

Chapter XXXVII

To surround anything, however monstrous or ridiculous, with an air of mystery, is to invest it with a secret charm, and power of attraction which to the crowd is irresistible. False priests, false prophets, false doctors, false patriots, false prodigies of every kind, veiling their proceedings in mystery, have always addressed themselves at an immense advantage to the popular credulity, and have been, perhaps, more indebted to that resource in gaining and keeping for a time the upper hand of Truth and Common Sense, than to any half-dozen items in the whole catalogue of imposture. Curiosity is, and has been from the creation of the world, a master-passion. To awaken it, to gratify it by slight degrees, and yet leave something always in suspense, is to establish the surest hold that can be had, in wrong, on the unthinking portion of mankind.

If a man had stood on London Bridge, calling till he was hoarse, upon the passers-by, to join with Lord George Gordon, although for an object which no man understood, and which in that very incident had a charm of its own, - the probability is, that he might have influenced a score of people in a month. If all zealous Protestants had been publicly urged to join an association for the avowed purpose of singing a hymn or two occasionally, and hearing some indifferent speeches made, and ultimately of petitioning Parliament not to pass an act for abolishing the penal laws against Roman Catholic priests, the penalty of perpetual imprisonment denounced against those who educated children in that persuasion, and the disqualification of all members of the Romish church to inherit real property in the United Kingdom by right of purchase or descent, - matters so far removed from the business and bosoms of the mass, might perhaps have called together a hundred people. But when vague rumours got abroad, that in this Protestant association a secret power was mustering against the government for undefined and mighty purposes; when the air was filled with whispers of a confederacy among the Popish powers to degrade and enslave England, establish an inquisition in London, and turn the pens of Smithfield market into stakes and cauldrons; when terrors and alarms which no man understood were perpetually broached, both in and out of Parliament, by one enthusiast who did not understand himself, and bygone bugbears which had lain quietly in their graves for centuries, were raised again to haunt the ignorant and credulous; when all this was done, as it were, in the dark, and secret invitations to join the Great Protestant Association in defence of religion, life, and liberty, were dropped in the public ways, thrust under the house-doors, tossed in at windows, and pressed into the hands of those who trod the streets by night; when they glared from every wall, and shone on every post and pillar, so that stocks and stones appeared infected with the common fear, urging all men to join together blindfold in resistance of they knew not what, they knew not

why; - then the mania spread indeed, and the body, still increasing every day, grew forty thousand strong.

So said, at least, in this month of March, 1780, Lord George Gordon, the Association's president. Whether it was the fact or otherwise, few men knew or cared to ascertain. It had never made any public demonstration; had scarcely ever been heard of, save through him; had never been seen; and was supposed by many to be the mere creature of his disordered brain. He was accustomed to talk largely about numbers of men - stimulated, as it was inferred, by certain successful disturbances, arising out of the same subject, which had occurred in Scotland in the previous year; was looked upon as a cracked-brained member of the lower house, who attacked all parties and sided with none, and was very little regarded. It was known that there was discontent abroad - there always is; he had been accustomed to address the people by placard, speech, and pamphlet, upon other questions; nothing had come, in England, of his past exertions, and nothing was apprehended from his present. Just as he has come upon the reader, he had come, from time to time, upon the public, and been forgotten in a day; as suddenly as he appears in these pages, after a blank of five long years, did he and his proceedings begin to force themselves, about this period, upon the notice of thousands of people, who had mingled in active life during the whole interval, and who, without being deaf or blind to passing events, had scarcely ever thought of him before.

'My lord,' said Gashford in his ear, as he drew the curtains of his bed betimes; 'my lord!'

'Yes - who's that? What is it?'

'The clock has struck nine,' returned the secretary, with meekly folded hands. 'You have slept well? I hope you have slept well? If my prayers are heard, you are refreshed indeed.'

'To say the truth, I have slept so soundly,' said Lord George, rubbing his eyes and looking round the room, 'that I don't remember quite - what place is this?'

'My lord!' cried Gashford, with a smile.

'Oh!' returned his superior. 'Yes. You're not a Jew then?'

'A Jew!' exclaimed the pious secretary, recoiling.

'I dreamed that we were Jews, Gashford. You and I - both of us - Jews with long beards.'

'Heaven forbid, my lord! We might as well be Papists.'

'I suppose we might,' returned the other, very quickly. 'Eh? You really think so, Gashford?' 'Surely I do,' the secretary cried, with looks of great surprise.

'Humph!' he muttered. 'Yes, that seems reasonable.'

'I hope my lord - ' the secretary began.

'Hope!' he echoed, interrupting him. 'Why do you say, you hope? There's no harm in thinking of such things.'

'Not in dreams,' returned the Secretary.

'In dreams! No, nor waking either.'

- "Called, and chosen, and faithful," said Gashford, taking up Lord George's watch which lay upon a chair, and seeming to read the inscription on the seal, abstractedly.

It was the slightest action possible, not obtruded on his notice, and apparently the result of a moment's absence of mind, not worth remark. But as the words were uttered, Lord George, who had been going on impetuously, stopped short, reddened, and was silent. Apparently quite unconscious of this change in his demeanour, the wily Secretary stepped a little apart, under pretence of pulling up the window-blind, and returning when the other had had time to recover, said:

'The holy cause goes bravely on, my lord. I was not idle, even last night. I dropped two of the handbills before I went to bed, and both are gone this morning. Nobody in the house has mentioned the circumstance of finding them, though I have been downstairs full half-an-hour. One or two recruits will be their first fruit, I predict; and who shall say how many more, with Heaven's blessing on your inspired exertions!'

'It was a famous device in the beginning,' replied Lord George; 'an excellent device, and did good service in Scotland. It was quite worthy of you. You remind me not to be a sluggard, Gashford, when the vineyard is menaced with destruction, and may be trodden down by Papist feet. Let the horses be saddled in half-an-hour. We must be up and doing!'

He said this with a heightened colour, and in a tone of such enthusiasm, that the secretary deemed all further prompting needless, and withdrew.

- 'Dreaded he was a Jew,' he said thoughtfully, as he closed the bedroom door. 'He may come to that before he dies. It's like enough. Well! After a time, and provided I lost nothing by it, I don't see why that religion shouldn't suit me as well as any other. There are rich men among the Jews; shaving is very troublesome; - yes, it would suit me well enough. For the present, though, we must be Christian to the core. Our prophetic motto will suit all creeds in their turn, that's a comfort.' Reflecting on this source of consolation, he reached the sitting-room, and rang the bell for breakfast.

Lord George was quickly dressed (for his plain toilet was easily made), and as he was no less frugal in his repasts than in his Puritan attire, his share of the meal was soon dispatched. The secretary, however, more devoted to the good things of this world, or more intent on sustaining his strength and spirits for the sake of the Protestant cause, ate and drank to the last minute, and required indeed some three or four reminders from John Grueby, before he could resolve to tear himself away from Mr Willet's plentiful providing.

At length he came downstairs, wiping his greasy mouth, and having paid John Willet's bill, climbed into his saddle. Lord George, who had been walking up and down before the house talking to himself with earnest gestures, mounted his horse; and returning old John Willet's stately bow, as well as the parting salutation of a dozen idlers whom the rumour of a live lord being about to leave the Maypole had gathered round the porch, they rode away, with stout John Grueby in the rear.

If Lord George Gordon had appeared in the eyes of Mr Willet, overnight, a nobleman of somewhat quaint and odd exterior, the impression was confirmed this morning, and increased a hundredfold. Sitting bolt upright upon his bony steed, with his long, straight hair, dangling about his face and fluttering in the wind; his limbs all angular and rigid, his elbows stuck out on either side ungracefully, and his whole frame jogged and shaken at every motion of his horse's feet; a more grotesque or more ungainly figure can hardly be conceived. In lieu of whip, he carried in his hand a great gold-headed cane, as large as any footman carries in these days, and his various modes of holding this unwieldy weapon - now upright before his face like the sabre of a horse-soldier, now over his shoulder like a musket, now between his finger and thumb, but always in some uncouth and awkward fashion - contributed in no small degree to the absurdity of his appearance. Stiff, lank, and solemn, dressed in an unusual manner, and ostentatiously exhibiting - whether by design or accident - all his peculiarities of carriage, gesture, and conduct, all the qualities, natural and artificial, in which he differed from other men; he might have moved the sternest looker-on to laughter, and fully

provoked the smiles and whispered jests which greeted his departure from the Maypole inn.

Quite unconscious, however, of the effect he produced, he trotted on beside his secretary, talking to himself nearly all the way, until they came within a mile or two of London, when now and then some passenger went by who knew him by sight, and pointed him out to some one else, and perhaps stood looking after him, or cried in jest or earnest as it might be, 'Hurrah Geordie! No Popery!' At which he would gravely pull off his hat, and bow. When they reached the town and rode along the streets, these notices became more frequent; some laughed, some hissed, some turned their heads and smiled, some wondered who he was, some ran along the pavement by his side and cheered. When this happened in a crush of carts and chairs and coaches, he would make a dead stop, and pulling off his hat, cry, 'Gentlemen, No Popery!' to which the gentlemen would respond with lusty voices, and with three times three; and then, on he would go again with a score or so of the raggedest, following at his horse's heels, and shouting till their throats were parched.

The old ladies too - there were a great many old ladies in the streets, and these all knew him. Some of them - not those of the highest rank, but such as sold fruit from baskets and carried burdens - clapped their shrivelled hands, and raised a weazen, piping, shrill 'Hurrah, my lord.' Others waved their hands or handkerchiefs, or shook their fans or parasols, or threw up windows and called in haste to those within, to come and see. All these marks of popular esteem, he received with profound gravity and respect; bowing very low, and so frequently that his hat was more off his head than on; and looking up at the houses as he passed along, with the air of one who was making a public entry, and yet was not puffed up or proud.

So they rode (to the deep and unspeakable disgust of John Grueby) the whole length of Whitechapel, Leadenhall Street, and Cheapside, and into St Paul's Churchyard. Arriving close to the cathedral, he halted; spoke to Gashford; and looking upward at its lofty dome, shook his head, as though he said, 'The Church in Danger!' Then to be sure, the bystanders stretched their throats indeed; and he went on again with mighty acclamations from the mob, and lower bows than ever.

So along the Strand, up Swallow Street, into the Oxford Road, and thence to his house in Welbeck Street, near Cavendish Square, whither he was attended by a few dozen idlers; of whom he took leave on the steps with this brief parting, 'Gentlemen, No Popery. Good day. God bless you.' This being rather a shorter address than they expected, was received with some displeasure, and cries of 'A speech! a speech!' which might have been complied with, but that John

Grueby, making a mad charge upon them with all three horses, on his way to the stables, caused them to disperse into the adjoining fields, where they presently fell to pitch and toss, chuck-farthing, odd or even, dog-fighting, and other Protestant recreations.

In the afternoon Lord George came forth again, dressed in a black velvet coat, and trousers and waistcoat of the Gordon plaid, all of the same Quaker cut; and in this costume, which made him look a dozen times more strange and singular than before, went down on foot to Westminster. Gashford, meanwhile, bestirred himself in business matters; with which he was still engaged when, shortly after dusk, John Grueby entered and announced a visitor.

'Let him come in,' said Gashford.

'Here! come in!' growled John to somebody without; 'You're a Protestant, an't you?'

'I should think so,' replied a deep, gruff voice.

'You've the looks of it,' said John Grueby. 'I'd have known you for one, anywhere.' With which remark he gave the visitor admission, retired, and shut the door.

The man who now confronted Gashford, was a squat, thickset personage, with a low, retreating forehead, a coarse shock head of hair, and eyes so small and near together, that his broken nose alone seemed to prevent their meeting and fusing into one of the usual size. A dingy handkerchief twisted like a cord about his neck, left its great veins exposed to view, and they were swollen and starting, as though with gulping down strong passions, malice, and ill-will. His dress was of threadbare velveteen - a faded, rusty, whitened black, like the ashes of a pipe or a coal fire after a day's extinction; discoloured with the soils of many a stale debauch, and reeking yet with pot-house odours. In lieu of buckles at his knees, he wore unequal loops of packthread; and in his grimy hands he held a knotted stick, the knob of which was carved into a rough likeness of his own vile face. Such was the visitor who doffed his three-cornered hat in Gashford's presence, and waited, leering, for his notice.

'Ah! Dennis!' cried the secretary. 'Sit down.'

'I see my lord down yonder - ' cried the man, with a jerk of his thumb towards the quarter that he spoke of, 'and he says to me, says my lord, 'If you've nothing to do, Dennis, go up to my house and talk with Muster Gashford.' Of course I'd nothing to do, you know. These an't my working hours. Ha ha! I was a-taking the air when I see my lord,

that's what I was doing. I takes the air by night, as the howls does, Muster Gashford.'

And sometimes in the day-time, eh?' said the secretary - 'when you go out in state, you know.'

'Ha ha!' roared the fellow, smiting his leg; 'for a gentleman as 'ull say a pleasant thing in a pleasant way, give me Muster Gashford agin' all London and Westminster! My lord an't a bad 'un at that, but he's a fool to you. Ah to be sure, - when I go out in state.'

'And have your carriage,' said the secretary; 'and your chaplain, eh? and all the rest of it?'

'You'll be the death of me,' cried Dennis, with another roar, 'you will. But what's in the wind now, Muster Gashford,' he asked hoarsely, 'Eh? Are we to be under orders to pull down one of them Popish chapels - or what?'

'Hush!' said the secretary, suffering the faintest smile to play upon his face. 'Hush! God bless me, Dennis! We associate, you know, for strictly peaceable and lawful purposes.'

'I know, bless you,' returned the man, thrusting his tongue into his cheek; 'I entered a' purpose, didn't I!'

'No doubt,' said Gashford, smiling as before. And when he said so, Dennis roared again, and smote his leg still harder, and falling into fits of laughter, wiped his eyes with the corner of his neckerchief, and cried, 'Muster Gashford agin' all England hollow!'

'Lord George and I were talking of you last night,' said Gashford, after a pause. 'He says you are a very earnest fellow.'

'So I am,' returned the hangman.

'And that you truly hate the Papists.'

'So I do,' and he confirmed it with a good round oath. 'Lookye here, Muster Gashford,' said the fellow, laying his hat and stick upon the floor, and slowly beating the palm of one hand with the fingers of the other; 'Ob-serve. I'm a constitutional officer that works for my living, and does my work creditable. Do I, or do I not?'

'Unquestionably.'

'Very good. Stop a minute. My work, is sound, Protestant, constitutional, English work. Is it, or is it not?'

'No man alive can doubt it.'

'Nor dead neither. Parliament says this here - says Parliament, 'If any man, woman, or child, does anything which goes again a certain number of our acts' - how many hanging laws may there be at this present time, Muster Gashford? Fifty?'

'I don't exactly know how many,' replied Gashford, leaning back in his chair and yawning; 'a great number though.'

'Well, say fifty. Parliament says, 'If any man, woman, or child, does anything again any one of them fifty acts, that man, woman, or child, shall be worked off by Dennis.' George the Third steps in when they number very strong at the end of a sessions, and says, 'These are too many for Dennis. I'll have half for myself and Dennis shall have half for himself;' and sometimes he throws me in one over that I don't expect, as he did three year ago, when I got Mary Jones, a young woman of nineteen who come up to Tyburn with a infant at her breast, and was worked off for taking a piece of cloth off the counter of a shop in Ludgate Hill, and putting it down again when the shopman see her; and who had never done any harm before, and only tried to do that, in consequence of her husband having been pressed three weeks previous, and she being left to beg, with two young children - as was proved upon the trial. Ha ha! - Well! That being the law and the practice of England, is the glory of England, an't it, Muster Gashford?'

'Certainly,' said the secretary.

'And in times to come,' pursued the hangman, 'if our grandsons should think of their grandfathers' times, and find these things altered, they'll say, 'Those were days indeed, and we've been going down hill ever since.' Won't they, Muster Gashford?'

'I have no doubt they will,' said the secretary.

'Well then, look here,' said the hangman. 'If these Papists gets into power, and begins to boil and roast instead of hang, what becomes of my work! If they touch my work that's a part of so many laws, what becomes of the laws in general, what becomes of the religion, what becomes of the country! - Did you ever go to church, Muster Gashford?'

'Ever!' repeated the secretary with some indignation; 'of course.'

'Well,' said the ruffian, 'I've been once - twice, counting the time I was christened - and when I heard the Parliament prayed for, and thought how many new hanging laws they made every sessions, I considered that I was prayed for. Now mind, Muster Gashford,' said the fellow,

taking up his stick and shaking it with a ferocious air, 'I mustn't have my Protestant work touched, nor this here Protestant state of things altered in no degree, if I can help it; I mustn't have no Papists interfering with me, unless they come to be worked off in course of law; I mustn't have no biling, no roasting, no frying - nothing but hanging. My lord may well call me an earnest fellow. In support of the great Protestant principle of having plenty of that, I'll,' and here he beat his club upon the ground, 'burn, fight, kill - do anything you bid me, so that it's bold and devilish - though the end of it was, that I got hung myself. - There, Muster Gashford!'

He appropriately followed up this frequent prostitution of a noble word to the vilest purposes, by pouring out in a kind of ecstasy at least a score of most tremendous oaths; then wiped his heated face upon his neckerchief, and cried, 'No Popery! I'm a religious man, by G - !'

Gashford had leant back in his chair, regarding him with eyes so sunken, and so shadowed by his heavy brows, that for aught the hangman saw of them, he might have been stone blind. He remained smiling in silence for a short time longer, and then said, slowly and distinctly:

'You are indeed an earnest fellow, Dennis - a most valuable fellow - the staunchest man I know of in our ranks. But you must calm yourself; you must be peaceful, lawful, mild as any lamb. I am sure you will be though.'

'Ay, ay, we shall see, Muster Gashford, we shall see. You won't have to complain of me,' returned the other, shaking his head.

'I am sure I shall not,' said the secretary in the same mild tone, and with the same emphasis. 'We shall have, we think, about next month, or May, when this Papist relief bill comes before the house, to convene our whole body for the first time. My lord has thoughts of our walking in procession through the streets - just as an innocent display of strength - and accompanying our petition down to the door of the House of Commons.'

'The sooner the better,' said Dennis, with another oath.

'We shall have to draw up in divisions, our numbers being so large; and, I believe I may venture to say,' resumed Gashford, affecting not to hear the interruption, 'though I have no direct instructions to that effect - that Lord George has thought of you as an excellent leader for one of these parties. I have no doubt you would be an admirable one.'

'Try me,' said the fellow, with an ugly wink.

'You would be cool, I know,' pursued the secretary, still smiling, and still managing his eyes so that he could watch him closely, and really not be seen in turn, 'obedient to orders, and perfectly temperate. You would lead your party into no danger, I am certain.'

'I'd lead them, Muster Gashford,' - the hangman was beginning in a reckless way, when Gashford started forward, laid his finger on his lips, and feigned to write, just as the door was opened by John Grueby.

'Oh!' said John, looking in; 'here's another Protestant.'

'Some other room, John,' cried Gashford in his blandest voice. 'I am engaged just now.'

But John had brought this new visitor to the door, and he walked in unbidden, as the words were uttered; giving to view the form and features, rough attire, and reckless air, of Hugh.