

Chapter XLV

While the worst passions of the worst men were thus working in the dark, and the mantle of religion, assumed to cover the ugliest deformities, threatened to become the shroud of all that was good and peaceful in society, a circumstance occurred which once more altered the position of two persons from whom this history has long been separated, and to whom it must now return.

In a small English country town, the inhabitants of which supported themselves by the labour of their hands in plaiting and preparing straw for those who made bonnets and other articles of dress and ornament from that material, - concealed under an assumed name, and living in a quiet poverty which knew no change, no pleasures, and few cares but that of struggling on from day to day in one great toil for bread, - dwelt Barnaby and his mother. Their poor cottage had known no stranger's foot since they sought the shelter of its roof five years before; nor had they in all that time held any commerce or communication with the old world from which they had fled. To labour in peace, and devote her labour and her life to her poor son, was all the widow sought. If happiness can be said at any time to be the lot of one on whom a secret sorrow preys, she was happy now. Tranquillity, resignation, and her strong love of him who needed it so much, formed the small circle of her quiet joys; and while that remained unbroken, she was contented.

For Barnaby himself, the time which had flown by, had passed him like the wind. The daily suns of years had shed no brighter gleam of reason on his mind; no dawn had broken on his long, dark night. He would sit sometimes - often for days together on a low seat by the fire or by the cottage door, busy at work (for he had learnt the art his mother plied), and listening, God help him, to the tales she would repeat, as a lure to keep him in her sight. He had no recollection of these little narratives; the tale of yesterday was new to him upon the morrow; but he liked them at the moment; and when the humour held him, would remain patiently within doors, hearing her stories like a little child, and working cheerfully from sunrise until it was too dark to see.

At other times, - and then their scanty earnings were barely sufficient to furnish them with food, though of the coarsest sort, - he would wander abroad from dawn of day until the twilight deepened into night. Few in that place, even of the children, could be idle, and he had no companions of his own kind. Indeed there were not many who could have kept up with him in his rambles, had there been a legion. But there were a score of vagabond dogs belonging to the neighbours, who served his purpose quite as well. With two or three of these, or sometimes with a full half-dozen barking at his heels, he would sally

forth on some long expedition that consumed the day; and though, on their return at nightfall, the dogs would come home limping and sore-footed, and almost spent with their fatigue, Barnaby was up and off again at sunrise with some new attendants of the same class, with whom he would return in like manner. On all these travels, Grip, in his little basket at his master's back, was a constant member of the party, and when they set off in fine weather and in high spirits, no dog barked louder than the raven.

Their pleasures on these excursions were simple enough. A crust of bread and scrap of meat, with water from the brook or spring, sufficed for their repast. Barnaby's enjoyments were, to walk, and run, and leap, till he was tired; then to lie down in the long grass, or by the growing corn, or in the shade of some tall tree, looking upward at the light clouds as they floated over the blue surface of the sky, and listening to the lark as she poured out her brilliant song. There were wild-flowers to pluck - the bright red poppy, the gentle harebell, the cowslip, and the rose. There were birds to watch; fish; ants; worms; hares or rabbits, as they darted across the distant pathway in the wood and so were gone: millions of living things to have an interest in, and lie in wait for, and clap hands and shout in memory of, when they had disappeared. In default of these, or when they wearied, there was the merry sunlight to hunt out, as it crept in aslant through leaves and boughs of trees, and hid far down - deep, deep, in hollow places - like a silver pool, where nodding branches seemed to bathe and sport; sweet scents of summer air breathing over fields of beans or clover; the perfume of wet leaves or moss; the life of waving trees, and shadows always changing. When these or any of them tired, or in excess of pleasing tempted him to shut his eyes, there was slumber in the midst of all these soft delights, with the gentle wind murmuring like music in his ears, and everything around melting into one delicious dream.

Their hut - for it was little more - stood on the outskirts of the town, at a short distance from the high road, but in a secluded place, where few chance passengers strayed at any season of the year. It had a plot of garden-ground attached, which Barnaby, in fits and starts of working, trimmed, and kept in order. Within doors and without, his mother laboured for their common good; and hail, rain, snow, or sunshine, found no difference in her.

Though so far removed from the scenes of her past life, and with so little thought or hope of ever visiting them again, she seemed to have a strange desire to know what happened in the busy world. Any old newspaper, or scrap of intelligence from London, she caught at with avidity. The excitement it produced was not of a pleasurable kind, for her manner at such times expressed the keenest anxiety and dread; but it never faded in the least degree. Then, and in stormy winter

nights, when the wind blew loud and strong, the old expression came into her face, and she would be seized with a fit of trembling, like one who had an ague. But Barnaby noted little of this; and putting a great constraint upon herself, she usually recovered her accustomed manner before the change had caught his observation.

Grip was by no means an idle or unprofitable member of the humble household. Partly by dint of Barnaby's tuition, and partly by pursuing a species of self-instruction common to his tribe, and exerting his powers of observation to the utmost, he had acquired a degree of sagacity which rendered him famous for miles round. His conversational powers and surprising performances were the universal theme: and as many persons came to see the wonderful raven, and none left his exertions unrewarded - when he condescended to exhibit, which was not always, for genius is capricious - his earnings formed an important item in the common stock. Indeed, the bird himself appeared to know his value well; for though he was perfectly free and unrestrained in the presence of Barnaby and his mother, he maintained in public an amazing gravity, and never stooped to any other gratuitous performances than biting the ankles of vagabond boys (an exercise in which he much delighted), killing a fowl or two occasionally, and swallowing the dinners of various neighbouring dogs, of whom the boldest held him in great awe and dread.

Time had glided on in this way, and nothing had happened to disturb or change their mode of life, when, one summer's night in June, they were in their little garden, resting from the labours of the day. The widow's work was yet upon her knee, and strewn upon the ground about her; and Barnaby stood leaning on his spade, gazing at the brightness in the west, and singing softly to himself.

'A brave evening, mother! If we had, chinking in our pockets, but a few specks of that gold which is piled up yonder in the sky, we should be rich for life.'

'We are better as we are,' returned the widow with a quiet smile. 'Let us be contented, and we do not want and need not care to have it, though it lay shining at our feet.'

'Ay!' said Barnaby, resting with crossed arms on his spade, and looking wistfully at the sunset, that's well enough, mother; but gold's a good thing to have. I wish that I knew where to find it. Grip and I could do much with gold, be sure of that.'

'What would you do?' she asked.

'What! A world of things. We'd dress finely - you and I, I mean; not Grip - keep horses, dogs, wear bright colours and feathers, do no more work, live delicately and at our ease. Oh, we'd find uses for it, mother, and uses that would do us good. I would I knew where gold was buried. How hard I'd work to dig it up!'

'You do not know,' said his mother, rising from her seat and laying her hand upon his shoulder, 'what men have done to win it, and how they have found, too late, that it glitters brightest at a distance, and turns quite dim and dull when handled.'

'Ay, ay; so you say; so you think,' he answered, still looking eagerly in the same direction. 'For all that, mother, I should like to try.'

'Do you not see,' she said, 'how red it is? Nothing bears so many stains of blood, as gold. Avoid it. None have such cause to hate its name as we have. Do not so much as think of it, dear love. It has brought such misery and suffering on your head and mine as few have known, and God grant few may have to undergo. I would rather we were dead and laid down in our graves, than you should ever come to love it.'

For a moment Barnaby withdrew his eyes and looked at her with wonder. Then, glancing from the redness in the sky to the mark upon his wrist as if he would compare the two, he seemed about to question her with earnestness, when a new object caught his wandering attention, and made him quite forgetful of his purpose.

This was a man with dusty feet and garments, who stood, bare-headed, behind the hedge that divided their patch of garden from the pathway, and leant meekly forward as if he sought to mingle with their conversation, and waited for his time to speak. His face was turned towards the brightness, too, but the light that fell upon it showed that he was blind, and saw it not.

'A blessing on those voices!' said the wayfarer. 'I feel the beauty of the night more keenly, when I hear them. They are like eyes to me. Will they speak again, and cheer the heart of a poor traveller?'

'Have you no guide?' asked the widow, after a moment's pause.

'None but that,' he answered, pointing with his staff towards the sun; 'and sometimes a milder one at night, but she is idle now.'

'Have you travelled far?'

'A weary way and long,' rejoined the traveller as he shook his head. 'A weary, weary, way. I struck my stick just now upon the bucket of your well - be pleased to let me have a draught of water, lady.'

'Why do you call me lady?' she returned. 'I am as poor as you.'

'Your speech is soft and gentle, and I judge by that,' replied the man. 'The coarsest stuffs and finest silks, are - apart from the sense of touch - alike to me. I cannot judge you by your dress.'

'Come round this way,' said Barnaby, who had passed out at the garden-gate and now stood close beside him. 'Put your hand in mine. You're blind and always in the dark, eh? Are you frightened in the dark? Do you see great crowds of faces, now? Do they grin and chatter?'

'Alas!' returned the other, 'I see nothing. Waking or sleeping, nothing.'

Barnaby looked curiously at his eyes, and touching them with his fingers, as an inquisitive child might, led him towards the house.

'You have come a long distance,' said the widow, meeting him at the door. 'How have you found your way so far?'

'Use and necessity are good teachers, as I have heard - the best of any,' said the blind man, sitting down upon the chair to which Barnaby had led him, and putting his hat and stick upon the red-tiled floor. 'May neither you nor your son ever learn under them. They are rough masters.'

'You have wandered from the road, too,' said the widow, in a tone of pity.

'Maybe, maybe,' returned the blind man with a sigh, and yet with something of a smile upon his face, 'that's likely. Handposts and milestones are dumb, indeed, to me. Thank you the more for this rest, and this refreshing drink!' As he spoke, he raised the mug of water to his mouth. It was clear, and cold, and sparkling, but not to his taste nevertheless, or his thirst was not very great, for he only wetted his lips and put it down again.

He wore, hanging with a long strap round his neck, a kind of scrip or wallet, in which to carry food. The widow set some bread and cheese before him, but he thanked her, and said that through the kindness of the charitable he had broken his fast once since morning, and was not hungry. When he had made her this reply, he opened his wallet, and took out a few pence, which was all it appeared to contain.

'Might I make bold to ask,' he said, turning towards where Barnaby stood looking on, 'that one who has the gift of sight, would lay this out for me in bread to keep me on my way? Heaven's blessing on the young feet that will bestir themselves in aid of one so helpless as a sightless man!'

Barnaby looked at his mother, who nodded assent; in another moment he was gone upon his charitable errand. The blind man sat listening with an attentive face, until long after the sound of his retreating footsteps was inaudible to the widow, and then said, suddenly, and in a very altered tone:

'There are various degrees and kinds of blindness, widow. There is the connubial blindness, ma'am, which perhaps you may have observed in the course of your own experience, and which is a kind of wilful and self-bandaging blindness. There is the blindness of party, ma'am, and public men, which is the blindness of a mad bull in the midst of a regiment of soldiers clothed in red. There is the blind confidence of youth, which is the blindness of young kittens, whose eyes have not yet opened on the world; and there is that physical blindness, ma'am, of which I am, contrairy to my own desire, a most illustrious example. Added to these, ma'am, is that blindness of the intellect, of which we have a specimen in your interesting son, and which, having sometimes glimmerings and dawnings of the light, is scarcely to be trusted as a total darkness. Therefore, ma'am, I have taken the liberty to get him out of the way for a short time, while you and I confer together, and this precaution arising out of the delicacy of my sentiments towards yourself, you will excuse me, ma'am, I know.'

Having delivered himself of this speech with many flourishes of manner, he drew from beneath his coat a flat stone bottle, and holding the cork between his teeth, qualified his mug of water with a plentiful infusion of the liquor it contained. He politely drained the bumper to her health, and the ladies, and setting it down empty, smacked his lips with infinite relish.

'I am a citizen of the world, ma'am,' said the blind man, corking his bottle, 'and if I seem to conduct myself with freedom, it is therefore. You wonder who I am, ma'am, and what has brought me here. Such experience of human nature as I have, leads me to that conclusion, without the aid of eyes by which to read the movements of your soul as depicted in your feminine features. I will satisfy your curiosity immediately, ma'am; immediately.' With that he slapped his bottle on its broad back, and having put it under his garment as before, crossed his legs and folded his hands, and settled himself in his chair, previous to proceeding any further.

The change in his manner was so unexpected, the craft and wickedness of his deportment were so much aggravated by his condition - for we are accustomed to see in those who have lost a human sense, something in its place almost divine - and this alteration bred so many fears in her whom he addressed, that she could not pronounce one word. After waiting, as it seemed, for some remark or answer, and waiting in vain, the visitor resumed:

'Madam, my name is Stagg. A friend of mine who has desired the honour of meeting with you any time these five years past, has commissioned me to call upon you. I should be glad to whisper that gentleman's name in your ear. - Zounds, ma'am, are you deaf? Do you hear me say that I should be glad to whisper my friend's name in your ear?'

'You need not repeat it,' said the widow, with a stifled groan; 'I see too well from whom you come.'

'But as a man of honour, ma'am,' said the blind man, striking himself on the breast, 'whose credentials must not be disputed, I take leave to say that I WILL mention that gentleman's name. Ay, ay,' he added, seeming to catch with his quick ear the very motion of her hand, 'but not aloud. With your leave, ma'am, I desire the favour of a whisper.'

She moved towards him, and stooped down. He muttered a word in her ear; and, wringing her hands, she paced up and down the room like one distracted. The blind man, with perfect composure, produced his bottle again, mixed another glassful; put it up as before; and, drinking from time to time, followed her with his face in silence.

'You are slow in conversation, widow,' he said after a time, pausing in his draught. 'We shall have to talk before your son.'

'What would you have me do?' she answered. 'What do you want?'

'We are poor, widow, we are poor,' he retorted, stretching out his right hand, and rubbing his thumb upon its palm.

'Poor!' she cried. 'And what am I?'

'Comparisons are odious,' said the blind man. 'I don't know, I don't care. I say that we are poor. My friend's circumstances are indifferent, and so are mine. We must have our rights, widow, or we must be bought off. But you know that, as well as I, so where is the use of talking?'

She still walked wildly to and fro. At length, stopping abruptly before him, she said:

'Is he near here?'

'He is. Close at hand.'

'Then I am lost!'

'Not lost, widow,' said the blind man, calmly; 'only found. Shall I call him?'

'Not for the world,' she answered, with a shudder.

'Very good,' he replied, crossing his legs again, for he had made as though he would rise and walk to the door. 'As you please, widow. His presence is not necessary that I know of. But both he and I must live; to live, we must eat and drink; to eat and drink, we must have money: - I say no more.'

'Do you know how pinched and destitute I am?' she retorted. 'I do not think you do, or can. If you had eyes, and could look around you on this poor place, you would have pity on me. Oh! let your heart be softened by your own affliction, friend, and have some sympathy with mine.'

The blind man snapped his fingers as he answered:

' - Beside the question, ma'am, beside the question. I have the softest heart in the world, but I can't live upon it. Many a gentleman lives well upon a soft head, who would find a heart of the same quality a very great drawback. Listen to me. This is a matter of business, with which sympathies and sentiments have nothing to do. As a mutual friend, I wish to arrange it in a satisfactory manner, if possible; and thus the case stands. - If you are very poor now, it's your own choice. You have friends who, in case of need, are always ready to help you. My friend is in a more destitute and desolate situation than most men, and, you and he being linked together in a common cause, he naturally looks to you to assist him. He has boarded and lodged with me a long time (for as I said just now, I am very soft-hearted), and I quite approve of his entertaining this opinion. You have always had a roof over your head; he has always been an outcast. You have your son to comfort and assist you; he has nobody at all. The advantages must not be all one side. You are in the same boat, and we must divide the ballast a little more equally.'

She was about to speak, but he checked her, and went on.

'The only way of doing this, is by making up a little purse now and then for my friend; and that's what I advise. He bears you no malice that I know of, ma'am: so little, that although you have treated him

harshly more than once, and driven him, I may say, out of doors, he has that regard for you that I believe even if you disappointed him now, he would consent to take charge of your son, and to make a man of him.'

He laid a great stress on these latter words, and paused as if to find out what effect they had produced. She only answered by her tears.

'He is a likely lad,' said the blind man, thoughtfully, 'for many purposes, and not ill-disposed to try his fortune in a little change and bustle, if I may judge from what I heard of his talk with you to-night. - Come. In a word, my friend has pressing necessity for twenty pounds. You, who can give up an annuity, can get that sum for him. It's a pity you should be troubled. You seem very comfortable here, and it's worth that much to remain so. Twenty pounds, widow, is a moderate demand. You know where to apply for it; a post will bring it you. - Twenty pounds!'

She was about to answer him again, but again he stopped her.

'Don't say anything hastily; you might be sorry for it. Think of it a little while. Twenty pounds - of other people's money - how easy! Turn it over in your mind. I'm in no hurry. Night's coming on, and if I don't sleep here, I shall not go far. Twenty pounds! Consider of it, ma'am, for twenty minutes; give each pound a minute; that's a fair allowance. I'll enjoy the air the while, which is very mild and pleasant in these parts.'

With these words he groped his way to the door, carrying his chair with him. Then seating himself, under a spreading honeysuckle, and stretching his legs across the threshold so that no person could pass in or out without his knowledge, he took from his pocket a pipe, flint, steel and tinder-box, and began to smoke. It was a lovely evening, of that gentle kind, and at that time of year, when the twilight is most beautiful. Pausing now and then to let his smoke curl slowly off, and to sniff the grateful fragrance of the flowers, he sat there at his ease - as though the cottage were his proper dwelling, and he had held undisputed possession of it all his life - waiting for the widow's answer and for Barnaby's return.