Chapter XXXI

Pondering on his unhappy lot, Joe sat and listened for a long time, expecting every moment to hear their creaking footsteps on the stairs, or to be greeted by his worthy father with a summons to capitulate unconditionally, and deliver himself up straightway. But neither voice nor footstep came; and though some distant echoes, as of closing doors and people hurrying in and out of rooms, resounding from time to time through the great passages, and penetrating to his remote seclusion, gave note of unusual commotion downstairs, no nearer sound disturbed his place of retreat, which seemed the quieter for these far-off noises, and was as dull and full of gloom as any hermit's cell.

It came on darker and darker. The old-fashioned furniture of the chamber, which was a kind of hospital for all the invalided movables in the house, grew indistinct and shadowy in its many shapes; chairs and tables, which by day were as honest cripples as need be, assumed a doubtful and mysterious character; and one old leprous screen of faded India leather and gold binding, which had kept out many a cold breath of air in days of yore and shut in many a jolly face, frowned on him with a spectral aspect, and stood at full height in its allotted corner, like some gaunt ghost who waited to be questioned. A portrait opposite the window - a queer, old grey-eyed general, in an oval frame - seemed to wink and doze as the light decayed, and at length, when the last faint glimmering speck of day went out, to shut its eyes in good earnest, and fall sound asleep. There was such a hush and mystery about everything, that Joe could not help following its example; and so went off into a slumber likewise, and dreamed of Dolly, till the clock of Chigwell church struck two.

Still nobody came. The distant noises in the house had ceased, and out of doors all was quiet; save for the occasional barking of some deep-mouthed dog, and the shaking of the branches by the night wind. He gazed mournfully out of window at each well-known object as it lay sleeping in the dim light of the moon; and creeping back to his former seat, thought about the late uproar, until, with long thinking of, it seemed to have occurred a month ago. Thus, between dozing, and thinking, and walking to the window and looking out, the night wore away; the grim old screen, and the kindred chairs and tables, began slowly to reveal themselves in their accustomed forms; the grey-eyed general seemed to wink and yawn and rouse himself; and at last he was broad awake again, and very uncomfortable and cold and haggard he looked, in the dull grey light of morning.

The sun had begun to peep above the forest trees, and already flung across the curling mist bright bars of gold, when Joe dropped from his

window on the ground below, a little bundle and his trusty stick, and prepared to descend himself.

It was not a very difficult task; for there were so many projections and gable ends in the way, that they formed a series of clumsy steps, with no greater obstacle than a jump of some few feet at last. Joe, with his stick and bundle on his shoulder, quickly stood on the firm earth, and looked up at the old Maypole, it might be for the last time.

He didn't apostrophise it, for he was no great scholar. He didn't curse it, for he had little ill-will to give to anything on earth. He felt more affectionate and kind to it than ever he had done in all his life before, so said with all his heart, 'God bless you!' as a parting wish, and turned away.

He walked along at a brisk pace, big with great thoughts of going for a soldier and dying in some foreign country where it was very hot and sandy, and leaving God knows what unheard-of wealth in prize-money to Dolly, who would be very much affected when she came to know of it; and full of such youthful visions, which were sometimes sanguine and sometimes melancholy, but always had her for their main point and centre, pushed on vigorously until the noise of London sounded in his ears, and the Black Lion hove in sight.

It was only eight o'clock then, and very much astonished the Black Lion was, to see him come walking in with dust upon his feet at that early hour, with no grey mare to bear him company. But as he ordered breakfast to be got ready with all speed, and on its being set before him gave indisputable tokens of a hearty appetite, the Lion received him, as usual, with a hospitable welcome; and treated him with those marks of distinction, which, as a regular customer, and one within the freemasonry of the trade, he had a right to claim.

This Lion or landlord, - for he was called both man and beast, by reason of his having instructed the artist who painted his sign, to convey into the features of the lordly brute whose effigy it bore, as near a counterpart of his own face as his skill could compass and devise, - was a gentleman almost as quick of apprehension, and of almost as subtle a wit, as the mighty John himself. But the difference between them lay in this: that whereas Mr Willet's extreme sagacity and acuteness were the efforts of unassisted nature, the Lion stood indebted, in no small amount, to beer; of which he swigged such copious draughts, that most of his faculties were utterly drowned and washed away, except the one great faculty of sleep, which he retained in surprising perfection. The creaking Lion over the house-door was, therefore, to say the truth, rather a drowsy, tame, and feeble lion; and as these social representatives of a savage class are usually of a conventional character (being depicted, for the most part, in

impossible attitudes and of unearthly colours), he was frequently supposed by the more ignorant and uninformed among the neighbours, to be the veritable portrait of the host as he appeared on the occasion of some great funeral ceremony or public mourning.

'What noisy fellow is that in the next room?' said Joe, when he had disposed of his breakfast, and had washed and brushed himself.

'A recruiting serjeant,' replied the Lion.

Joe started involuntarily. Here was the very thing he had been dreaming of, all the way along.

'And I wish,' said the Lion, 'he was anywhere else but here. The party make noise enough, but don't call for much. There's great cry there, Mr Willet, but very little wool. Your father wouldn't like 'em, I know.'

Perhaps not much under any circumstances. Perhaps if he could have known what was passing at that moment in Joe's mind, he would have liked them still less.

'Is he recruiting for a - for a fine regiment?' said Joe, glancing at a little round mirror that hung in the bar.

'I believe he is,' replied the host. 'It's much the same thing, whatever regiment he's recruiting for. I'm told there an't a deal of difference between a fine man and another one, when they're shot through and through.'

'They're not all shot,' said Joe.

'No,' the Lion answered, 'not all. Those that are - supposing it's done easy - are the best off in my opinion.'

'Ah!' retorted Joe, 'but you don't care for glory.'

'For what?' said the Lion.

'Glory.'

'No,' returned the Lion, with supreme indifference. 'I don't. You're right in that, Mr Willet. When Glory comes here, and calls for anything to drink and changes a guinea to pay for it, I'll give it him for nothing. It's my belief, sir, that the Glory's arms wouldn't do a very strong business.'

These remarks were not at all comforting. Joe walked out, stopped at the door of the next room, and listened. The serjeant was describing a

military life. It was all drinking, he said, except that there were frequent intervals of eating and love-making. A battle was the finest thing in the world - when your side won it - and Englishmen always did that. 'Supposing you should be killed, sir?' said a timid voice in one corner. 'Well, sir, supposing you should be,' said the serjeant, 'what then? Your country loves you, sir; his Majesty King George the Third loves you; your memory is honoured, revered, respected; everybody's fond of you, and grateful to you; your name's wrote down at full length in a book in the War Office. Damme, gentlemen, we must all die some time, or another, eh?'

The voice coughed, and said no more.

Joe walked into the room. A group of half-a-dozen fellows had gathered together in the taproom, and were listening with greedy ears. One of them, a carter in a smockfrock, seemed wavering and disposed to enlist. The rest, who were by no means disposed, strongly urged him to do so (according to the custom of mankind), backed the serjeant's arguments, and grinned among themselves. 'I say nothing, boys,' said the serjeant, who sat a little apart, drinking his liquor. 'For lads of spirit' - here he cast an eye on Joe - 'this is the time. I don't want to inveigle you. The king's not come to that, I hope. Brisk young blood is what we want; not milk and water. We won't take five men out of six. We want top-sawyers, we do. I'm not a-going to tell tales out of school, but, damme, if every gentleman's son that carries arms in our corps, through being under a cloud and having little differences with his relations, was counted up' - here his eye fell on Joe again, and so good-naturedly, that Joe beckoned him out. He came directly.

'You're a gentleman, by G - !' was his first remark, as he slapped him on the back. 'You're a gentleman in disguise. So am I. Let's swear a friendship.'

Joe didn't exactly do that, but he shook hands with him, and thanked him for his good opinion.

'You want to serve,' said his new friend. 'You shall. You were made for it. You're one of us by nature. What'll you take to drink?'

'Nothing just now,' replied Joe, smiling faintly. 'I haven't quite made up my mind.'

'A mettlesome fellow like you, and not made up his mind!' cried the serjeant. 'Here - let me give the bell a pull, and you'll make up your mind in half a minute, I know.'

'You're right so far' - answered Joe, 'for if you pull the bell here, where I'm known, there'll be an end of my soldiering inclinations in no time. Look in my face. You see me, do you?'

'I do,' replied the serjeant with an oath, 'and a finer young fellow or one better qualified to serve his king and country, I never set my - ' he used an adjective in this place - 'eyes on.

'Thank you,' said Joe, 'I didn't ask you for want of a compliment, but thank you all the same. Do I look like a sneaking fellow or a liar?'

The serjeant rejoined with many choice asseverations that he didn't; and that if his (the serjeant's) own father were to say he did, he would run the old gentleman through the body cheerfully, and consider it a meritorious action.

Joe expressed his obligations, and continued, 'You can trust me then, and credit what I say. I believe I shall enlist in your regiment to-night. The reason I don't do so now is, because I don't want until to-night, to do what I can't recall. Where shall I find you, this evening?'

His friend replied with some unwillingness, and after much ineffectual entreaty having for its object the immediate settlement of the business, that his quarters would be at the Crooked Billet in Tower Street; where he would be found waking until midnight, and sleeping until breakfast time to-morrow.

'And if I do come - which it's a million to one, I shall - when will you take me out of London?' demanded Joe.

'To-morrow morning, at half after eight o'clock,' replied the serjeant. 'You'll go abroad - a country where it's all sunshine and plunder - the finest climate in the world.'

'To go abroad,' said Joe, shaking hands with him, 'is the very thing I want. You may expect me.'

'You're the kind of lad for us,' cried the serjeant, holding Joe's hand in his, in the excess of his admiration. 'You're the boy to push your fortune. I don't say it because I bear you any envy, or would take away from the credit of the rise you'll make, but if I had been bred and taught like you, I'd have been a colonel by this time.'

'Tush, man!' said Joe, 'I'm not so young as that. Needs must when the devil drives; and the devil that drives me is an empty pocket and an unhappy home. For the present, good-bye.'

'For king and country!' cried the serjeant, flourishing his cap.

'For bread and meat!' cried Joe, snapping his fingers. And so they parted.

He had very little money in his pocket; so little indeed, that after paying for his breakfast (which he was too honest and perhaps too proud to score up to his father's charge) he had but a penny left. He had courage, notwithstanding, to resist all the affectionate importunities of the serjeant, who waylaid him at the door with many protestations of eternal friendship, and did in particular request that he would do him the favour to accept of only one shilling as a temporary accommodation. Rejecting his offers both of cash and credit, Joe walked away with stick and bundle as before, bent upon getting through the day as he best could, and going down to the locksmith's in the dusk of the evening; for it should go hard, he had resolved, but he would have a parting word with charming Dolly Varden.

He went out by Islington and so on to Highgate, and sat on many stones and gates, but there were no voices in the bells to bid him turn. Since the time of noble Whittington, fair flower of merchants, bells have come to have less sympathy with humankind. They only ring for money and on state occasions. Wanderers have increased in number; ships leave the Thames for distant regions, carrying from stem to stern no other cargo; the bells are silent; they ring out no entreaties or regrets; they are used to it and have grown worldly.

Joe bought a roll, and reduced his purse to the condition (with a difference) of that celebrated purse of Fortunatus, which, whatever were its favoured owner's necessities, had one unvarying amount in it. In these real times, when all the Fairies are dead and buried, there are still a great many purses which possess that quality. The sum-total they contain is expressed in arithmetic by a circle, and whether it be added to or multiplied by its own amount, the result of the problem is more easily stated than any known in figures.

Evening drew on at last. With the desolate and solitary feeling of one who had no home or shelter, and was alone utterly in the world for the first time, he bent his steps towards the locksmith's house. He had delayed till now, knowing that Mrs Varden sometimes went out alone, or with Miggs for her sole attendant, to lectures in the evening; and devoutly hoping that this might be one of her nights of moral culture.

He had walked up and down before the house, on the opposite side of the way, two or three times, when as he returned to it again, he caught a glimpse of a fluttering skirt at the door. It was Dolly's - to whom else could it belong? no dress but hers had such a flow as that. He plucked up his spirits, and followed it into the workshop of the Golden Key.

His darkening the door caused her to look round. Oh that face! 'If it hadn't been for that,' thought Joe, 'I should never have walked into poor Tom Cobb. She's twenty times handsomer than ever. She might marry a Lord!'

He didn't say this. He only thought it - perhaps looked it also. Dolly was glad to see him, and was SO sorry her father and mother were away from home. Joe begged she wouldn't mention it on any account.

Dolly hesitated to lead the way into the parlour, for there it was nearly dark; at the same time she hesitated to stand talking in the workshop, which was yet light and open to the street. They had got by some means, too, before the little forge; and Joe having her hand in his (which he had no right to have, for Dolly only gave it him to shake), it was so like standing before some homely altar being married, that it was the most embarrassing state of things in the world.

'I have come,' said Joe, 'to say good-bye - to say good-bye for I don't know how many years; perhaps for ever. I am going abroad.'

Now this was exactly what he should not have said. Here he was, talking like a gentleman at large who was free to come and go and roam about the world at pleasure, when that gallant coachmaker had vowed but the night before that Miss Varden held him bound in adamantine chains; and had positively stated in so many words that she was killing him by inches, and that in a fortnight more or thereabouts he expected to make a decent end and leave the business to his mother.

Dolly released her hand and said 'Indeed!' She remarked in the same breath that it was a fine night, and in short, betrayed no more emotion than the forge itself.

'I couldn't go,' said Joe, 'without coming to see you. I hadn't the heart to.'

Dolly was more sorry than she could tell, that he should have taken so much trouble. It was such a long way, and he must have such a deal to do. And how WAS Mr Willet - that dear old gentleman -

'Is this all you say!' cried Joe.

All! Good gracious, what did the man expect! She was obliged to take her apron in her hand and run her eyes along the hem from corner to corner, to keep herself from laughing in his face; - not because his gaze confused her - not at all.

Joe had small experience in love affairs, and had no notion how different young ladies are at different times; he had expected to take Dolly up again at the very point where he had left her after that delicious evening ride, and was no more prepared for such an alteration than to see the sun and moon change places. He had buoyed himself up all day with an indistinct idea that she would certainly say 'Don't go,' or 'Don't leave us,' or 'Why do you go?' or 'Why do you leave us?' or would give him some little encouragement of that sort; he had even entertained the possibility of her bursting into tears, of her throwing herself into his arms, of her falling down in a fainting fit without previous word or sign; but any approach to such a line of conduct as this, had been so far from his thoughts that he could only look at her in silent wonder.

Dolly in the meanwhile, turned to the corners of her apron, and measured the sides, and smoothed out the wrinkles, and was as silent as he. At last after a long pause, Joe said good-bye. 'Good-bye' - said Dolly - with as pleasant a smile as if he were going into the next street, and were coming back to supper; 'good-bye.'

'Come,' said Joe, putting out both hands, 'Dolly, dear Dolly, don't let us part like this. I love you dearly, with all my heart and soul; with as much truth and earnestness as ever man loved woman in this world, I do believe. I am a poor fellow, as you know - poorer now than ever, for I have fled from home, not being able to bear it any longer, and must fight my own way without help. You are beautiful, admired, are loved by everybody, are well off and happy; and may you ever be so! Heaven forbid I should ever make you otherwise; but give me a word of comfort. Say something kind to me. I have no right to expect it of you, I know, but I ask it because I love you, and shall treasure the slightest word from you all through my life. Dolly, dearest, have you nothing to say to me?'

No. Nothing. Dolly was a coquette by nature, and a spoilt child. She had no notion of being carried by storm in this way. The coachmaker would have been dissolved in tears, and would have knelt down, and called himself names, and clasped his hands, and beat his breast, and tugged wildly at his cravat, and done all kinds of poetry. Joe had no business to be going abroad. He had no right to be able to do it. If he was in adamantine chains, he couldn't.

'I have said good-bye,' said Dolly, 'twice. Take your arm away directly, Mr Joseph, or I'll call Miggs.'

'I'll not reproach you,' answered Joe, 'it's my fault, no doubt. I have thought sometimes that you didn't quite despise me, but I was a fool to think so. Every one must, who has seen the life I have led - you most of all. God bless you!'

He was gone, actually gone. Dolly waited a little while, thinking he would return, peeped out at the door, looked up the street and down as well as the increasing darkness would allow, came in again, waited a little longer, went upstairs humming a tune, bolted herself in, laid her head down on her bed, and cried as if her heart would break. And yet such natures are made up of so many contradictions, that if Joe Willet had come back that night, next day, next week, next month, the odds are a hundred to one she would have treated him in the very same manner, and have wept for it afterwards with the very same distress.

She had no sooner left the workshop than there cautiously peered out from behind the chimney of the forge, a face which had already emerged from the same concealment twice or thrice, unseen, and which, after satisfying itself that it was now alone, was followed by a leg, a shoulder, and so on by degrees, until the form of Mr Tappertit stood confessed, with a brown-paper cap stuck negligently on one side of its head, and its arms very much a-kimbo.

'Have my ears deceived me,' said the 'prentice, 'or do I dream! am I to thank thee, Fortun', or to cus thee - which?'

He gravely descended from his elevation, took down his piece of looking-glass, planted it against the wall upon the usual bench, twisted his head round, and looked closely at his legs.

'If they're a dream,' said Sim, 'let sculptures have such wisions, and chisel 'em out when they wake. This is reality. Sleep has no such limbs as them. Tremble, Willet, and despair. She's mine! She's mine!'

With these triumphant expressions, he seized a hammer and dealt a heavy blow at a vice, which in his mind's eye represented the sconce or head of Joseph Willet. That done, he burst into a peal of laughter which startled Miss Miggs even in her distant kitchen, and dipping his head into a bowl of water, had recourse to a jack-towel inside the closet door, which served the double purpose of smothering his feelings and drying his face.

Joe, disconsolate and down-hearted, but full of courage too, on leaving the locksmith's house made the best of his way to the Crooked Billet, and there inquired for his friend the serjeant, who, expecting no man less, received him with open arms. In the course of five minutes after his arrival at that house of entertainment, he was enrolled among the gallant defenders of his native land; and within half an hour, was regaled with a steaming supper of boiled tripe and onions, prepared, as his friend assured him more than once, at the express command of his most Sacred Majesty the King. To this meal, which tasted very savoury after his long fasting, he did ample justice; and

when he had followed it up, or down, with a variety of loyal and patriotic toasts, he was conducted to a straw mattress in a loft over the stable, and locked in there for the night.

The next morning, he found that the obliging care of his martial friend had decorated his hat with sundry particoloured streamers, which made a very lively appearance; and in company with that officer, and three other military gentlemen newly enrolled, who were under a cloud so dense that it only left three shoes, a boot, and a coat and a half visible among them, repaired to the riverside. Here they were joined by a corporal and four more heroes, of whom two were drunk and daring, and two sober and penitent, but each of whom, like Joe, had his dusty stick and bundle. The party embarked in a passage-boat bound for Gravesend, whence they were to proceed on foot to Chatham; the wind was in their favour, and they soon left London behind them, a mere dark mist - a giant phantom in the air.