

Chapter XLIV

When the concourse separated, and, dividing into chance clusters, drew off in various directions, there still remained upon the scene of the late disturbance, one man. This man was Gashford, who, bruised by his late fall, and hurt in a much greater degree by the indignity he had undergone, and the exposure of which he had been the victim, limped up and down, breathing curses and threats of vengeance.

It was not the secretary's nature to waste his wrath in words. While he vented the froth of his malevolence in those effusions, he kept a steady eye on two men, who, having disappeared with the rest when the alarm was spread, had since returned, and were now visible in the moonlight, at no great distance, as they walked to and fro, and talked together.

He made no move towards them, but waited patiently on the dark side of the street, until they were tired of strolling backwards and forwards and walked away in company. Then he followed, but at some distance: keeping them in view, without appearing to have that object, or being seen by them.

They went up Parliament Street, past Saint Martin's church, and away by Saint Giles's to Tottenham Court Road, at the back of which, upon the western side, was then a place called the Green Lanes. This was a retired spot, not of the choicest kind, leading into the fields. Great heaps of ashes; stagnant pools, overgrown with rank grass and duckweed; broken turnstiles; and the upright posts of palings long since carried off for firewood, which menaced all heedless walkers with their jagged and rusty nails; were the leading features of the landscape: while here and there a donkey, or a ragged horse, tethered to a stake, and cropping off a wretched meal from the coarse stunted turf, were quite in keeping with the scene, and would have suggested (if the houses had not done so, sufficiently, of themselves) how very poor the people were who lived in the crazy huts adjacent, and how foolhardy it might prove for one who carried money, or wore decent clothes, to walk that way alone, unless by daylight.

Poverty has its whims and shows of taste, as wealth has. Some of these cabins were turreted, some had false windows painted on their rotten walls; one had a mimic clock, upon a crazy tower of four feet high, which screened the chimney; each in its little patch of ground had a rude seat or arbour. The population dealt in bones, in rags, in broken glass, in old wheels, in birds, and dogs. These, in their several ways of stowage, filled the gardens; and shedding a perfume, not of the most delicious nature, in the air, filled it besides with yelps, and screams, and howling.

Into this retreat, the secretary followed the two men whom he had held in sight; and here he saw them safely lodged, in one of the meanest houses, which was but a room, and that of small dimensions. He waited without, until the sound of their voices, joined in a discordant song, assured him they were making merry; and then approaching the door, by means of a tottering plank which crossed the ditch in front, knocked at it with his hand.

'Muster Gashford!' said the man who opened it, taking his pipe from his mouth, in evident surprise. 'Why, who'd have thought of this here honour! Walk in, Muster Gashford - walk in, sir.'

Gashford required no second invitation, and entered with a gracious air. There was a fire in the rusty grate (for though the spring was pretty far advanced, the nights were cold), and on a stool beside it Hugh sat smoking. Dennis placed a chair, his only one, for the secretary, in front of the hearth; and took his seat again upon the stool he had left when he rose to give the visitor admission.

'What's in the wind now, Muster Gashford?' he said, as he resumed his pipe, and looked at him askew. 'Any orders from head-quarters? Are we going to begin? What is it, Muster Gashford?'

'Oh, nothing, nothing,' rejoined the secretary, with a friendly nod to Hugh. 'We have broken the ice, though. We had a little spurt to-day - eh, Dennis?'

'A very little one,' growled the hangman. 'Not half enough for me.'

'Nor me neither!' cried Hugh. 'Give us something to do with life in it - with life in it, master. Ha, ha!'

'Why, you wouldn't,' said the secretary, with his worst expression of face, and in his mildest tones, 'have anything to do, with - with death in it?'

'I don't know that,' replied Hugh. 'I'm open to orders. I don't care; not I.'

'Nor I!' vociferated Dennis.

'Brave fellows!' said the secretary, in as pastor-like a voice as if he were commending them for some uncommon act of valour and generosity. 'By the bye' - and here he stopped and warmed his hands: then suddenly looked up - 'who threw that stone to-day?'

Mr Dennis coughed and shook his head, as who should say, 'A mystery indeed!' Hugh sat and smoked in silence.

'It was well done!' said the secretary, warming his hands again. 'I should like to know that man.'

'Would you?' said Dennis, after looking at his face to assure himself that he was serious. 'Would you like to know that man, Muster Gashford?'

'I should indeed,' replied the secretary.

'Why then, Lord love you,' said the hangman, in his hoarest chuckle, as he pointed with his pipe to Hugh, 'there he sits. That's the man. My stars and halts, Muster Gashford,' he added in a whisper, as he drew his stool close to him and jogged him with his elbow, 'what a interesting blade he is! He wants as much holding in as a thoroughbred bulldog. If it hadn't been for me to-day, he'd have had that 'ere Roman down, and made a riot of it, in another minute.'

'And why not?' cried Hugh in a surly voice, as he overheard this last remark. 'Where's the good of putting things off? Strike while the iron's hot; that's what I say.'

'Ah!' retorted Dennis, shaking his head, with a kind of pity for his friend's ingenuous youth; 'but suppose the iron an't hot, brother! You must get people's blood up afore you strike, and have 'em in the humour. There wasn't quite enough to provoke 'em to-day, I tell you. If you'd had your way, you'd have spoiled the fun to come, and ruined us.'

'Dennis is quite right,' said Gashford, smoothly. 'He is perfectly correct. Dennis has great knowledge of the world.'

'I ought to have, Muster Gashford, seeing what a many people I've helped out of it, eh?' grinned the hangman, whispering the words behind his hand.

The secretary laughed at this jest as much as Dennis could desire, and when he had done, said, turning to Hugh:

'Dennis's policy was mine, as you may have observed. You saw, for instance, how I fell when I was set upon. I made no resistance. I did nothing to provoke an outbreak. Oh dear no!'

'No, by the Lord Harry!' cried Dennis with a noisy laugh, 'you went down very quiet, Muster Gashford - and very flat besides. I thinks to myself at the time 'it's all up with Muster Gashford!' I never see a man lay flatter nor more still - with the life in him - than you did to-day. He's a rough 'un to play with, is that 'ere Papist, and that's the fact.'

The secretary's face, as Dennis roared with laughter, and turned his wrinkled eyes on Hugh who did the like, might have furnished a study for the devil's picture. He sat quite silent until they were serious again, and then said, looking round:

'We are very pleasant here; so very pleasant, Dennis, that but for my lord's particular desire that I should sup with him, and the time being very near at hand, I should be inclined to stay, until it would be hardly safe to go homeward. I come upon a little business - yes, I do - as you supposed. It's very flattering to you; being this. If we ever should be obliged - and we can't tell, you know - this is a very uncertain world' -

'I believe you, Muster Gashford,' interposed the hangman with a grave nod. 'The uncertainties as I've seen in reference to this here state of existence, the unexpected contingencies as have come about! - Oh my eye!' Feeling the subject much too vast for expression, he puffed at his pipe again, and looked the rest.

'I say,' resumed the secretary, in a slow, impressive way; 'we can't tell what may come to pass; and if we should be obliged, against our wills, to have recourse to violence, my lord (who has suffered terribly to-day, as far as words can go) consigns to you two - bearing in mind my recommendation of you both, as good staunch men, beyond all doubt and suspicion - the pleasant task of punishing this Haredale. You may do as you please with him, or his, provided that you show no mercy, and no quarter, and leave no two beams of his house standing where the builder placed them. You may sack it, burn it, do with it as you like, but it must come down; it must be razed to the ground; and he, and all belonging to him, left as shelterless as new-born infants whom their mothers have exposed. Do you understand me?' said Gashford, pausing, and pressing his hands together gently.

'Understand you, master!' cried Hugh. 'You speak plain now. Why, this is hearty!'

'I knew you would like it,' said Gashford, shaking him by the hand; 'I thought you would. Good night! Don't rise, Dennis: I would rather find my way alone. I may have to make other visits here, and it's pleasant to come and go without disturbing you. I can find my way perfectly well. Good night!'

He was gone, and had shut the door behind him. They looked at each other, and nodded approvingly: Dennis stirred up the fire.

'This looks a little more like business!' he said.

'Ay, indeed!' cried Hugh; 'this suits me!'

'I've heerd it said of Muster Gashford,' said the hangman, 'that he'd a surprising memory and wonderful firmness - that he never forgot, and never forgave. - Let's drink his health!'

Hugh readily complied - pouring no liquor on the floor when he drank this toast - and they pledged the secretary as a man after their own hearts, in a bumper.