

Chapter XXX

A homely proverb recognises the existence of a troublesome class of persons who, having an inch conceded them, will take an ell. Not to quote the illustrious examples of those heroic scourges of mankind, whose amiable path in life has been from birth to death through blood, and fire, and ruin, and who would seem to have existed for no better purpose than to teach mankind that as the absence of pain is pleasure, so the earth, purged of their presence, may be deemed a blessed place - not to quote such mighty instances, it will be sufficient to refer to old John Willet.

Old John having long encroached a good standard inch, full measure, on the liberty of Joe, and having snipped off a Flemish ell in the matter of the parole, grew so despotic and so great, that his thirst for conquest knew no bounds. The more young Joe submitted, the more absolute old John became. The ell soon faded into nothing. Yards, furlongs, miles arose; and on went old John in the pleasantest manner possible, trimming off an exuberance in this place, shearing away some liberty of speech or action in that, and conducting himself in his small way with as much high mightiness and majesty, as the most glorious tyrant that ever had his statue reared in the public ways, of ancient or of modern times.

As great men are urged on to the abuse of power (when they need urging, which is not often), by their flatterers and dependents, so old John was impelled to these exercises of authority by the applause and admiration of his Maypole cronies, who, in the intervals of their nightly pipes and pots, would shake their heads and say that Mr Willet was a father of the good old English sort; that there were no new-fangled notions or modern ways in him; that he put them in mind of what their fathers were when they were boys; that there was no mistake about him; that it would be well for the country if there were more like him, and more was the pity that there were not; with many other original remarks of that nature. Then they would condescendingly give Joe to understand that it was all for his good, and he would be thankful for it one day; and in particular, Mr Cobb would acquaint him, that when he was his age, his father thought no more of giving him a parental kick, or a box on the ears, or a cuff on the head, or some little admonition of that sort, than he did of any other ordinary duty of life; and he would further remark, with looks of great significance, that but for this judicious bringing up, he might have never been the man he was at that present speaking; which was probable enough, as he was, beyond all question, the dullest dog of the party. In short, between old John and old John's friends, there never was an unfortunate young fellow so bullied, badgered, worried, fretted, and brow-beaten; so constantly beset, or made so tired of his life, as poor Joe Willet.

This had come to be the recognised and established state of things; but as John was very anxious to flourish his supremacy before the eyes of Mr Chester, he did that day exceed himself, and did so goad and chafe his son and heir, that but for Joe's having made a solemn vow to keep his hands in his pockets when they were not otherwise engaged, it is impossible to say what he might have done with them. But the longest day has an end, and at length Mr Chester came downstairs to mount his horse, which was ready at the door.

As old John was not in the way at the moment, Joe, who was sitting in the bar ruminating on his dismal fate and the manifold perfections of Dolly Varden, ran out to hold the guest's stirrup and assist him to mount. Mr Chester was scarcely in the saddle, and Joe was in the very act of making him a graceful bow, when old John came diving out of the porch, and collared him.

'None of that, sir,' said John, 'none of that, sir. No breaking of patroles. How dare you come out of the door, sir, without leave? You're trying to get away, sir, are you, and to make a traitor of yourself again? What do you mean, sir?'

'Let me go, father,' said Joe, imploringly, as he marked the smile upon their visitor's face, and observed the pleasure his disgrace afforded him. 'This is too bad. Who wants to get away?'

'Who wants to get away!' cried John, shaking him. 'Why you do, sir, you do. You're the boy, sir,' added John, collaring with one hand, and aiding the effect of a farewell bow to the visitor with the other, 'that wants to sneak into houses, and stir up differences between noble gentlemen and their sons, are you, eh? Hold your tongue, sir.'

Joe made no effort to reply. It was the crowning circumstance of his degradation. He extricated himself from his father's grasp, darted an angry look at the departing guest, and returned into the house.

'But for her,' thought Joe, as he threw his arms upon a table in the common room, and laid his head upon them, 'but for Dolly, who I couldn't bear should think me the rascal they would make me out to be if I ran away, this house and I should part to-night.'

It being evening by this time, Solomon Daisy, Tom Cobb, and Long Parkes, were all in the common room too, and had from the window been witnesses of what had just occurred. Mr Willet joining them soon afterwards, received the compliments of the company with great composure, and lighting his pipe, sat down among them.

'We'll see, gentlemen,' said John, after a long pause, 'who's the master of this house, and who isn't. We'll see whether boys are to govern men, or men are to govern boys.'

'And quite right too,' assented Solomon Daisy with some approving nods; 'quite right, Johnny. Very good, Johnny. Well said, Mr Willet. Brayvo, sir.'

John slowly brought his eyes to bear upon him, looked at him for a long time, and finally made answer, to the unspeakable consternation of his hearers, 'When I want encouragement from you, sir, I'll ask you for it. You let me alone, sir. I can get on without you, I hope. Don't you tackle me, sir, if you please.'

'Don't take it ill, Johnny; I didn't mean any harm,' pleaded the little man.

'Very good, sir,' said John, more than usually obstinate after his late success. 'Never mind, sir. I can stand pretty firm of myself, sir, I believe, without being shored up by you.' And having given utterance to this retort, Mr Willet fixed his eyes upon the boiler, and fell into a kind of tobacco-trance.

The spirits of the company being somewhat damped by this embarrassing line of conduct on the part of their host, nothing more was said for a long time; but at length Mr Cobb took upon himself to remark, as he rose to knock the ashes out of his pipe, that he hoped Joe would thenceforth learn to obey his father in all things; that he had found, that day, he was not one of the sort of men who were to be trifled with; and that he would recommend him, poetically speaking, to mind his eye for the future.

'I'd recommend you, in return,' said Joe, looking up with a flushed face, 'not to talk to me.'

'Hold your tongue, sir,' cried Mr Willet, suddenly rousing himself, and turning round.

'I won't, father,' cried Joe, smiting the table with his fist, so that the jugs and glasses rung again; 'these things are hard enough to bear from you; from anybody else I never will endure them any more. Therefore I say, Mr Cobb, don't talk to me.'

'Why, who are you,' said Mr Cobb, sneeringly, 'that you're not to be talked to, eh, Joe?'

To which Joe returned no answer, but with a very ominous shake of the head, resumed his old position, which he would have peacefully

preserved until the house shut up at night, but that Mr Cobb, stimulated by the wonder of the company at the young man's presumption, retorted with sundry taunts, which proved too much for flesh and blood to bear. Crowding into one moment the vexation and the wrath of years, Joe started up, overturned the table, fell upon his long enemy, pummelled him with all his might and main, and finished by driving him with surprising swiftness against a heap of spittoons in one corner; plunging into which, head foremost, with a tremendous crash, he lay at full length among the ruins, stunned and motionless. Then, without waiting to receive the compliments of the bystanders on the victory he had won, he retreated to his own bedchamber, and considering himself in a state of siege, piled all the portable furniture against the door by way of barricade.

'I have done it now,' said Joe, as he sat down upon his bedstead and wiped his heated face. 'I knew it would come at last. The Maypole and I must part company. I'm a roving vagabond - she hates me for evermore - it's all over!'