

Chapter XXXIV

Before old John had looked at the boiler quite twenty minutes, he got his ideas into a focus, and brought them to bear upon Solomon Daisy's story. The more he thought of it, the more impressed he became with a sense of his own wisdom, and a desire that Mr Haredale should be impressed with it likewise. At length, to the end that he might sustain a principal and important character in the affair; and might have the start of Solomon and his two friends, through whose means he knew the adventure, with a variety of exaggerations, would be known to at least a score of people, and most likely to Mr Haredale himself, by breakfast-time to-morrow; he determined to repair to the Warren before going to bed.

'He's my landlord,' thought John, as he took a candle in his hand, and setting it down in a corner out of the wind's way, opened a casement in the rear of the house, looking towards the stables. 'We haven't met of late years so often as we used to do - changes are taking place in the family - it's desirable that I should stand as well with them, in point of dignity, as possible - the whispering about of this here tale will anger him - it's good to have confidences with a gentleman of his natur', and set one's-self right besides. Halloa there! Hugh - Hugh. Hal-loa!'

When he had repeated this shout a dozen times, and startled every pigeon from its slumbers, a door in one of the ruinous old buildings opened, and a rough voice demanded what was amiss now, that a man couldn't even have his sleep in quiet.

'What! Haven't you sleep enough, growler, that you're not to be knocked up for once?' said John.

'No,' replied the voice, as the speaker yawned and shook himself. 'Not half enough.'

'I don't know how you CAN sleep, with the wind a bellowsing and roaring about you, making the tiles fly like a pack of cards,' said John; 'but no matter for that. Wrap yourself up in something or another, and come here, for you must go as far as the Warren with me. And look sharp about it.'

Hugh, with much low growling and muttering, went back into his lair; and presently reappeared, carrying a lantern and a cudgel, and enveloped from head to foot in an old, frowzy, slouching horse-cloth. Mr Willet received this figure at the back-door, and ushered him into the bar, while he wrapped himself in sundry greatcoats and capes, and so tied and knotted his face in shawls and handkerchiefs, that how he breathed was a mystery.

'You don't take a man out of doors at near midnight in such weather, without putting some heart into him, do you, master?' said Hugh.

'Yes I do, sir,' returned Mr Willet. 'I put the heart (as you call it) into him when he has brought me safe home again, and his standing steady on his legs an't of so much consequence. So hold that light up, if you please, and go on a step or two before, to show the way.'

Hugh obeyed with a very indifferent grace, and a longing glance at the bottles. Old John, laying strict injunctions on his cook to keep the doors locked in his absence, and to open to nobody but himself on pain of dismissal, followed him into the blustering darkness out of doors.

The way was wet and dismal, and the night so black, that if Mr Willet had been his own pilot, he would have walked into a deep horsepond within a few hundred yards of his own house, and would certainly have terminated his career in that ignoble sphere of action. But Hugh, who had a sight as keen as any hawk's, and, apart from that endowment, could have found his way blindfold to any place within a dozen miles, dragged old John along, quite deaf to his remonstrances, and took his own course without the slightest reference to, or notice of, his master. So they made head against the wind as they best could; Hugh crushing the wet grass beneath his heavy tread, and stalking on after his ordinary savage fashion; John Willet following at arm's length, picking his steps, and looking about him, now for bogs and ditches, and now for such stray ghosts as might be wandering abroad, with looks of as much dismay and uneasiness as his immovable face was capable of expressing.

At length they stood upon the broad gravel-walk before the Warren-house. The building was profoundly dark, and none were moving near it save themselves. From one solitary turret-chamber, however, there shone a ray of light; and towards this speck of comfort in the cold, cheerless, silent scene, Mr Willet bade his pilot lead him.

'The old room,' said John, looking timidly upward; 'Mr Reuben's own apartment, God be with us! I wonder his brother likes to sit there, so late at night - on this night too.'

'Why, where else should he sit?' asked Hugh, holding the lantern to his breast, to keep the candle from the wind, while he trimmed it with his fingers. 'It's snug enough, an't it?'

'Snug!' said John indignantly. 'You have a comfortable idea of snugness, you have, sir. Do you know what was done in that room, you ruffian?'

'Why, what is it the worse for that!' cried Hugh, looking into John's fat face. 'Does it keep out the rain, and snow, and wind, the less for that? Is it less warm or dry, because a man was killed there? Ha, ha, ha! Never believe it, master. One man's no such matter as that comes to.'

Mr Willet fixed his dull eyes on his follower, and began - by a species of inspiration - to think it just barely possible that he was something of a dangerous character, and that it might be advisable to get rid of him one of these days. He was too prudent to say anything, with the journey home before him; and therefore turned to the iron gate before which this brief dialogue had passed, and pulled the handle of the bell that hung beside it. The turret in which the light appeared being at one corner of the building, and only divided from the path by one of the garden-walks, upon which this gate opened, Mr Haredale threw up the window directly, and demanded who was there.

'Begging pardon, sir,' said John, 'I knew you sat up late, and made bold to come round, having a word to say to you.'

'Willet - is it not?'

'Of the Maypole - at your service, sir.'

Mr Haredale closed the window, and withdrew. He presently appeared at a door in the bottom of the turret, and coming across the garden-walk, unlocked the gate and let them in.

'You are a late visitor, Willet. What is the matter?'

'Nothing to speak of, sir,' said John; 'an idle tale, I thought you ought to know of; nothing more.'

'Let your man go forward with the lantern, and give me your hand. The stairs are crooked and narrow. Gently with your light, friend. You swing it like a censer.'

Hugh, who had already reached the turret, held it more steadily, and ascended first, turning round from time to time to shed his light downward on the steps. Mr Haredale following next, eyed his lowering face with no great favour; and Hugh, looking down on him, returned his glances with interest, as they climbed the winding stairs.

It terminated in a little ante-room adjoining that from which they had seen the light. Mr Haredale entered first, and led the way through it into the latter chamber, where he seated himself at a writing-table from which he had risen when they had rung the bell.

'Come in,' he said, beckoning to old John, who remained bowing at the door. 'Not you, friend,' he added hastily to Hugh, who entered also. 'Willet, why do you bring that fellow here?'

'Why, sir,' returned John, elevating his eyebrows, and lowering his voice to the tone in which the question had been asked him, 'he's a good guard, you see.'

'Don't be too sure of that,' said Mr Haredale, looking towards him as he spoke. 'I doubt it. He has an evil eye.'

'There's no imagination in his eye,' returned Mr Willet, glancing over his shoulder at the organ in question, 'certainly.'

'There is no good there, be assured,' said Mr Haredale. 'Wait in that little room, friend, and close the door between us.'

Hugh shrugged his shoulders, and with a disdainful look, which showed, either that he had overheard, or that he guessed the purport of their whispering, did as he was told. When he was shut out, Mr Haredale turned to John, and bade him go on with what he had to say, but not to speak too loud, for there were quick ears yonder.

Thus cautioned, Mr Willet, in an oily whisper, recited all that he had heard and said that night; laying particular stress upon his own sagacity, upon his great regard for the family, and upon his solicitude for their peace of mind and happiness. The story moved his auditor much more than he had expected. Mr Haredale often changed his attitude, rose and paced the room, returned again, desired him to repeat, as nearly as he could, the very words that Solomon had used, and gave so many other signs of being disturbed and ill at ease, that even Mr Willet was surprised.

'You did quite right,' he said, at the end of a long conversation, 'to bid them keep this story secret. It is a foolish fancy on the part of this weak-brained man, bred in his fears and superstition. But Miss Haredale, though she would know it to be so, would be disturbed by it if it reached her ears; it is too nearly connected with a subject very painful to us all, to be heard with indifference. You were most prudent, and have laid me under a great obligation. I thank you very much.'

This was equal to John's most sanguine expectations; but he would have preferred Mr Haredale's looking at him when he spoke, as if he really did thank him, to his walking up and down, speaking by fits and starts, often stopping with his eyes fixed on the ground, moving hurriedly on again, like one distracted, and seeming almost unconscious of what he said or did.

This, however, was his manner; and it was so embarrassing to John that he sat quite passive for a long time, not knowing what to do. At length he rose. Mr Haredale stared at him for a moment as though he had quite forgotten his being present, then shook hands with him, and opened the door. Hugh, who was, or feigned to be, fast asleep on the ante-chamber floor, sprang up on their entrance, and throwing his cloak about him, grasped his stick and lantern, and prepared to descend the stairs.

'Stay,' said Mr Haredale. 'Will this man drink?'

'Drink! He'd drink the Thames up, if it was strong enough, sir,' replied John Willet. 'He'll have something when he gets home. He's better without it, now, sir.'

'Nay. Half the distance is done,' said Hugh. 'What a hard master you are! I shall go home the better for one glassful, halfway. Come!'

As John made no reply, Mr Haredale brought out a glass of liquor, and gave it to Hugh, who, as he took it in his hand, threw part of it upon the floor.

'What do you mean by splashing your drink about a gentleman's house, sir?' said John.

'I'm drinking a toast,' Hugh rejoined, holding the glass above his head, and fixing his eyes on Mr Haredale's face; 'a toast to this house and its master.' With that he muttered something to himself, and drank the rest, and setting down the glass, preceded them without another word.

John was a good deal scandalised by this observance, but seeing that Mr Haredale took little heed of what Hugh said or did, and that his thoughts were otherwise employed, he offered no apology, and went in silence down the stairs, across the walk, and through the garden-gate. They stopped upon the outer side for Hugh to hold the light while Mr Haredale locked it on the inner; and then John saw with wonder (as he often afterwards related), that he was very pale, and that his face had changed so much and grown so haggard since their entrance, that he almost seemed another man.

They were in the open road again, and John Willet was walking on behind his escort, as he had come, thinking very steadily of what he had just now seen, when Hugh drew him suddenly aside, and almost at the same instant three horsemen swept past - the nearest brushed his shoulder even then - who, checking their steeds as suddenly as they could, stood still, and waited for their