

Chapter XXXV

When John Willet saw that the horsemen wheeled smartly round, and drew up three abreast in the narrow road, waiting for him and his man to join them, it occurred to him with unusual precipitation that they must be highwaymen; and had Hugh been armed with a blunderbuss, in place of his stout cudgel, he would certainly have ordered him to fire it off at a venture, and would, while the word of command was obeyed, have consulted his own personal safety in immediate flight. Under the circumstances of disadvantage, however, in which he and his guard were placed, he deemed it prudent to adopt a different style of generalship, and therefore whispered his attendant to address them in the most peaceable and courteous terms. By way of acting up to the spirit and letter of this instruction, Hugh stepped forward, and flourishing his staff before the very eyes of the rider nearest to him, demanded roughly what he and his fellows meant by so nearly galloping over them, and why they scoured the king's highway at that late hour of night.

The man whom he addressed was beginning an angry reply in the same strain, when he was checked by the horseman in the centre, who, interposing with an air of authority, inquired in a somewhat loud but not harsh or unpleasant voice:

'Pray, is this the London road?'

'If you follow it right, it is,' replied Hugh roughly.

'Nay, brother,' said the same person, 'you're but a churlish Englishman, if Englishman you be - which I should much doubt but for your tongue. Your companion, I am sure, will answer me more civilly. How say you, friend?'

'I say it IS the London road, sir,' answered John. 'And I wish,' he added in a subdued voice, as he turned to Hugh, 'that you was in any other road, you vagabond. Are you tired of your life, sir, that you go a-trying to provoke three great neck-or-nothing chaps, that could keep on running over us, back'ards and for'ards, till we was dead, and then take our bodies up behind 'em, and drown us ten miles off?'

'How far is it to London?' inquired the same speaker.

'Why, from here, sir,' answered John, persuasively, 'it's thirteen very easy mile.'

The adjective was thrown in, as an inducement to the travellers to ride away with all speed; but instead of having the desired effect, it elicited

from the same person, the remark, 'Thirteen miles! That's a long distance!' which was followed by a short pause of indecision.

'Pray,' said the gentleman, 'are there any inns hereabouts?' At the word 'inns,' John plucked up his spirit in a surprising manner; his fears rolled off like smoke; all the landlord stirred within him.

'There are no inns,' rejoined Mr Willet, with a strong emphasis on the plural number; 'but there's a Inn - one Inn - the Maypole Inn. That's a Inn indeed. You won't see the like of that Inn often.'

'You keep it, perhaps?' said the horseman, smiling.

'I do, sir,' replied John, greatly wondering how he had found this out. 'And how far is the Maypole from here?'

'About a mile' - John was going to add that it was the easiest mile in all the world, when the third rider, who had hitherto kept a little in the rear, suddenly interposed:

'And have you one excellent bed, landlord? Hem! A bed that you can recommend - a bed that you are sure is well aired - a bed that has been slept in by some perfectly respectable and unexceptionable person?'

'We don't take in no tagrag and bobtail at our house, sir,' answered John. 'And as to the bed itself - '

'Say, as to three beds,' interposed the gentleman who had spoken before; 'for we shall want three if we stay, though my friend only speaks of one.'

'No, no, my lord; you are too good, you are too kind; but your life is of far too much importance to the nation in these portentous times, to be placed upon a level with one so useless and so poor as mine. A great cause, my lord, a mighty cause, depends on you. You are its leader and its champion, its advanced guard and its van. It is the cause of our altars and our homes, our country and our faith. Let ME sleep on a chair - the carpet - anywhere. No one will repine if I take cold or fever. Let John Grueby pass the night beneath the open sky - no one will repine for HIM. But forty thousand men of this our island in the wave (exclusive of women and children) rivet their eyes and thoughts on Lord George Gordon; and every day, from the rising up of the sun to the going down of the same, pray for his health and vigour. My lord,' said the speaker, rising in his stirrups, 'it is a glorious cause, and must not be forgotten. My lord, it is a mighty cause, and must not be endangered. My lord, it is a holy cause, and must not be deserted.'

'It IS a holy cause,' exclaimed his lordship, lifting up his hat with great solemnity. 'Amen.'

'John Grueby,' said the long-winded gentleman, in a tone of mild reproof, 'his lordship said Amen.'

'I heard my lord, sir,' said the man, sitting like a statue on his horse.

'And do not YOU say Amen, likewise?'

To which John Grueby made no reply at all, but sat looking straight before him.

'You surprise me, Grueby,' said the gentleman. 'At a crisis like the present, when Queen Elizabeth, that maiden monarch, weeps within her tomb, and Bloody Mary, with a brow of gloom and shadow, stalks triumphant - '

'Oh, sir,' cied the man, gruffly, 'where's the use of talking of Bloody Mary, under such circumstances as the present, when my lord's wet through, and tired with hard riding? Let's either go on to London, sir, or put up at once; or that unfort'nate Bloody Mary will have more to answer for - and she's done a deal more harm in her grave than she ever did in her lifetime, I believe.'

By this time Mr Willet, who had never beard so many words spoken together at one time, or delivered with such volubility and emphasis as by the long-winded gentleman; and whose brain, being wholly unable to sustain or compass them, had quite given itself up for lost; recovered so far as to observe that there was ample accommodation at the Maypole for all the party: good beds; neat wines; excellent entertainment for man and beast; private rooms for large and small parties; dinners dressed upon the shortest notice; choice stabling, and a lock-up coach-house; and, in short, to run over such recommendatory scraps of language as were painted up on various portions of the building, and which in the course of some forty years he had learnt to repeat with tolerable correctness. He was considering whether it was at all possible to insert any novel sentences to the same purpose, when the gentleman who had spoken first, turning to him of the long wind, exclaimed, 'What say you, Gashford? Shall we tarry at this house he speaks of, or press forward? You shall decide.'

'I would submit, my lord, then,' returned the person he appealed to, in a silky tone, 'that your health and spirits - so important, under Providence, to our great cause, our pure and truthful cause' - here his lordship pulled off his hat again, though it was raining hard - 'require refreshment and repose.'

'Go on before, landlord, and show the way,' said Lord George Gordon; 'we will follow at a footpace.'

'If you'll give me leave, my lord,' said John Grueby, in a low voice, 'I'll change my proper place, and ride before you. The looks of the landlord's friend are not over honest, and it may be as well to be cautious with him.'

'John Grueby is quite right,' interposed Mr Gashford, falling back hastily. 'My lord, a life so precious as yours must not be put in peril. Go forward, John, by all means. If you have any reason to suspect the fellow, blow his brains out.'

John made no answer, but looking straight before him, as his custom seemed to be when the secretary spoke, bade Hugh push on, and followed close behind him. Then came his lordship, with Mr Willet at his bridle rein; and, last of all, his lordship's secretary - for that, it seemed, was Gashford's office.

Hugh strode briskly on, often looking back at the servant, whose horse was close upon his heels, and glancing with a leer at his bolster case of pistols, by which he seemed to set great store. He was a square-built, strong-made, bull-necked fellow, of the true English breed; and as Hugh measured him with his eye, he measured Hugh, regarding him meanwhile with a look of bluff disdain. He was much older than the Maypole man, being to all appearance five-and-forty; but was one of those self-possessed, hard-headed, imperturbable fellows, who, if they are ever beaten at fisticuffs, or other kind of warfare, never know it, and go on coolly till they win.

'If I led you wrong now,' said Hugh, tauntingly, 'you'd - ha ha ha! - you'd shoot me through the head, I suppose.'

John Grueby took no more notice of this remark than if he had been deaf and Hugh dumb; but kept riding on quite comfortably, with his eyes fixed on the horizon.

'Did you ever try a fall with a man when you were young, master?' said Hugh. 'Can you make any play at single-stick?'

John Grueby looked at him sideways with the same contented air, but deigned not a word in answer.

' - Like this?' said Hugh, giving his cudgel one of those skilful flourishes, in which the rustic of that time delighted. 'Whoop!'

' - Or that,' returned John Grueby, beating down his guard with his whip, and striking him on the head with its butt end. 'Yes, I played a

little once. You wear your hair too long; I should have cracked your crown if it had been a little shorter.'

It was a pretty smart, loud-sounding rap, as it was, and evidently astonished Hugh; who, for the moment, seemed disposed to drag his new acquaintance from his saddle. But his face betokening neither malice, triumph, rage, nor any lingering idea that he had given him offence; his eyes gazing steadily in the old direction, and his manner being as careless and composed as if he had merely brushed away a fly; Hugh was so puzzled, and so disposed to look upon him as a customer of almost supernatural toughness, that he merely laughed, and cried 'Well done!' then, sheering off a little, led the way in silence.

Before the lapse of many minutes the party halted at the Maypole door. Lord George and his secretary quickly dismounting, gave their horses to their servant, who, under the guidance of Hugh, repaired to the stables. Right glad to escape from the inclemency of the night, they followed Mr Willet into the common room, and stood warming themselves and drying their clothes before the cheerful fire, while he busied himself with such orders and preparations as his guest's high quality required.

As he bustled in and out of the room, intent on these arrangements, he had an opportunity of observing the two travellers, of whom, as yet, he knew nothing but the voice. The lord, the great personage who did the Maypole so much honour, was about the middle height, of a slender make, and sallow complexion, with an aquiline nose, and long hair of a reddish brown, combed perfectly straight and smooth about his ears, and slightly powdered, but without the faintest vestige of a curl. He was attired, under his greatcoat, in a full suit of black, quite free from any ornament, and of the most precise and sober cut. The gravity of his dress, together with a certain lankness of cheek and stiffness of deportment, added nearly ten years to his age, but his figure was that of one not yet past thirty. As he stood musing in the red glow of the fire, it was striking to observe his very bright large eye, which betrayed a restlessness of thought and purpose, singularly at variance with the studied composure and sobriety of his mien, and with his quaint and sad apparel. It had nothing harsh or cruel in its expression; neither had his face, which was thin and mild, and wore an air of melancholy; but it was suggestive of an indefinable uneasiness; which infected those who looked upon him, and filled them with a kind of pity for the man: though why it did so, they would have had some trouble to explain.

Gashford, the secretary, was taller, angularly made, high-shouldered, bony, and ungraceful. His dress, in imitation of his superior, was demure and staid in the extreme; his manner, formal and constrained. This gentleman had an overhanging brow, great hands and feet and

ears, and a pair of eyes that seemed to have made an unnatural retreat into his head, and to have dug themselves a cave to hide in. His manner was smooth and humble, but very sly and slinking. He wore the aspect of a man who was always lying in wait for something that WOULDN'T come to pass; but he looked patient - very patient - and fawned like a spaniel dog. Even now, while he warmed and rubbed his hands before the blaze, he had the air of one who only presumed to enjoy it in his degree as a commoner; and though he knew his lord was not regarding him, he looked into his face from time to time, and with a meek and deferential manner, smiled as if for practice.

Such were the guests whom old John Willet, with a fixed and leaden eye, surveyed a hundred times, and to whom he now advanced with a state candlestick in each hand, beseeching them to follow him into a worthier chamber. 'For my lord,' said John - it is odd enough, but certain people seem to have as great a pleasure in pronouncing titles as their owners have in wearing them - 'this room, my lord, isn't at all the sort of place for your lordship, and I have to beg your lordship's pardon for keeping you here, my lord, one minute.'

With this address, John ushered them upstairs into the state apartment, which, like many other things of state, was cold and comfortless. Their own footsteps, reverberating through the spacious room, struck upon their hearing with a hollow sound; and its damp and chilly atmosphere was rendered doubly cheerless by contrast with the homely warmth they had deserted.

It was of no use, however, to propose a return to the place they had quitted, for the preparations went on so briskly that there was no time to stop them. John, with the tall candlesticks in his hands, bowed them up to the fireplace; Hugh, striding in with a lighted brand and pile of firewood, cast it down upon the hearth, and set it in a blaze; John Grueby (who had a great blue cockade in his hat, which he appeared to despise mightily) brought in the portmanteau he had carried on his horse, and placed it on the floor; and presently all three were busily engaged in drawing out the screen, laying the cloth, inspecting the beds, lighting fires in the bedrooms, expediting the supper, and making everything as cosy and as snug as might be, on so short a notice. In less than an hour's time, supper had been served, and ate, and cleared away; and Lord George and his secretary, with slippered feet, and legs stretched out before the fire, sat over some hot mulled wine together.

'So ends, my lord,' said Gashford, filling his glass with great complacency, 'the blessed work of a most blessed day.'

'And of a blessed yesterday,' said his lordship, raising his head.

'Ah!' - and here the secretary clasped his hands - 'a blessed yesterday indeed! The Protestants of Suffolk are godly men and true. Though others of our countrymen have lost their way in darkness, even as we, my lord, did lose our road to-night, theirs is the light and glory.'

'Did I move them, Gashford?' said Lord George.

'Move them, my lord! Move them! They cried to be led on against the Papists, they vowed a dreadful vengeance on their heads, they roared like men possessed - '

'But not by devils,' said his lord.

'By devils! my lord! By angels.'

'Yes - oh surely - by angels, no doubt,' said Lord George, thrusting his hands into his pockets, taking them out again to bite his nails, and looking uncomfortably at the fire. 'Of course by angels - eh Gashford?'

'You do not doubt it, my lord?' said the secretary.

'No - No,' returned his lord. 'No. Why should I? I suppose it would be decidedly irreligious to doubt it - wouldn't it, Gashford? Though there certainly were,' he added, without waiting for an answer, 'some plaguy ill-looking characters among them.'

'When you warmed,' said the secretary, looking sharply at the other's downcast eyes, which brightened slowly as he spoke; 'when you warmed into that noble outbreak; when you told them that you were never of the lukewarm or the timid tribe, and bade them take heed that they were prepared to follow one who would lead them on, though to the very death; when you spoke of a hundred and twenty thousand men across the Scottish border who would take their own redress at any time, if it were not conceded; when you cried 'Perish the Pope and all his base adherents; the penal laws against them shall never be repealed while Englishmen have hearts and hands' - and waved your own and touched your sword; and when they cried 'No Popery!' and you cried 'No; not even if we wade in blood,' and they threw up their hats and cried 'Hurrah! not even if we wade in blood; No Popery! Lord George! Down with the Papists - Vengeance on their heads:' when this was said and done, and a word from you, my lord, could raise or still the tumult - ah! then I felt what greatness was indeed, and thought, When was there ever power like this of Lord George Gordon's!'

'It's a great power. You're right. It is a great power!' he cried with sparkling eyes. 'But - dear Gashford - did I really say all that?'

'And how much more!' cried the secretary, looking upwards. 'Ah! how much more!'

'And I told them what you say, about the one hundred and forty thousand men in Scotland, did I!' he asked with evident delight. 'That was bold.'

'Our cause is boldness. Truth is always bold.'

'Certainly. So is religion. She's bold, Gashford?'

'The true religion is, my lord.'

'And that's ours,' he rejoined, moving uneasily in his seat, and biting his nails as though he would pare them to the quick. 'There can be no doubt of ours being the true one. You feel as certain of that as I do, Gashford, don't you?'

'Does my lord ask ME,' whined Gashford, drawing his chair nearer with an injured air, and laying his broad flat hand upon the table; 'ME,' he repeated, bending the dark hollows of his eyes upon him with an unwholesome smile, 'who, stricken by the magic of his eloquence in Scotland but a year ago, abjured the errors of the Romish church, and clung to him as one whose timely hand had plucked me from a pit?'

'True. No - No. I - I didn't mean it,' replied the other, shaking him by the hand, rising from his seat, and pacing restlessly about the room. 'It's a proud thing to lead the people, Gashford,' he added as he made a sudden halt.

'By force of reason too,' returned the pliant secretary.

'Ay, to be sure. They may cough and jeer, and groan in Parliament, and call me fool and madman, but which of them can raise this human sea and make it swell and roar at pleasure? Not one.'

'Not one,' repeated Gashford.

'Which of them can say for his honesty, what I can say for mine; which of them has refused a minister's bribe of one thousand pounds a year, to resign his seat in favour of another? Not one.'

'Not one,' repeated Gashford again - taking the lion's share of the mulled wine between whiles.

'And as we are honest, true, and in a sacred cause, Gashford,' said Lord George with a heightened colour and in a louder voice, as he laid

his fevered hand upon his shoulder, 'and are the only men who regard the mass of people out of doors, or are regarded by them, we will uphold them to the last; and will raise a cry against these un-English Papists which shall re-echo through the country, and roll with a noise like thunder. I will be worthy of the motto on my coat of arms, 'Called and chosen and faithful.'

'Called,' said the secretary, 'by Heaven.'

'I am.'

'Chosen by the people.'

'Yes.'

'Faithful to both.'

'To the block!'

It would be difficult to convey an adequate idea of the excited manner in which he gave these answers to the secretary's promptings; of the rapidity of his utterance, or the violence of his tone and gesture; in which, struggling through his Puritan's demeanour, was something wild and ungovernable which broke through all restraint. For some minutes he walked rapidly up and down the room, then stopping suddenly, exclaimed,

'Gashford - YOU moved them yesterday too. Oh yes! You did.'

'I shone with a reflected light, my lord,' replied the humble secretary, laying his hand upon his heart. 'I did my best.'

'You did well,' said his master, 'and are a great and worthy instrument. If you will ring for John Grueby to carry the portmanteau into my room, and will wait here while I undress, we will dispose of business as usual, if you're not too tired.'

'Too tired, my lord! - But this is his consideration! Christian from head to foot.' With which soliloquy, the secretary tilted the jug, and looked very hard into the mulled wine, to see how much remained.

John Willet and John Grueby appeared together. The one bearing the great candlesticks, and the other the portmanteau, showed the deluded lord into his chamber; and left the secretary alone, to yawn and shake himself, and finally to fall asleep before the fire.

'Now, Mr Gashford sir,' said John Grueby in his ear, after what appeared to him a moment of unconsciousness; 'my lord's abed.'

'Oh. Very good, John,' was his mild reply. 'Thank you, John. Nobody need sit up. I know my room.'

'I hope you're not a-going to trouble your head to-night, or my lord's head neither, with anything more about Bloody Mary,' said John. 'I wish the blessed old creetur had never been born.'

'I said you might go to bed, John,' returned the secretary. 'You didn't hear me, I think.'

'Between Bloody Marys, and blue cockades, and glorious Queen Besses, and no Poperys, and Protestant associations, and making of speeches,' pursued John Grueby, looking, as usual, a long way off, and taking no notice of this hint, 'my lord's half off his head. When we go out o' doors, such a set of ragamuffins comes a-shouting after us, 'Gordon forever!' that I'm ashamed of myself and don't know where to look. When we're indoors, they come a-roaring and screaming about the house like so many devils; and my lord instead of ordering them to be drove away, goes out into the balcony and demeans himself by making speeches to 'em, and calls 'em 'Men of England,' and 'Fellow-countrymen,' as if he was fond of 'em and thanked 'em for coming. I can't make it out, but they're all mixed up somehow or another with that unfort'nate Bloody Mary, and call her name out till they're hoarse. They're all Protestants too - every man and boy among 'em: and Protestants are very fond of spoons, I find, and silver-plate in general, whenever area-gates is left open accidentally. I wish that was the worst of it, and that no more harm might be to come; but if you don't stop these ugly customers in time, Mr Gashford (and I know you; you're the man that blows the fire), you'll find 'em grow a little bit too strong for you. One of these evenings, when the weather gets warmer and Protestants are thirsty, they'll be pulling London down, - and I never heard that Bloody Mary went as far as THAT.'

Gashford had vanished long ago, and these remarks had been bestowed on empty air. Not at all discomposed by the discovery, John Grueby fixed his hat on, wrongside foremost that he might be unconscious of the shadow of the obnoxious cockade, and withdrew to bed; shaking his head in a very gloomy and prophetic manner until he reached his chamber.