

Chapter XXXII

Misfortunes, saith the adage, never come singly. There is little doubt that troubles are exceedingly gregarious in their nature, and flying in flocks, are apt to perch capriciously; crowding on the heads of some poor wights until there is not an inch of room left on their unlucky crowns, and taking no more notice of others who offer as good resting-places for the soles of their feet, than if they had no existence. It may have happened that a flight of troubles brooding over London, and looking out for Joseph Willet, whom they couldn't find, darted down haphazard on the first young man that caught their fancy, and settled on him instead. However this may be, certain it is that on the very day of Joe's departure they swarmed about the ears of Edward Chester, and did so buzz and flap their wings, and persecute him, that he was most profoundly wretched.

It was evening, and just eight o'clock, when he and his father, having wine and dessert set before them, were left to themselves for the first time that day. They had dined together, but a third person had been present during the meal, and until they met at table they had not seen each other since the previous night.

Edward was reserved and silent. Mr Chester was more than usually gay; but not caring, as it seemed, to open a conversation with one whose humour was so different, he vented the lightness of his spirit in smiles and sparkling looks, and made no effort to awaken his attention. So they remained for some time: the father lying on a sofa with his accustomed air of graceful negligence; the son seated opposite to him with downcast eyes, busied, it was plain, with painful and uneasy thoughts.

'My dear Edward,' said Mr Chester at length, with a most engaging laugh, 'do not extend your drowsy influence to the decanter. Suffer THAT to circulate, let your spirits be never so stagnant.'

Edward begged his pardon, passed it, and relapsed into his former state.

'You do wrong not to fill your glass,' said Mr Chester, holding up his own before the light. 'Wine in moderation - not in excess, for that makes men ugly - has a thousand pleasant influences. It brightens the eye, improves the voice, imparts a new vivacity to one's thoughts and conversation: you should try it, Ned.'

'Ah father!' cried his son, 'if - '

'My good fellow,' interposed the parent hastily, as he set down his glass, and raised his eyebrows with a startled and horrified

expression, 'for Heaven's sake don't call me by that obsolete and ancient name. Have some regard for delicacy. Am I grey, or wrinkled, do I go on crutches, have I lost my teeth, that you adopt such a mode of address? Good God, how very coarse!'

'I was about to speak to you from my heart, sir,' returned Edward, 'in the confidence which should subsist between us; and you check me in the outset.'

'Now DO, Ned, DO not,' said Mr Chester, raising his delicate hand imploringly, 'talk in that monstrous manner. About to speak from your heart. Don't you know that the heart is an ingenious part of our formation - the centre of the blood-vessels and all that sort of thing - which has no more to do with what you say or think, than your knees have? How can you be so very vulgar and absurd? These anatomical allusions should be left to gentlemen of the medical profession. They are really not agreeable in society. You quite surprise me, Ned.'

'Well! there are no such things to wound, or heal, or have regard for. I know your creed, sir, and will say no more,' returned his son.

'There again,' said Mr Chester, sipping his wine, 'you are wrong. I distinctly say there are such things. We know there are. The hearts of animals - of bullocks, sheep, and so forth - are cooked and devoured, as I am told, by the lower classes, with a vast deal of relish. Men are sometimes stabbed to the heart, shot to the heart; but as to speaking from the heart, or to the heart, or being warm-hearted, or cold-hearted, or broken-hearted, or being all heart, or having no heart - pah! these things are nonsense, Ned.'

'No doubt, sir,' returned his son, seeing that he paused for him to speak. 'No doubt.'

'There's Haredale's niece, your late flame,' said Mr Chester, as a careless illustration of his meaning. 'No doubt in your mind she was all heart once. Now she has none at all. Yet she is the same person, Ned, exactly.'

'She is a changed person, sir,' cried Edward, reddening; 'and changed by vile means, I believe.'

'You have had a cool dismissal, have you?' said his father. 'Poor Ned! I told you last night what would happen. - May I ask you for the nutcrackers?'

'She has been tampered with, and most treacherously deceived,' cried Edward, rising from his seat. 'I never will believe that the knowledge of my real position, given her by myself, has worked this change. I know

she is beset and tortured. But though our contract is at an end, and broken past all redemption; though I charge upon her want of firmness and want of truth, both to herself and me; I do not now, and never will believe, that any sordid motive, or her own unbiassed will, has led her to this course - never!

'You make me blush,' returned his father gaily, 'for the folly of your nature, in which - but we never know ourselves - I devoutly hope there is no reflection of my own. With regard to the young lady herself, she has done what is very natural and proper, my dear fellow; what you yourself proposed, as I learn from Haredale; and what I predicted - with no great exercise of sagacity - she would do. She supposed you to be rich, or at least quite rich enough; and found you poor. Marriage is a civil contract; people marry to better their worldly condition and improve appearances; it is an affair of house and furniture, of liveries, servants, equipage, and so forth. The lady being poor and you poor also, there is an end of the matter. You cannot enter upon these considerations, and have no manner of business with the ceremony. I drink her health in this glass, and respect and honour her for her extreme good sense. It is a lesson to you. Fill yours, Ned.'

'It is a lesson,' returned his son, 'by which I hope I may never profit, and if years and experience impress it on - '

'Don't say on the heart,' interposed his father.

'On men whom the world and its hypocrisy have spoiled,' said Edward warmly, 'Heaven keep me from its knowledge.'

'Come, sir,' returned his father, raising himself a little on the sofa, and looking straight towards him; 'we have had enough of this. Remember, if you please, your interest, your duty, your moral obligations, your filial affections, and all that sort of thing, which it is so very delightful and charming to reflect upon; or you will repent it.'

'I shall never repent the preservation of my self-respect, sir,' said Edward. 'Forgive me if I say that I will not sacrifice it at your bidding, and that I will not pursue the track which you would have me take, and to which the secret share you have had in this late separation tends.'

His father rose a little higher still, and looking at him as though curious to know if he were quite resolved and earnest, dropped gently down again, and said in the calmest voice - eating his nuts meanwhile,

'Edward, my father had a son, who being a fool like you, and, like you, entertaining low and disobedient sentiments, he disinherited and

cursed one morning after breakfast. The circumstance occurs to me with a singular clearness of recollection this evening. I remember eating muffins at the time, with marmalade. He led a miserable life (the son, I mean) and died early; it was a happy release on all accounts; he degraded the family very much. It is a sad circumstance, Edward, when a father finds it necessary to resort to such strong measures.

'It is,' replied Edward, 'and it is sad when a son, proffering him his love and duty in their best and truest sense, finds himself repelled at every turn, and forced to disobey. Dear father,' he added, more earnestly though in a gentler tone, 'I have reflected many times on what occurred between us when we first discussed this subject. Let there be a confidence between us; not in terms, but truth. Hear what I have to say.'

'As I anticipate what it is, and cannot fail to do so, Edward,' returned his father coldly, 'I decline. I couldn't possibly. I am sure it would put me out of temper, which is a state of mind I can't endure. If you intend to mar my plans for your establishment in life, and the preservation of that gentility and becoming pride, which our family have so long sustained - if, in short, you are resolved to take your own course, you must take it, and my curse with it. I am very sorry, but there's really no alternative.'

'The curse may pass your lips,' said Edward, 'but it will be but empty breath. I do not believe that any man on earth has greater power to call one down upon his fellow - least of all, upon his own child - than he has to make one drop of rain or flake of snow fall from the clouds above us at his impious bidding. Beware, sir, what you do.'

'You are so very irreligious, so exceedingly undutiful, so horribly profane,' rejoined his father, turning his face lazily towards him, and cracking another nut, 'that I positively must interrupt you here. It is quite impossible we can continue to go on, upon such terms as these. If you will do me the favour to ring the bell, the servant will show you to the door. Return to this roof no more, I beg you. Go, sir, since you have no moral sense remaining; and go to the Devil, at my express desire. Good day.'

Edward left the room without another word or look, and turned his back upon the house for ever.

The father's face was slightly flushed and heated, but his manner was quite unchanged, as he rang the bell again, and addressed the servant on his entrance.

'Peak - if that gentleman who has just gone out - '

'I beg your pardon, sir, Mr Edward?'

'Were there more than one, dolt, that you ask the question? - If that gentleman should send here for his wardrobe, let him have it, do you hear? If he should call himself at any time, I'm not at home. You'll tell him so, and shut the door.'

So, it soon got whispered about, that Mr Chester was very unfortunate in his son, who had occasioned him great grief and sorrow. And the good people who heard this and told it again, marvelled the more at his equanimity and even temper, and said what an amiable nature that man must have, who, having undergone so much, could be so placid and so calm. And when Edward's name was spoken, Society shook its head, and laid its finger on its lip, and sighed, and looked very grave; and those who had sons about his age, waxed wrathful and indignant, and hoped, for Virtue's sake, that he was dead. And the world went on turning round, as usual, for five years, concerning which this Narrative is silent.