

Chapter XLI

From the workshop of the Golden Key, there issued forth a tinkling sound, so merry and good-humoured, that it suggested the idea of some one working blithely, and made quite pleasant music. No man who hammered on at a dull monotonous duty, could have brought such cheerful notes from steel and iron; none but a chirping, healthy, honest-hearted fellow, who made the best of everything, and felt kindly towards everybody, could have done it for an instant. He might have been a coppersmith, and still been musical. If he had sat in a jolting waggon, full of rods of iron, it seemed as if he would have brought some harmony out of it.

Tink, tink, tink - clear as a silver bell, and audible at every pause of the streets' harsher noises, as though it said, 'I don't care; nothing puts me out; I am resolved to be happy.' Women scolded, children squalled, heavy carts went rumbling by, horrible cries proceeded from the lungs of hawkers; still it struck in again, no higher, no lower, no louder, no softer; not thrusting itself on people's notice a bit the more for having been outdone by louder sounds - tink, tink, tink, tink, tink.

It was a perfect embodiment of the still small voice, free from all cold, hoarseness, huskiness, or unhealthiness of any kind; foot-passengers slackened their pace, and were disposed to linger near it; neighbours who had got up splenetic that morning, felt good-humour stealing on them as they heard it, and by degrees became quite sprightly; mothers danced their babies to its ringing; still the same magical tink, tink, tink, came gaily from the workshop of the Golden Key.

Who but the locksmith could have made such music! A gleam of sun shining through the unsashed window, and chequering the dark workshop with a broad patch of light, fell full upon him, as though attracted by his sunny heart. There he stood working at his anvil, his face all radiant with exercise and gladness, his sleeves turned up, his wig pushed off his shining forehead - the easiest, freest, happiest man in all the world. Beside him sat a sleek cat, purring and winking in the light, and falling every now and then into an idle doze, as from excess of comfort. Toby looked on from a tall bench hard by; one beaming smile, from his broad nut-brown face down to the slack-baked buckles in his shoes. The very locks that hung around had something jovial in their rust, and seemed like gouty gentlemen of hearty natures, disposed to joke on their infirmities. There was nothing surly or severe in the whole scene. It seemed impossible that any one of the innumerable keys could fit a churlish strong-box or a prison-door. Cellars of beer and wine, rooms where there were fires, books, gossip, and cheering laughter - these were their proper sphere of action. Places of distrust and cruelty, and restraint, they would have left quadruple-locked for ever.

Tink, tink, tink. The locksmith paused at last, and wiped his brow. The silence roused the cat, who, jumping softly down, crept to the door, and watched with tiger eyes a bird-cage in an opposite window. Gabriel lifted Toby to his mouth, and took a hearty draught.

Then, as he stood upright, with his head flung back, and his portly chest thrown out, you would have seen that Gabriel's lower man was clothed in military gear. Glancing at the wall beyond, there might have been espied, hanging on their several pegs, a cap and feather, broadsword, sash, and coat of scarlet; which any man learned in such matters would have known from their make and pattern to be the uniform of a serjeant in the Royal East London Volunteers.

As the locksmith put his mug down, empty, on the bench whence it had smiled on him before, he glanced at these articles with a laughing eye, and looking at them with his head a little on one side, as though he would get them all into a focus, said, leaning on his hammer:

'Time was, now, I remember, when I was like to run mad with the desire to wear a coat of that colour. If any one (except my father) had called me a fool for my pains, how I should have fired and fumed! But what a fool I must have been, sure-ly!'

'Ah!' sighed Mrs Varden, who had entered unobserved. 'A fool indeed. A man at your time of life, Varden, should know better now.'

'Why, what a ridiculous woman you are, Martha,' said the locksmith, turning round with a smile.

'Certainly,' replied Mrs V. with great demureness. 'Of course I am. I know that, Varden. Thank you.'

'I mean - ' began the locksmith.

'Yes,' said his wife, 'I know what you mean. You speak quite plain enough to be understood, Varden. It's very kind of you to adapt yourself to my capacity, I am sure.'

'Tut, tut, Martha,' rejoined the locksmith; 'don't take offence at nothing. I mean, how strange it is of you to run down volunteering, when it's done to defend you and all the other women, and our own fireside and everybody else's, in case of need.'

'It's unchristian,' cried Mrs Varden, shaking her head.

'Unchristian!' said the locksmith. 'Why, what the devil - '

Mrs Varden looked at the ceiling, as in expectation that the consequence of this profanity would be the immediate descent of the four-post bedstead on the second floor, together with the best sitting-room on the first; but no visible judgment occurring, she heaved a deep sigh, and begged her husband, in a tone of resignation, to go on, and by all means to blaspheme as much as possible, because he knew she liked it.

The locksmith did for a moment seem disposed to gratify her, but he gave a great gulp, and mildly rejoined:

'I was going to say, what on earth do you call it unchristian for? Which would be most unchristian, Martha - to sit quietly down and let our houses be sacked by a foreign army, or to turn out like men and drive 'em off? Shouldn't I be a nice sort of a Christian, if I crept into a corner of my own chimney and looked on while a parcel of whiskered savages bore off Dolly - or you?'

When he said 'or you,' Mrs Varden, despite herself, relaxed into a smile. There was something complimentary in the idea. 'In such a state of things as that, indeed - ' she simpered.

'As that!' repeated the locksmith. 'Well, that would be the state of things directly. Even Miggs would go. Some black tambourine-player, with a great turban on, would be bearing HER off, and, unless the tambourine-player was proof against kicking and scratching, it's my belief he'd have the worst of it. Ha ha ha! I'd forgive the tambourine-player. I wouldn't have him interfered with on any account, poor fellow.' And here the locksmith laughed again so heartily, that tears came into his eyes - much to Mrs Varden's indignation, who thought the capture of so sound a Protestant and estimable a private character as Miggs by a pagan negro, a circumstance too shocking and awful for contemplation.

The picture Gabriel had drawn, indeed, threatened serious consequences, and would indubitably have led to them, but luckily at that moment a light footstep crossed the threshold, and Dolly, running in, threw her arms round her old father's neck and hugged him tight.

'Here she is at last!' cried Gabriel. 'And how well you look, Doll, and how late you are, my darling!'

How well she looked? Well? Why, if he had exhausted every laudatory adjective in the dictionary, it wouldn't have been praise enough. When and where was there ever such a plump, roguish, comely, bright-eyed, enticing, bewitching, captivating, maddening little puss in all this world, as Dolly! What was the Dolly of five years ago, to the Dolly of

that day! How many coachmakers, saddlers, cabinet-makers, and professors of other useful arts, had deserted their fathers, mothers, sisters, brothers, and, most of all, their cousins, for the love of her! How many unknown gentlemen - supposed to be of mighty fortunes, if not titles - had waited round the corner after dark, and tempted Miggs the incorruptible, with golden guineas, to deliver offers of marriage folded up in love-letters! How many disconsolate fathers and substantial tradesmen had waited on the locksmith for the same purpose, with dismal tales of how their sons had lost their appetites, and taken to shut themselves up in dark bedrooms, and wandering in desolate suburbs with pale faces, and all because of Dolly Varden's loveliness and cruelty! How many young men, in all previous times of unprecedented steadiness, had turned suddenly wild and wicked for the same reason, and, in an ecstasy of unrequited love, taken to wrench off door-knockers, and invert the boxes of rheumatic watchmen! How had she recruited the king's service, both by sea and land, through rendering desperate his loving subjects between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five! How many young ladies had publicly professed, with tears in their eyes, that for their tastes she was much too short, too tall, too bold, too cold, too stout, too thin, too fair, too dark - too everything but handsome! How many old ladies, taking counsel together, had thanked Heaven their daughters were not like her, and had hoped she might come to no harm, and had thought she would come to no good, and had wondered what people saw in her, and had arrived at the conclusion that she was 'going off' in her looks, or had never come on in them, and that she was a thorough imposition and a popular mistake!

And yet here was this same Dolly Varden, so whimsical and hard to please that she was Dolly Varden still, all smiles and dimples and pleasant looks, and caring no more for the fifty or sixty young fellows who at that very moment were breaking their hearts to marry her, than if so many oysters had been crossed in love and opened afterwards.

Dolly hugged her father as has been already stated, and having hugged her mother also, accompanied both into the little parlour where the cloth was already laid for dinner, and where Miss Miggs - a trifle more rigid and bony than of yore - received her with a sort of hysterical gasp, intended for a smile. Into the hands of that young virgin, she delivered her bonnet and walking dress (all of a dreadful, artful, and designing kind), and then said with a laugh, which rivalled the locksmith's music, 'How glad I always am to be at home again!'

'And how glad we always are, Doll,' said her father, putting back the dark hair from her sparkling eyes, 'to have you at home. Give me a kiss.'

If there had been anybody of the male kind there to see her do it - but there was not - it was a mercy.

'I don't like your being at the Warren,' said the locksmith, 'I can't bear to have you out of my sight. And what is the news over yonder, Doll?'

'What news there is, I think you know already,' replied his daughter. 'I am sure you do though.'

'Ay?' cried the locksmith. 'What's that?'

'Come, come,' said Dolly, 'you know very well. I want you to tell me why Mr Haredale - oh, how gruff he is again, to be sure! - has been away from home for some days past, and why he is travelling about (we know he IS travelling, because of his letters) without telling his own niece why or wherefore.'

'Miss Emma doesn't want to know, I'll swear,' returned the locksmith.

'I don't know that,' said Dolly; 'but I do, at any rate. Do tell me. Why is he so secret, and what is this ghost story, which nobody is to tell Miss Emma, and which seems to be mixed up with his going away? Now I see you know by your colouring so.'

'What the story means, or is, or has to do with it, I know no more than you, my dear,' returned the locksmith, 'except that it's some foolish fear of little Solomon's - which has, indeed, no meaning in it, I suppose. As to Mr Haredale's journey, he goes, as I believe - '

'Yes,' said Dolly.

'As I believe,' resumed the locksmith, pinching her cheek, 'on business, Doll. What it may be, is quite another matter. Read Blue Beard, and don't be too curious, pet; it's no business of yours or mine, depend upon that; and here's dinner, which is much more to the purpose.'

Dolly might have remonstrated against this summary dismissal of the subject, notwithstanding the appearance of dinner, but at the mention of Blue Beard Mrs Varden interposed, protesting she could not find it in her conscience to sit tamely by, and hear her child recommended to peruse the adventures of a Turk and Mussulman - far less of a fabulous Turk, which she considered that potentate to be. She held that, in such stirring and tremendous times as those in which they lived, it would be much more to the purpose if Dolly became a regular subscriber to the Thunderer, where she would have an opportunity of reading Lord George Gordon's speeches word for word, which would be a greater comfort and solace to her, than a hundred and fifty Blue

Beards ever could impart. She appealed in support of this proposition to Miss Miggs, then in waiting, who said that indeed the peace of mind she had derived from the perusal of that paper generally, but especially of one article of the very last week as ever was, entitled 'Great Britain drenched in gore,' exceeded all belief; the same composition, she added, had also wrought such a comforting effect on the mind of a married sister of hers, then resident at Golden Lion Court, number twenty-sivin, second bell-handle on the right-hand door-post, that, being in a delicate state of health, and in fact expecting an addition to her family, she had been seized with fits directly after its perusal, and had raved of the Inquisition ever since; to the great improvement of her husband and friends. Miss Miggs went on to say that she would recommend all those whose hearts were hardened to hear Lord George themselves, whom she commended first, in respect of his steady Protestantism, then of his oratory, then of his eyes, then of his nose, then of his legs, and lastly of his figure generally, which she looked upon as fit for any statue, prince, or angel, to which sentiment Mrs Varden fully subscribed.

Mrs Varden having cut in, looked at a box upon the mantelshelf, painted in imitation of a very red-brick dwelling-house, with a yellow roof; having at top a real chimney, down which voluntary subscribers dropped their silver, gold, or pence, into the parlour; and on the door the counterfeit presentment of a brass plate, whereon was legibly inscribed 'Protestant Association:' - and looking at it, said, that it was to her a source of poignant misery to think that Varden never had, of all his substance, dropped anything into that temple, save once in secret - as she afterwards discovered - two fragments of tobacco-pipe, which she hoped would not be put down to his last account. That Dolly, she was grieved to say, was no less backward in her contributions, better loving, as it seemed, to purchase ribbons and such gauds, than to encourage the great cause, then in such heavy tribulation; and that she did entreat her (her father she much feared could not be moved) not to despise, but imitate, the bright example of Miss Miggs, who flung her wages, as it were, into the very countenance of the Pope, and bruised his features with her quarter's money.

'Oh, mim,' said Miggs, 'don't relude to that. I had no intentions, mim, that nobody should know. Such sacrifices as I can make, are quite a widder's mite. It's all I have,' cried Miggs with a great burst of tears - for with her they never came on by degrees - 'but it's made up to me in other ways; it's well made up.'

This was quite true, though not perhaps in the sense that Miggs intended. As she never failed to keep her self-denial full in Mrs Varden's view, it drew forth so many gifts of caps and gowns and other articles of dress, that upon the whole the red-brick house was

perhaps the best investment for her small capital she could possibly have hit upon; returning her interest, at the rate of seven or eight per cent in money, and fifty at least in personal repute and credit.

'You needn't cry, Miggs,' said Mrs Varden, herself in tears; 'you needn't be ashamed of it, though your poor mistress IS on the same side.'

Miggs howled at this remark, in a peculiarly dismal way, and said she knowed that master hated her. That it was a dreadful thing to live in families and have dislikes, and not give satisfactions. That to make divisions was a thing she could not abear to think of, neither could her feelings let her do it. That if it was master's wishes as she and him should part, it was best they should part, and she hoped he might be the happier for it, and always wished him well, and that he might find somebody as would meet his dispositions. It would be a hard trial, she said, to part from such a missis, but she could meet any suffering when her conscience told her she was in the rights, and therefore she was willing even to go that lengths. She did not think, she added, that she could long survive the separations, but, as she was hated and looked upon unpleasant, perhaps her dying as soon as possible would be the best endings for all parties. With this affecting conclusion, Miss Miggs shed more tears, and sobbed abundantly.

'Can you bear this, Varden?' said his wife in a solemn voice, laying down her knife and fork.

'Why, not very well, my dear,' rejoined the locksmith, 'but I try to keep my temper.'

'Don't let there be words on my account, mim,' sobbed Miggs. 'It's much the best that we should part. I wouldn't stay - oh, gracious me! - and make dissensions, not for a annual gold mine, and found in tea and sugar.'

Lest the reader should be at any loss to discover the cause of Miss Miggs's deep emotion, it may be whispered apart that, happening to be listening, as her custom sometimes was, when Gabriel and his wife conversed together, she had heard the locksmith's joke relative to the foreign black who played the tambourine, and bursting with the spiteful feelings which the taunt awoke in her fair breast, exploded in the manner we have witnessed. Matters having now arrived at a crisis, the locksmith, as usual, and for the sake of peace and quietness, gave in.

'What are you crying for, girl?' he said. 'What's the matter with you? What are you talking about hatred for? I don't hate you; I don't hate

anybody. Dry your eyes and make yourself agreeable, in Heaven's name, and let us all be happy while we can.'

The allied powers deeming it good generalship to consider this a sufficient apology on the part of the enemy, and confession of having been in the wrong, did dry their eyes and take it in good part. Miss Miggs observed that she bore no malice, no not to her greatest foe, whom she rather loved the more indeed, the greater persecution she sustained. Mrs Varden approved of this meek and forgiving spirit in high terms, and incidentally declared as a closing article of agreement, that Dolly should accompany her to the Clerkenwell branch of the association, that very night. This was an extraordinary instance of her great prudence and policy; having had this end in view from the first, and entertaining a secret misgiving that the locksmith (who was bold when Dolly was in question) would object, she had backed Miss Miggs up to this point, in order that she might have him at a disadvantage. The manoeuvre succeeded so well that Gabriel only made a wry face, and with the warning he had just had, fresh in his mind, did not dare to say one word.

The difference ended, therefore, in Miggs being presented with a gown by Mrs Varden and half-a-crown by Dolly, as if she had eminently distinguished herself in the paths of morality and goodness. Mrs V., according to custom, expressed her hope that Varden would take a lesson from what had passed and learn more generous conduct for the time to come; and the dinner being now cold and nobody's appetite very much improved by what had passed, they went on with it, as Mrs Varden said, 'like Christians.'

As there was to be a grand parade of the Royal East London Volunteers that afternoon, the locksmith did no more work; but sat down comfortably with his pipe in his mouth, and his arm round his pretty daughter's waist, looking lovingly on Mrs V., from time to time, and exhibiting from the crown of his head to the sole of his foot, one smiling surface of good humour. And to be sure, when it was time to dress him in his regimentals, and Dolly, hanging about him in all kinds of graceful winning ways, helped to button and buckle and brush him up and get him into one of the tightest coats that ever was made by mortal tailor, he was the proudest father in all England.

'What a handy jade it is!' said the locksmith to Mrs Varden, who stood by with folded hands - rather proud of her husband too - while Miggs held his cap and sword at arm's length, as if mistrusting that the latter might run some one through the body of its own accord; 'but never marry a soldier, Doll, my dear.'

Dolly didn't ask why not, or say a word, indeed, but stooped her head down very low to tie his sash.

'I never wear this dress,' said honest Gabriel, 'but I think of poor Joe Willet. I loved Joe; he was always a favourite of mine. Poor Joe! - Dear heart, my girl, don't tie me in so tight.'

Dolly laughed - not like herself at all - the strangest little laugh that could be - and held her head down lower still.

'Poor Joe!' resumed the locksmith, muttering to himself; 'I always wish he had come to me. I might have made it up between them, if he had. Ah! old John made a great mistake in his way of acting by that lad - a great mistake. - Have you nearly tied that sash, my dear?'

What an ill-made sash it was! There it was, loose again and trailing on the ground. Dolly was obliged to kneel down, and recommence at the beginning.

'Never mind young Willet, Varden,' said his wife frowning; 'you might find some one more deserving to talk about, I think.'

Miss Miggs gave a great sniff to the same effect.

'Nay, Martha,' cried the locksmith, 'don't let us bear too hard upon him. If the lad is dead indeed, we'll deal kindly by his memory.'

'A runaway and a vagabond!' said Mrs Varden.

Miss Miggs expressed her concurrence as before.

'A runaway, my dear, but not a vagabond,' returned the locksmith in a gentle tone. 'He behaved himself well, did Joe - always - and was a handsome, manly fellow. Don't call him a vagabond, Martha.'

Mrs Varden coughed - and so did Miggs.

'He tried hard to gain your good opinion, Martha, I can tell you,' said the locksmith smiling, and stroking his chin. 'Ah! that he did. It seems but yesterday that he followed me out to the Maypole door one night, and begged me not to say how like a boy they used him - say here, at home, he meant, though at the time, I recollect, I didn't understand. 'And how's Miss Dolly, sir?' says Joe,' pursued the locksmith, musing sorrowfully, 'Ah! Poor Joe!'

'Well, I declare,' cried Miggs. 'Oh! Goodness gracious me!'

'What's the matter now?' said Gabriel, turning sharply to her, 'Why, if here an't Miss Dolly,' said the handmaid, stooping down to look into her face, 'a-giving way to floods of tears. Oh mim! oh sir. Raly it's give me such a turn,' cried the susceptible damsel, pressing her hand

upon her side to quell the palpitation of her heart, 'that you might knock me down with a feather.'

The locksmith, after glancing at Miss Miggs as if he could have wished to have a feather brought straightway, looked on with a broad stare while Dolly hurried away, followed by that sympathising young woman: then turning to his wife, stammered out, 'Is Dolly ill? Have I done anything? Is it my fault?'

'Your fault!' cried Mrs V. reproachfully. 'There - you had better make haste out.'

'What have I done?' said poor Gabriel. 'It was agreed that Mr Edward's name was never to be mentioned, and I have not spoken of him, have I?'

Mrs Varden merely replied that she had no patience with him, and bounced off after the other two. The unfortunate locksmith wound his sash about him, girded on his sword, put on his cap, and walked out.

'I am not much of a dab at my exercise,' he said under his breath, 'but I shall get into fewer scrapes at that work than at this. Every man came into the world for something; my department seems to be to make every woman cry without meaning it. It's rather hard!'

But he forgot it before he reached the end of the street, and went on with a shining face, nodding to the neighbours, and showering about his friendly greetings like mild spring rain.