

## Chapter XXXVI

Gashford, with a smiling face, but still with looks of profound deference and humility, betook himself towards his master's room, smoothing his hair down as he went, and humming a psalm tune. As he approached Lord George's door, he cleared his throat and hummed more vigorously.

There was a remarkable contrast between this man's occupation at the moment, and the expression of his countenance, which was singularly repulsive and malicious. His beetling brow almost obscured his eyes; his lip was curled contemptuously; his very shoulders seemed to sneer in stealthy whisperings with his great flapped ears.

'Hush!' he muttered softly, as he peeped in at the chamber-door. 'He seems to be asleep. Pray Heaven he is! Too much watching, too much care, too much thought - ah! Lord preserve him for a martyr! He is a saint, if ever saint drew breath on this bad earth.'

Placing his light upon a table, he walked on tiptoe to the fire, and sitting in a chair before it with his back towards the bed, went on communing with himself like one who thought aloud:

'The saviour of his country and his country's religion, the friend of his poor countrymen, the enemy of the proud and harsh; beloved of the rejected and oppressed, adored by forty thousand bold and loyal English hearts - what happy slumbers his should be!' And here he sighed, and warmed his hands, and shook his head as men do when their hearts are full, and heaved another sigh, and warmed his hands again.

'Why, Gashford?' said Lord George, who was lying broad awake, upon his side, and had been staring at him from his entrance.

'My - my lord,' said Gashford, starting and looking round as though in great surprise. 'I have disturbed you!'

'I have not been sleeping.'

'Not sleeping!' he repeated, with assumed confusion. 'What can I say for having in your presence given utterance to thoughts - but they were sincere - they were sincere!' exclaimed the secretary, drawing his sleeve in a hasty way across his eyes; 'and why should I regret your having heard them?'

'Gashford,' said the poor lord, stretching out his hand with manifest emotion. 'Do not regret it. You love me well, I know - too well. I don't deserve such homage.'

Gashford made no reply, but grasped the hand and pressed it to his lips. Then rising, and taking from the trunk a little desk, he placed it on a table near the fire, unlocked it with a key he carried in his pocket, sat down before it, took out a pen, and, before dipping it in the inkstand, sucked it - to compose the fashion of his mouth perhaps, on which a smile was hovering yet.

'How do our numbers stand since last enrolling-night?' inquired Lord George. 'Are we really forty thousand strong, or do we still speak in round numbers when we take the Association at that amount?'

'Our total now exceeds that number by a score and three,' Gashford replied, casting his eyes upon his papers.

'The funds?'

'Not VERY improving; but there is some manna in the wilderness, my lord. Hem! On Friday night the widows' mites dropped in. 'Forty scavengers, three and fourpence. An aged pew-opener of St Martin's parish, sixpence. A bell-ringer of the established church, sixpence. A Protestant infant, newly born, one halfpenny. The United Link Boys, three shillings - one bad. The anti-popish prisoners in Newgate, five and fourpence. A friend in Bedlam, half-a-crown. Dennis the hangman, one shilling.'

'That Dennis,' said his lordship, 'is an earnest man. I marked him in the crowd in Welbeck Street, last Friday.'

'A good man,' rejoined the secretary, 'a staunch, sincere, and truly zealous man.'

'He should be encouraged,' said Lord George. 'Make a note of Dennis. I'll talk with him.'

Gashford obeyed, and went on reading from his list:

'The Friends of Reason, half-a-guinea. The Friends of Liberty, half-a-guinea. The Friends of Peace, half-a-guinea. The Friends of Charity, half-a-guinea. The Friends of Mercy, half-a-guinea. The Associated Rememberers of Bloody Mary, half-a-guinea. The United Bulldogs, half-a-guinea.'

'The United Bulldogs,' said Lord George, biting his nails most horribly, 'are a new society, are they not?'

'Formerly the 'Prentice Knights, my lord. The indentures of the old members expiring by degrees, they changed their name, it seems, though they still have 'prentices among them, as well as workmen.'

'What is their president's name?' inquired Lord George.

'President,' said Gashford, reading, 'Mr Simon Tappertit.'

'I remember him. The little man, who sometimes brings an elderly sister to our meetings, and sometimes another female too, who is conscientious, I have no doubt, but not well-favoured?'

'The very same, my lord.'

'Tappertit is an earnest man,' said Lord George, thoughtfully. 'Eh, Gashford?'

'One of the foremost among them all, my lord. He snuffs the battle from afar, like the war-horse. He throws his hat up in the street as if he were inspired, and makes most stirring speeches from the shoulders of his friends.'

'Make a note of Tappertit,' said Lord George Gordon. 'We may advance him to a place of trust.'

'That,' rejoined the secretary, doing as he was told, 'is all - except Mrs Varden's box (fourteenth time of opening), seven shillings and sixpence in silver and copper, and half-a-guinea in gold; and Miggs (being the saving of a quarter's wages), one-and-threepence.'

'Miggs,' said Lord George. 'Is that a man?'

'The name is entered on the list as a woman,' replied the secretary. 'I think she is the tall spare female of whom you spoke just now, my lord, as not being well-favoured, who sometimes comes to hear the speeches - along with Tappertit and Mrs Varden.'

'Mrs Varden is the elderly lady then, is she?'

The secretary nodded, and rubbed the bridge of his nose with the feather of his pen.

'She is a zealous sister,' said Lord George. 'Her collection goes on prosperously, and is pursued with fervour. Has her husband joined?'

'A malignant,' returned the secretary, folding up his papers. 'Unworthy such a wife. He remains in outer darkness and steadily refuses.'

'The consequences be upon his own head! - Gashford!'

'My lord!'

'You don't think,' he turned restlessly in his bed as he spoke, 'these people will desert me, when the hour arrives? I have spoken boldly for them, ventured much, suppressed nothing. They'll not fall off, will they?'

'No fear of that, my lord,' said Gashford, with a meaning look, which was rather the involuntary expression of his own thoughts than intended as any confirmation of his words, for the other's face was turned away. 'Be sure there is no fear of that.'

'Nor,' he said with a more restless motion than before, 'of their - but they CAN sustain no harm from leaguings for this purpose. Right is on our side, though Might may be against us. You feel as sure of that as I - honestly, you do?'

The secretary was beginning with 'You do not doubt,' when the other interrupted him, and impatiently rejoined:

'Doubt. No. Who says I doubt? If I doubted, should I cast away relatives, friends, everything, for this unhappy country's sake; this unhappy country,' he cried, springing up in bed, after repeating the phrase 'unhappy country's sake' to himself, at least a dozen times, 'forsaken of God and man, delivered over to a dangerous confederacy of Popish powers; the prey of corruption, idolatry, and despotism! Who says I doubt? Am I called, and chosen, and faithful? Tell me. Am I, or am I not?'

'To God, the country, and yourself,' cried Gashford.

'I am. I will be. I say again, I will be: to the block. Who says as much! Do you? Does any man alive?'

The secretary drooped his head with an expression of perfect acquiescence in anything that had been said or might be; and Lord George gradually sinking down upon his pillow, fell asleep.

Although there was something very ludicrous in his vehement manner, taken in conjunction with his meagre aspect and ungraceful presence, it would scarcely have provoked a smile in any man of kindly feeling; or even if it had, he would have felt sorry and almost angry with himself next moment, for yielding to the impulse. This lord was sincere in his violence and in his wavering. A nature prone to false enthusiasm, and the vanity of being a leader, were the worst qualities apparent in his composition. All the rest was weakness - sheer weakness; and it is the unhappy lot of thoroughly weak men, that their very sympathies, affections, confidences - all the qualities which in better constituted minds are virtues - dwindle into foibles, or turn into downright vices.

Gashford, with many a sly look towards the bed, sat chuckling at his master's folly, until his deep and heavy breathing warned him that he might retire. Locking his desk, and replacing it within the trunk (but not before he had taken from a secret lining two printed handbills), he cautiously withdrew; looking back, as he went, at the pale face of the slumbering man, above whose head the dusty plumes that crowned the Maypole couch, waved drearily and sadly as though it were a bier.

Stopping on the staircase to listen that all was quiet, and to take off his shoes lest his footsteps should alarm any light sleeper who might be near at hand, he descended to the ground floor, and thrust one of his bills beneath the great door of the house. That done, he crept softly back to his own chamber, and from the window let another fall - carefully wrapt round a stone to save it from the wind - into the yard below.

They were addressed on the back 'To every Protestant into whose hands this shall come,' and bore within what follows:

'Men and Brethren. Whoever shall find this letter, will take it as a warning to join, without delay, the friends of Lord George Gordon. There are great events at hand; and the times are dangerous and troubled. Read this carefully, keep it clean, and drop it somewhere else. For King and Country. Union.' 'More seed, more seed,' said Gashford as he closed the window. 'When will the harvest come!'