

Chapter XLII

The Royal East London Volunteers made a brilliant sight that day: formed into lines, squares, circles, triangles, and what not, to the beating of drums, and the streaming of flags; and performed a vast number of complex evolutions, in all of which Serjeant Varden bore a conspicuous share. Having displayed their military prowess to the utmost in these warlike shows, they marched in glittering order to the Chelsea Bun House, and regaled in the adjacent taverns until dark. Then at sound of drum they fell in again, and returned amidst the shouting of His Majesty's lieges to the place from whence they came.

The homeward march being somewhat tardy, - owing to the unsoldierlike behaviour of certain corporals, who, being gentlemen of sedentary pursuits in private life and excitable out of doors, broke several windows with their bayonets, and rendered it imperative on the commanding officer to deliver them over to a strong guard, with whom they fought at intervals as they came along, - it was nine o'clock when the locksmith reached home. A hackney-coach was waiting near his door; and as he passed it, Mr Haredale looked from the window and called him by his name.

'The sight of you is good for sore eyes, sir,' said the locksmith, stepping up to him. 'I wish you had walked in though, rather than waited here.'

'There is nobody at home, I find,' Mr Haredale answered; 'besides, I desired to be as private as I could.'

'Humph!' muttered the locksmith, looking round at his house. 'Gone with Simon Tappertit to that precious Branch, no doubt.'

Mr Haredale invited him to come into the coach, and, if he were not tired or anxious to go home, to ride with him a little way that they might have some talk together. Gabriel cheerfully complied, and the coachman mounting his box drove off.

'Varden,' said Mr Haredale, after a minute's pause, 'you will be amazed to hear what errand I am on; it will seem a very strange one.'

'I have no doubt it's a reasonable one, sir, and has a meaning in it,' replied the locksmith; 'or it would not be yours at all. Have you just come back to town, sir?'

'But half an hour ago.'

'Bringing no news of Barnaby, or his mother?' said the locksmith dubiously. 'Ah! you needn't shake your head, sir. It was a wild-goose

chase. I feared that, from the first. You exhausted all reasonable means of discovery when they went away. To begin again after so long a time has passed is hopeless, sir - quite hopeless.'

'Why, where are they?' he returned impatiently. 'Where can they be? Above ground?'

'God knows,' rejoined the locksmith, 'many that I knew above it five years ago, have their beds under the grass now. And the world is a wide place. It's a hopeless attempt, sir, believe me. We must leave the discovery of this mystery, like all others, to time, and accident, and Heaven's pleasure.'

'Varden, my good fellow,' said Mr Haredale, 'I have a deeper meaning in my present anxiety to find them out, than you can fathom. It is not a mere whim; it is not the casual revival of my old wishes and desires; but an earnest, solemn purpose. My thoughts and dreams all tend to it, and fix it in my mind. I have no rest by day or night; I have no peace or quiet; I am haunted.'

His voice was so altered from its usual tones, and his manner bespoke so much emotion, that Gabriel, in his wonder, could only sit and look towards him in the darkness, and fancy the expression of his face.

'Do not ask me,' continued Mr Haredale, 'to explain myself. If I were to do so, you would think me the victim of some hideous fancy. It is enough that this is so, and that I cannot - no, I can not - lie quietly in my bed, without doing what will seem to you incomprehensible.'

'Since when, sir,' said the locksmith after a pause, 'has this uneasy feeling been upon you?'

Mr Haredale hesitated for some moments, and then replied: 'Since the night of the storm. In short, since the last nineteenth of March.'

As though he feared that Varden might express surprise, or reason with him, he hastily went on:

'You will think, I know, I labour under some delusion. Perhaps I do. But it is not a morbid one; it is a wholesome action of the mind, reasoning on actual occurrences. You know the furniture remains in Mrs Rudge's house, and that it has been shut up, by my orders, since she went away, save once a-week or so, when an old neighbour visits it to scare away the rats. I am on my way there now.'

'For what purpose?' asked the locksmith.

'To pass the night there,' he replied; 'and not to-night alone, but many nights. This is a secret which I trust to you in case of any unexpected emergency. You will not come, unless in case of strong necessity, to me; from dusk to broad day I shall be there. Emma, your daughter, and the rest, suppose me out of London, as I have been until within this hour. Do not undeceive them. This is the errand I am bound upon. I know I may confide it to you, and I rely upon your questioning me no more at this time.'

With that, as if to change the theme, he led the astounded locksmith back to the night of the Maypole highwayman, to the robbery of Edward Chester, to the reappearance of the man at Mrs Rudge's house, and to all the strange circumstances which afterwards occurred. He even asked him carelessly about the man's height, his face, his figure, whether he was like any one he had ever seen - like Hugh, for instance, or any man he had known at any time - and put many questions of that sort, which the locksmith, considering them as mere devices to engage his attention and prevent his expressing the astonishment he felt, answered pretty much at random.

At length, they arrived at the corner of the street in which the house stood, where Mr Haredale, alighting, dismissed the coach. 'If you desire to see me safely lodged,' he said, turning to the locksmith with a gloomy smile, 'you can.'

Gabriel, to whom all former marvels had been nothing in comparison with this, followed him along the narrow pavement in silence. When they reached the door, Mr Haredale softly opened it with a key he had about him, and closing it when Varden entered, they were left in thorough darkness.

They groped their way into the ground-floor room. Here Mr Haredale struck a light, and kindled a pocket taper he had brought with him for the purpose. It was then, when the flame was full upon him, that the locksmith saw for the first time how haggard, pale, and changed he looked; how worn and thin he was; how perfectly his whole appearance coincided with all that he had said so strangely as they rode along. It was not an unnatural impulse in Gabriel, after what he had heard, to note curiously the expression of his eyes. It was perfectly collected and rational; - so much so, indeed, that he felt ashamed of his momentary suspicion, and drooped his own when Mr Haredale looked towards him, as if he feared they would betray his thoughts.

'Will you walk through the house?' said Mr Haredale, with a glance towards the window, the crazy shutters of which were closed and fastened. 'Speak low.'

There was a kind of awe about the place, which would have rendered it difficult to speak in any other manner. Gabriel whispered 'Yes,' and followed him upstairs.

Everything was just as they had seen it last. There was a sense of closeness from the exclusion of fresh air, and a gloom and heaviness around, as though long imprisonment had made the very silence sad. The homely hangings of the beds and windows had begun to droop; the dust lay thick upon their dwindling folds; and dampness had made their way through ceiling, wall, and floor. The boards creaked beneath their tread, as if resenting the unaccustomed intrusion; nimble spiders, paralysed by the taper's glare, checked the motion of their hundred legs upon the wall, or dropped like lifeless things upon the ground; the death-watch ticked; and the scampering feet of rats and mice rattled behind the wainscot.

As they looked about them on the decaying furniture, it was strange to find how vividly it presented those to whom it had belonged, and with whom it was once familiar. Grip seemed to perch again upon his high-backed chair; Barnaby to crouch in his old favourite corner by the fire; the mother to resume her usual seat, and watch him as of old. Even when they could separate these objects from the phantoms of the mind which they invoked, the latter only glided out of sight, but lingered near them still; for then they seemed to lurk in closets and behind the doors, ready to start out and suddenly accost them in well-remembered tones.

They went downstairs, and again into the room they had just now left. Mr Haredale unbuckled his sword and laid it on the table, with a pair of pocket pistols; then told the locksmith he would light him to the door.

'But this is a dull place, sir,' said Gabriel lingering; 'may no one share your watch?'

He shook his head, and so plainly evinced his wish to be alone, that Gabriel could say no more. In another moment the locksmith was standing in the street, whence he could see that the light once more travelled upstairs, and soon returning to the room below, shone brightly through the chinks of the shutters.

If ever man were sorely puzzled and perplexed, the locksmith was, that night. Even when snugly seated by his own fireside, with Mrs Varden opposite in a nightcap and night-jacket, and Dolly beside him (in a most distracting dishabille) curling her hair, and smiling as if she had never cried in all her life and never could - even then, with Toby at his elbow and his pipe in his mouth, and Miggs (but that perhaps was not much) falling asleep in the background, he could not quite

discard his wonder and uneasiness. So in his dreams - still there was Mr Haredele, haggard and careworn, listening in the solitary house to every sound that stirred, with the taper shining through the chinks until the day should turn it pale and end his lonely watching.