

Chapter XL

Little thinking of the plan for his happy settlement in life which had suggested itself to the teeming brain of his provident commander, Hugh made no pause until Saint Dunstan's giants struck the hour above him, when he worked the handle of a pump which stood hard by, with great vigour, and thrusting his head under the spout, let the water gush upon him until a little stream ran down from every uncombed hair, and he was wet to the waist. Considerably refreshed by this ablution, both in mind and body, and almost sobered for the time, he dried himself as he best could; then crossed the road, and plied the knocker of the Middle Temple gate.

The night-porter looked through a small grating in the portal with a surly eye, and cried 'Halloa!' which greeting Hugh returned in kind, and bade him open quickly.

'We don't sell beer here,' cried the man; 'what else do you want?'

'To come in,' Hugh replied, with a kick at the door.

'Where to go?'

'Paper Buildings.'

'Whose chambers?'

'Sir John Chester's.' Each of which answers, he emphasised with another kick.

After a little growling on the other side, the gate was opened, and he passed in: undergoing a close inspection from the porter as he did so.

'YOU wanting Sir John, at this time of night!' said the man.

'Ay!' said Hugh. 'I! What of that?'

'Why, I must go with you and see that you do, for I don't believe it.'

'Come along then.'

Eyeing him with suspicious looks, the man, with key and lantern, walked on at his side, and attended him to Sir John Chester's door, at which Hugh gave one knock, that echoed through the dark staircase like a ghostly summons, and made the dull light tremble in the drowsy lamp.

'Do you think he wants me now?' said Hugh.

Before the man had time to answer, a footstep was heard within, a light appeared, and Sir John, in his dressing-gown and slippers, opened the door.

'I ask your pardon, Sir John,' said the porter, pulling off his hat. 'Here's a young man says he wants to speak to you. It's late for strangers. I thought it best to see that all was right.'

'Aha!' cried Sir John, raising his eyebrows. 'It's you, messenger, is it? Go in. Quite right, friend. I commend your prudence highly. Thank you. God bless you. Good night.'

To be commended, thanked, God-blessed, and bade good night by one who carried 'Sir' before his name, and wrote himself M.P. to boot, was something for a porter. He withdrew with much humility and reverence. Sir John followed his late visitor into the dressing-room, and sitting in his easy-chair before the fire, and moving it so that he could see him as he stood, hat in hand, beside the door, looked at him from head to foot.

The old face, calm and pleasant as ever; the complexion, quite juvenile in its bloom and clearness; the same smile; the wonted precision and elegance of dress; the white, well-ordered teeth; the delicate hands; the composed and quiet manner; everything as it used to be: no mark of age or passion, envy, hate, or discontent: all unruffled and serene, and quite delightful to behold.

He wrote himself M.P. - but how? Why, thus. It was a proud family - more proud, indeed, than wealthy. He had stood in danger of arrest; of bailiffs, and a jail - a vulgar jail, to which the common people with small incomes went. Gentlemen of ancient houses have no privilege of exemption from such cruel laws - unless they are of one great house, and then they have. A proud man of his stock and kindred had the means of sending him there. He offered - not indeed to pay his debts, but to let him sit for a close borough until his own son came of age, which, if he lived, would come to pass in twenty years. It was quite as good as an Insolvent Act, and infinitely more genteel. So Sir John Chester was a member of Parliament.

But how Sir John? Nothing so simple, or so easy. One touch with a sword of state, and the transformation was effected. John Chester, Esquire, M.P., attended court - went up with an address - headed a deputation. Such elegance of manner, so many graces of deportment, such powers of conversation, could never pass unnoticed. Mr was too common for such merit. A man so gentlemanly should have been - but Fortune is capricious - born a Duke: just as some dukes should have been born labourers. He caught the fancy of the king, knelt down a

grub, and rose a butterfly. John Chester, Esquire, was knighted and became Sir John.

'I thought when you left me this evening, my esteemed acquaintance,' said Sir John after a pretty long silence, 'that you intended to return with all despatch?'

'So I did, master.'

'And so you have?' he retorted, glancing at his watch. 'Is that what you would say?'

Instead of replying, Hugh changed the leg on which he leant, shuffled his cap from one hand to the other, looked at the ground, the wall, the ceiling, and finally at Sir John himself; before whose pleasant face he lowered his eyes again, and fixed them on the floor.

'And how have you been employing yourself in the meanwhile?' quoth Sir John, lazily crossing his legs. 'Where have you been? what harm have you been doing?'

'No harm at all, master,' growled Hugh, with humility. 'I have only done as you ordered.'

'As I WHAT?' returned Sir John.

'Well then,' said Hugh uneasily, 'as you advised, or said I ought, or said I might, or said that you would do, if you was me. Don't be so hard upon me, master.'

Something like an expression of triumph in the perfect control he had established over this rough instrument appeared in the knight's face for an instant; but it vanished directly, as he said - paring his nails while speaking:

'When you say I ordered you, my good fellow, you imply that I directed you to do something for me - something I wanted done - something for my own ends and purposes - you see? Now I am sure I needn't enlarge upon the extreme absurdity of such an idea, however unintentional; so please - ' and here he turned his eyes upon him - 'to be more guarded. Will you?'

'I meant to give you no offence,' said Hugh. 'I don't know what to say. You catch me up so very short.'

'You will be caught up much shorter, my good friend - infinitely shorter - one of these days, depend upon it,' replied his patron calmly.

'By-the-bye, instead of wondering why you have been so long, my wonder should be why you came at all. Why did you?'

'You know, master,' said Hugh, 'that I couldn't read the bill I found, and that supposing it to be something particular from the way it was wrapped up, I brought it here.'

'And could you ask no one else to read it, Bruin?' said Sir John.

'No one that I could trust with secrets, master. Since Barnaby Rudge was lost sight of for good and all - and that's five years ago - I haven't talked with any one but you.'

'You have done me honour, I am sure.'

'I have come to and fro, master, all through that time, when there was anything to tell, because I knew that you'd be angry with me if I stayed away,' said Hugh, blurting the words out, after an embarrassed silence; 'and because I wished to please you if I could, and not to have you go against me. There. That's the true reason why I came to-night. You know that, master, I am sure.'

'You are a specious fellow,' returned Sir John, fixing his eyes upon him, 'and carry two faces under your hood, as well as the best. Didn't you give me in this room, this evening, any other reason; no dislike of anybody who has slighted you lately, on all occasions, abused you, treated you with rudeness; acted towards you, more as if you were a mongrel dog than a man like himself?'

'To be sure I did!' cried Hugh, his passion rising, as the other meant it should; 'and I say it all over now, again. I'd do anything to have some revenge on him - anything. And when you told me that he and all the Catholics would suffer from those who joined together under that handbill, I said I'd make one of 'em, if their master was the devil himself. I AM one of 'em. See whether I am as good as my word and turn out to be among the foremost, or no. I mayn't have much head, master, but I've head enough to remember those that use me ill. You shall see, and so shall he, and so shall hundreds more, how my spirit backs me when the time comes. My bark is nothing to my bite. Some that I know had better have a wild lion among 'em than me, when I am fairly loose - they had!'

The knight looked at him with a smile of far deeper meaning than ordinary; and pointing to the old cupboard, followed him with his eyes while he filled and drank a glass of liquor; and smiled when his back was turned, with deeper meaning yet.

'You are in a blustering mood, my friend,' he said, when Hugh confronted him again.

'Not I, master!' cried Hugh. 'I don't say half I mean. I can't. I haven't got the gift. There are talkers enough among us; I'll be one of the doers.'

'Oh! you have joined those fellows then?' said Sir John, with an air of most profound indifference.

'Yes. I went up to the house you told me of; and got put down upon the muster. There was another man there, named Dennis - '

'Dennis, eh!' cried Sir John, laughing. 'Ay, ay! a pleasant fellow, I believe?'

'A roaring dog, master - one after my own heart - hot upon the matter too - red hot.'

'So I have heard,' replied Sir John, carelessly. 'You don't happen to know his trade, do you?'

'He wouldn't say,' cried Hugh. 'He keeps it secret.'

'Ha ha!' laughed Sir John. 'A strange fancy - a weakness with some persons - you'll know it one day, I dare swear.'

'We're intimate already,' said Hugh.

'Quite natural! And have been drinking together, eh?' pursued Sir John. 'Did you say what place you went to in company, when you left Lord George's?'

Hugh had not said or thought of saying, but he told him; and this inquiry being followed by a long train of questions, he related all that had passed both in and out of doors, the kind of people he had seen, their numbers, state of feeling, mode of conversation, apparent expectations and intentions. His questioning was so artfully contrived, that he seemed even in his own eyes to volunteer all this information rather than to have it wrested from him; and he was brought to this state of feeling so naturally, that when Mr Chester yawned at length and declared himself quite wearied out, he made a rough kind of excuse for having talked so much.

'There - get you gone,' said Sir John, holding the door open in his hand. 'You have made a pretty evening's work. I told you not to do this. You may get into trouble. You'll have an opportunity of revenging

yourself on your proud friend Haredale, though, and for that, you'd hazard anything, I suppose?'

'I would,' retorted Hugh, stopping in his passage out and looking back; 'but what do I risk! What do I stand a chance of losing, master? Friends, home? A fig for 'em all; I have none; they are nothing to me. Give me a good scuffle; let me pay off old scores in a bold riot where there are men to stand by me; and then use me as you like - it don't matter much to me what the end is!'

'What have you done with that paper?' said Sir John.

'I have it here, master.'

'Drop it again as you go along; it's as well not to keep such things about you.'

Hugh nodded, and touching his cap with an air of as much respect as he could summon up, departed.

Sir John, fastening the doors behind him, went back to his dressing-room, and sat down once again before the fire, at which he gazed for a long time, in earnest meditation.

'This happens fortunately,' he said, breaking into a smile, 'and promises well. Let me see. My relative and I, who are the most Protestant fellows in the world, give our worst wishes to the Roman Catholic cause; and to Saville, who introduces their bill, I have a personal objection besides; but as each of us has himself for the first article in his creed, we cannot commit ourselves by joining with a very extravagant madman, such as this Gordon most undoubtedly is. Now really, to foment his disturbances in secret, through the medium of such a very apt instrument as my savage friend here, may further our real ends; and to express at all becoming seasons, in moderate and polite terms, a disapprobation of his proceedings, though we agree with him in principle, will certainly be to gain a character for honesty and uprightness of purpose, which cannot fail to do us infinite service, and to raise us into some importance. Good! So much for public grounds. As to private considerations, I confess that if these vagabonds WOULD make some riotous demonstration (which does not appear impossible), and WOULD inflict some little chastisement on Haredale as a not inactive man among his sect, it would be extremely agreeable to my feelings, and would amuse me beyond measure. Good again! Perhaps better!'

When he came to this point, he took a pinch of snuff; then beginning slowly to undress, he resumed his meditations, by saying with a smile:

'I fear, I DO fear exceedingly, that my friend is following fast in the footsteps of his mother. His intimacy with Mr Dennis is very ominous. But I have no doubt he must have come to that end any way. If I lend him a helping hand, the only difference is, that he may, upon the whole, possibly drink a few gallons, or puncheons, or hogsheads, less in this life than he otherwise would. It's no business of mine. It's a matter of very small importance!'

So he took another pinch of snuff, and went to bed.