A treat, indeed, to hear YOU speak! Would you have me take him in till he's cool?'

'Walk him up and down further off then, sir,' cried old John, 'and when you see me and a noble gentleman entertaining ourselves with talk, keep your distance. If you don't know your distance, sir,' added Mr Willet, after an enormously long pause, during which he fixed his great dull eyes on Hugh, and waited with exemplary patience for any little property in the way of ideas that might come to him, 'we'll find a way to teach you, pretty soon.'

Hugh shrugged his shoulders scornfully, and in his reckless swaggering way, crossed to the other side of the little green, and there, with the bridle slung loosely over his shoulder, led the horse to and fro, glancing at his master every now and then from under his bushy eyebrows, with as sinister an aspect as one would desire to see.

Mr Chester, who, without appearing to do so, had eyed him attentively during this brief dispute, stepped into the porch, and turning abruptly to Mr Willet, said,

'You keep strange servants, John.'

'Strange enough to look at, sir, certainly,' answered the host; 'but out of doors; for horses, dogs, and the likes of that; there an't a better man in England than is that Maypole Hugh yonder. He an't fit for indoors,' added Mr Willet, with the confidential air of a man who felt his own superior nature. 'I do that; but if that chap had only a little imagination, sir - '

'He's an active fellow now, I dare swear,' said Mr Chester, in a musing tone, which seemed to suggest that he would have said the same had there been nobody to hear him.

'Active, sir!' retorted John, with quite an expression in his face; 'that chap! Hallo there! You, sir! Bring that horse here, and go and hang my wig on the weathercock, to show this gentleman whether you're one of the lively sort or not.'

Hugh made no answer, but throwing the bridle to his master, and snatching his wig from his head, in a manner so unceremonious and hasty that the action discomposed Mr Willet not a little, though performed at his own special desire, climbed nimbly to the very summit of the maypole before the house, and hanging the wig upon the weathercock, sent it twirling round like a roasting jack. Having achieved this performance, he cast it on the ground, and sliding down the pole with inconceivable rapidity, alighted on his feet almost as soon as it had touched the earth.

'There, sir,' said John, relapsing into his usual stolid state, 'you won't see that at many houses, besides the Maypole, where there's good accommodation for man and beast - nor that neither, though that with him is nothing.'

This last remark bore reference to his vaulting on horseback, as upon Mr Chester's first visit, and quickly disappearing by the stable gate.

'That with him is nothing,' repeated Mr Willet, brushing his wig with his wrist, and inwardly resolving to distribute a small charge for dust and damage to that article of dress, through the various items of his guest's bill; 'he'll get out of a'most any winder in the house. There never was such a chap for flinging himself about and never hurting his bones. It's my opinion, sir, that it's pretty nearly allowing to his not having any imagination; and that if imagination could be (which it can't) knocked into him, he'd never be able to do it any more. But we was a-talking, sir, about my son.'

'True, Willet, true,' said his visitor, turning again towards the landlord with his accustomed serenity of face. 'My good friend, what about him?'

It has been reported that Mr Willet, previously to making answer, winked. But as he was never known to be guilty of such lightness of conduct either before or afterwards, this may be looked upon as a malicious invention of his enemies - founded, perhaps, upon the undisputed circumstance of his taking his guest by the third breast button of his coat, counting downwards from the chin, and pouring his reply into his ear:

'Sir,' whispered John, with dignity, 'I know my duty. We want no love-making here, sir, unbeknown to parents. I respect a certain young gentleman, taking him in the light of a young gentleman; I respect a certain young lady, taking her in the light of a young lady; but of the two as a couple, I have no knowledge, sir, none whatever. My son, sir, is upon his parole.'

'I thought I saw him looking through the corner window but this moment,' said Mr Chester, who naturally thought that being on parole, implied walking about somewhere.

'No doubt you did, sir,' returned John. 'He is upon his parole of honour, sir, not to leave the premises. Me and some friends of mine that use the Maypole of an evening, sir, considered what was best to be done with him, to prevent his doing anything unpleasant in opposing your desires; and we've put him on his parole. And what's more, sir, he won't be off his parole for a pretty long time to come, I can tell you that.' When he had communicated this bright idea, which had its origin in the perusal by the village cronies of a newspaper, containing, among other matters, an account of how some officer pending the sentence of some court-martial had been enlarged on parole, Mr Willet drew back from his guest's ear, and without any visible alteration of feature, chuckled thrice audibly. This nearest approach to a laugh in which he ever indulged (and that but seldom and only on extreme occasions), never even curled his lip or effected the smallest change in - no, not so much as a slight wagging of - his great, fat, double chin, which at these times, as at all others, remained a perfect desert in the broad map of his face; one changeless, dull, tremendous blank.

Lest it should be matter of surprise to any, that Mr Willet adopted this bold course in opposition to one whom he had often entertained, and who had always paid his way at the Maypole gallantly, it may be remarked that it was his very penetration and sagacity in this respect, which occasioned him to indulge in those unusual demonstrations of jocularly, just now recorded. For Mr Willet, after carefully balancing father and son in his mental scales, had arrived at the distinct conclusion that the old gentleman was a better sort of a customer than the young one. Throwing his landlord into the same scale, which was already turned by this consideration, and heaping upon him,

again, his strong desires to run counter to the unfortunate Joe, and his opposition as a general principle to all matters of love and matrimony, it went down to the very ground straightway, and sent the light cause of the younger gentleman flying upwards to the ceiling. Mr Chester was not the kind of man to be by any means dim-sighted to Mr Willet's motives, but he thanked him as graciously as if he had been one of the most disinterested martyrs that ever shone on earth; and leaving him, with many complimentary reliances on his great taste and judgment, to prepare whatever dinner he might deem most fitting the occasion, bent his steps towards the Warren.

Dressed with more than his usual elegance; assuming a gracefulness of manner, which, though it was the result of long study, sat easily upon him and became him well; composing his features into their most serene and prepossessing expression; and setting in short that guard upon himself, at every point, which denoted that he attached no slight importance to the impression he was about to make; he entered the bounds of Miss Haredale's usual walk. He had not gone far, or looked about him long, when he descried coming towards him, a female figure. A glimpse of the form and dress as she crossed a little wooden bridge which lay between them, satisfied him that he had found her whom he desired to see. He threw himself in her way, and a very few paces brought them close together.

He raised his hat from his head, and yielding the path, suffered her to pass him. Then, as if the idea had but that moment occurred to him, he turned hastily back and said in an agitated voice:

'I beg pardon - do I address Miss Haredale?'

She stopped in some confusion at being so unexpectedly accosted by a stranger; and answered 'Yes.'

'Something told me,' he said, LOOKING a compliment to her beauty, 'that it could be no other. Miss Haredale, I bear a name which is not unknown to you - which it is a pride, and yet a pain to me to know, sounds pleasantly in your ears. I am a man advanced in life, as you see. I am the father of him whom you honour and distinguish above all other men. May I for weighty reasons which fill me with distress, beg but a minute's conversation with you here?'

Who that was inexperienced in deceit, and had a frank and youthful heart, could doubt the speaker's truth - could doubt it too, when the voice that spoke, was like the faint echo of one she knew so well, and so much loved to hear? She inclined her head, and stopping, cast her eyes upon the ground.

'A little more apart - among these trees. It is an old man's hand, Miss Haredale; an honest one, believe me.'

She put hers in it as he said these words, and suffered him to lead her to a neighbouring seat.

'You alarm me, sir,' she said in a low voice. 'You are not the bearer of any ill news, I hope?' 'Of none that you anticipate,' he answered, sitting down beside her. 'Edward is well - quite well. It is of him I wish to speak, certainly; but I have no misfortune to communicate.'

She bowed her head again, and made as though she would have begged him to proceed; but said nothing.

'I am sensible that I speak to you at a disadvantage, dear Miss Haredale. Believe me that I am not so forgetful of the feelings of my younger days as not to know that you are little disposed to view me with favour. You have heard me described as cold-hearted, calculating, selfish - '

'I have never, sir,' - she interposed with an altered manner and a firmer voice; 'I have never heard you spoken of in harsh or disrespectful terms. You do a great wrong to Edward's nature if you believe him capable of any mean or base proceeding.'

'Pardon me, my sweet young lady, but your uncle - '

'Nor is it my uncle's nature either,' she replied, with a heightened colour in her cheek. 'It is not his nature to stab in the dark, nor is it mine to love such deeds.'

She rose as she spoke, and would have left him; but he detained her with a gentle hand, and besought her in such persuasive accents to hear him but another minute, that she was easily prevailed upon to comply, and so sat down again.

'And it is,' said Mr Chester, looking upward, and apostrophising the air; 'it is this frank, ingenuous, noble nature, Ned, that you can wound so lightly. Shame - shame upon you, boy!'

She turned towards him quickly, and with a scornful look and flashing eyes. There were tears in Mr Chester's eyes, but he dashed them hurriedly away, as though unwilling that his weakness should be known, and regarded her with mingled admiration and compassion.

'I never until now,' he said, 'believed, that the frivolous actions of a young man could move me like these of my own son. I never knew till

now, the worth of a woman's heart, which boys so lightly win, and lightly fling away. Trust me, dear young lady, that I never until now did know your worth; and though an abhorrence of deceit and falsehood has impelled me to seek you out, and would have done so had you been the poorest and least gifted of your sex, I should have lacked the fortitude to sustain this interview could I have pictured you to my imagination as you really are.'

Oh! If Mrs Varden could have seen the virtuous gentleman as he said these words, with indignation sparkling from his eyes - if she could have heard his broken, quavering voice - if she could have beheld him as he stood bareheaded in the sunlight, and with unwonted energy poured forth his eloquence!

With a haughty face, but pale and trembling too, Emma regarded him in silence. She neither spoke nor moved, but gazed upon him as though she would look into his heart.

'I throw off,' said Mr Chester, 'the restraint which natural affection would impose on some men, and reject all bonds but those of truth and duty. Miss Haredeale, you are deceived; you are deceived by your unworthy lover, and my unworthy son.'

Still she looked at him steadily, and still said not one word.

'I have ever opposed his professions of love for you; you will do me the justice, dear Miss Haredeale, to remember that. Your uncle and myself were enemies in early life, and if I had sought retaliation, I might have found it here. But as we grow older, we grow wiser - bitter, I would fain hope - and from the first, I have opposed him in this attempt. I foresaw the end, and would have spared you, if I could.'

'Speak plainly, sir,' she faltered. 'You deceive me, or are deceived yourself. I do not believe you - I cannot - I should not.'

'First,' said Mr Chester, soothingly, 'for there may be in your mind some latent angry feeling to which I would not appeal, pray take this letter. It reached my hands by chance, and by mistake, and should have accounted to you (as I am told) for my son's not answering some other note of yours. God forbid, Miss Haredeale,' said the good gentleman, with great emotion, 'that there should be in your gentle breast one causeless ground of quarrel with him. You should know, and you will see, that he was in no fault here.'

There appeared something so very candid, so scrupulously honourable, so very truthful and just in this course something which rendered the upright person who resorted to it, so worthy of belief -

that Emma's heart, for the first time, sunk within her. She turned away and burst into tears.

'I would,' said Mr Chester, leaning over her, and speaking in mild and quite venerable accents; 'I would, dear girl, it were my task to banish, not increase, those tokens of your grief. My son, my erring son, - I will not call him deliberately criminal in this, for men so young, who have been inconstant twice or thrice before, act without reflection, almost without a knowledge of the wrong they do, - will break his plighted faith to you; has broken it even now. Shall I stop here, and having given you this warning, leave it to be fulfilled; or shall I go on?'

'You will go on, sir,' she answered, 'and speak more plainly yet, in justice both to him and me.'

'My dear girl,' said Mr Chester, bending over her more affectionately still; 'whom I would call my daughter, but the Fates forbid, Edward seeks to break with you upon a false and most unwarrantable pretence. I have it on his own showing; in his own hand. Forgive me, if I have had a watch upon his conduct; I am his father; I had a regard for your peace and his honour, and no better resource was left me. There lies on his desk at this present moment, ready for transmission to you, a letter, in which he tells you that our poverty - our poverty; his and mine, Miss Haredeale - forbids him to pursue his claim upon your hand; in which he offers, voluntarily proposes, to free you from your pledge; and talks magnanimously (men do so, very commonly, in such cases) of being in time more worthy of your regard - and so forth. A letter, to be plain, in which he not only jilts you - pardon the word; I would summon to your aid your pride and dignity - not only jilts you, I fear, in favour of the object whose slighting treatment first inspired his brief passion for yourself and gave it birth in wounded vanity, but affects to make a merit and a virtue of the act.'

She glanced proudly at him once more, as by an involuntary impulse, and with a swelling breast rejoined, 'If what you say be true, he takes much needless trouble, sir, to compass his design. He's very tender of my peace of mind. I quite thank him.'

'The truth of what I tell you, dear young lady,' he replied, 'you will test by the receipt or non-receipt of the letter of which I speak. Haredeale, my dear fellow, I am delighted to see you, although we meet under singular circumstances, and upon a melancholy occasion. I hope you are very well.'

At these words the young lady raised her eyes, which were filled with tears; and seeing that her uncle indeed stood before them, and being quite unequal to the trial of hearing or of speaking one word more,

hurriedly withdrew, and left them. They stood looking at each other, and at her retreating figure, and for a long time neither of them spoke.

'What does this mean? Explain it,' said Mr Haredale at length. 'Why are you here, and why with her?'

'My dear friend,' rejoined the other, resuming his accustomed manner with infinite readiness, and throwing himself upon the bench with a weary air, 'you told me not very long ago, at that delightful old tavern of which you are the esteemed proprietor (and a most charming establishment it is for persons of rural pursuits and in robust health, who are not liable to take cold), that I had the head and heart of an evil spirit in all matters of deception. I thought at the time; I really did think; you flattered me. But now I begin to wonder at your discernment, and vanity apart, do honestly believe you spoke the truth. Did you ever counterfeit extreme ingenuousness and honest indignation? My dear fellow, you have no conception, if you never did, how faint the effort makes one.'

Mr Haredale surveyed him with a look of cold contempt. 'You may evade an explanation, I know,' he said, folding his arms. 'But I must have it. I can wait.'

'Not at all. Not at all, my good fellow. You shall not wait a moment,' returned his friend, as he lazily crossed his legs. 'The simplest thing in the world. It lies in a nutshell. Ned has written her a letter - a boyish, honest, sentimental composition, which remains as yet in his desk, because he hasn't had the heart to send it. I have taken a liberty, for which my parental affection and anxiety are a sufficient excuse, and possessed myself of the contents. I have described them to your niece (a most enchanting person, Haredale; quite an angelic creature), with a little colouring and description adapted to our purpose. It's done. You may be quite easy. It's all over. Deprived of their adherents and mediators; her pride and jealousy roused to the utmost; with nobody to undeceive her, and you to confirm me; you will find that their intercourse will close with her answer. If she receives Ned's letter by to-morrow noon, you may date their parting from to-morrow night. No thanks, I beg; you owe me none. I have acted for myself; and if I have forwarded our compact with all the ardour even you could have desired, I have done so selfishly, indeed.'

'I curse the compact, as you call it, with my whole heart and soul,' returned the other. 'It was made in an evil hour. I have bound myself to a lie; I have leagued myself with you; and though I did so with a righteous motive, and though it cost me such an effort as haply few men know, I hate and despise myself for the deed.'

'You are very warm,' said Mr Chester with a languid smile.

'I AM warm. I am maddened by your coldness. 'Death, Chester, if your blood ran warmer in your veins, and there were no restraints upon me, such as those that hold and drag me back - well; it is done; you tell me so, and on such a point I may believe you. When I am most remorseful for this treachery, I will think of you and your marriage, and try to justify myself in such remembrances, for having torn asunder Emma and your son, at any cost. Our bond is cancelled now, and we may part.'

Mr Chester kissed his hand gracefully; and with the same tranquil face he had preserved throughout - even when he had seen his companion so tortured and transported by his passion that his whole frame was shaken - lay in his lounging posture on the seat and watched him as he walked away.

'My scapegoat and my drudge at school,' he said, raising his head to look after him; 'my friend of later days, who could not keep his mistress when he had won her, and threw me in her way to carry off the prize; I triumph in the present and the past. Bark on, ill-favoured, ill-conditioned cur; fortune has ever been with me - I like to hear you.'

The spot where they had met, was in an avenue of trees. Mr Haredale not passing out on either hand, had walked straight on. He chanced to turn his head when at some considerable distance, and seeing that his late companion had by that time risen and was looking after him, stood still as though he half expected him to follow and waited for his coming up.

'It MAY come to that one day, but not yet,' said Mr Chester, waving his hand, as though they were the best of friends, and turning away. 'Not yet, Haredale. Life is pleasant enough to me; dull and full of heaviness to you. No. To cross swords with such a man - to indulge his humour unless upon extremity - would be weak indeed.'

For all that, he drew his sword as he walked along, and in an absent humour ran his eye from hilt to point full twenty times. But thoughtfulness begets wrinkles; remembering this, he soon put it up, smoothed his contracted brow, hummed a gay tune with greater gaiety of manner, and was his unruffled self again.