

Chapter XLVIII

Uncertain where to go next, and bewildered by the crowd of people who were already astir, they sat down in one of the recesses on the bridge, to rest. They soon became aware that the stream of life was all pouring one way, and that a vast throng of persons were crossing the river from the Middlesex to the Surrey shore, in unusual haste and evident excitement. They were, for the most part, in knots of two or three, or sometimes half-a-dozen; they spoke little together - many of them were quite silent; and hurried on as if they had one absorbing object in view, which was common to them all.

They were surprised to see that nearly every man in this great concourse, which still came pouring past, without slackening in the least, wore in his hat a blue cockade; and that the chance passengers who were not so decorated, appeared timidly anxious to escape observation or attack, and gave them the wall as if they would conciliate them. This, however, was natural enough, considering their inferiority in point of numbers; for the proportion of those who wore blue cockades, to those who were dressed as usual, was at least forty or fifty to one. There was no quarrelling, however: the blue cockades went swarming on, passing each other when they could, and making all the speed that was possible in such a multitude; and exchanged nothing more than looks, and very often not even those, with such of the passers-by as were not of their number.

At first, the current of people had been confined to the two pathways, and but a few more eager stragglers kept the road. But after half an hour or so, the passage was completely blocked up by the great press, which, being now closely wedged together, and impeded by the carts and coaches it encountered, moved but slowly, and was sometimes at a stand for five or ten minutes together.

After the lapse of nearly two hours, the numbers began to diminish visibly, and gradually dwindling away, by little and little, left the bridge quite clear, save that, now and then, some hot and dusty man, with the cockade in his hat, and his coat thrown over his shoulder, went panting by, fearful of being too late, or stopped to ask which way his friends had taken, and being directed, hastened on again like one refreshed. In this comparative solitude, which seemed quite strange and novel after the late crowd, the widow had for the first time an opportunity of inquiring of an old man who came and sat beside them, what was the meaning of that great assemblage.

'Why, where have you come from,' he returned, 'that you haven't heard of Lord George Gordon's great association? This is the day that he presents the petition against the Catholics, God bless him!'

'What have all these men to do with that?' she said.

'What have they to do with it!' the old man replied. 'Why, how you talk! Don't you know his lordship has declared he won't present it to the house at all, unless it is attended to the door by forty thousand good and true men at least? There's a crowd for you!'

'A crowd indeed!' said Barnaby. 'Do you hear that, mother!'

'And they're mustering yonder, as I am told,' resumed the old man, 'nigh upon a hundred thousand strong. Ah! Let Lord George alone. He knows his power. There'll be a good many faces inside them three windows over there,' and he pointed to where the House of Commons overlooked the river, 'that'll turn pale when good Lord George gets up this afternoon, and with reason too! Ay, ay. Let his lordship alone. Let him alone. HE knows!' And so, with much mumbling and chuckling and shaking of his forefinger, he rose, with the assistance of his stick, and tottered off.

'Mother!' said Barnaby, 'that's a brave crowd he talks of. Come!'

'Not to join it!' cried his mother.

'Yes, yes,' he answered, plucking at her sleeve. 'Why not? Come!'

'You don't know,' she urged, 'what mischief they may do, where they may lead you, what their meaning is. Dear Barnaby, for my sake - '

'For your sake!' he cried, patting her hand. 'Well! It IS for your sake, mother. You remember what the blind man said, about the gold. Here's a brave crowd! Come! Or wait till I come back - yes, yes, wait here.'

She tried with all the earnestness her fears engendered, to turn him from his purpose, but in vain. He was stooping down to buckle on his shoe, when a hackney-coach passed them rather quickly, and a voice inside called to the driver to stop.

'Young man,' said a voice within.

'Who's that?' cried Barnaby, looking up.

'Do you wear this ornament?' returned the stranger, holding out a blue cockade.

'In Heaven's name, no. Pray do not give it him!' exclaimed the widow.

'Speak for yourself, woman,' said the man within the coach, coldly. 'Leave the young man to his choice; he's old enough to make it, and to snap your apron-strings. He knows, without your telling, whether he wears the sign of a loyal Englishman or not.'

Barnaby, trembling with impatience, cried, 'Yes! yes, yes, I do,' as he had cried a dozen times already. The man threw him a cockade, and crying, 'Make haste to St George's Fields,' ordered the coachman to drive on fast; and left them.

With hands that trembled with his eagerness to fix the bauble in his hat, Barnaby was adjusting it as he best could, and hurriedly replying to the tears and entreaties of his mother, when two gentlemen passed on the opposite side of the way. Observing them, and seeing how Barnaby was occupied, they stopped, whispered together for an instant, turned back, and came over to them.

'Why are you sitting here?' said one of them, who was dressed in a plain suit of black, wore long lank hair, and carried a great cane. 'Why have you not gone with the rest?'

'I am going, sir,' replied Barnaby, finishing his task, and putting his hat on with an air of pride. 'I shall be there directly.'

'Say 'my lord,' young man, when his lordship does you the honour of speaking to you,' said the second gentleman mildly. 'If you don't know Lord George Gordon when you see him, it's high time you should.'

'Nay, Gashford,' said Lord George, as Barnaby pulled off his hat again and made him a low bow, 'it's no great matter on a day like this, which every Englishman will remember with delight and pride. Put on your hat, friend, and follow us, for you lag behind and are late. It's past ten now. Didn't you know that the hour for assembling was ten o'clock?'

Barnaby shook his head and looked vacantly from one to the other.

'You might have known it, friend,' said Gashford, 'it was perfectly understood. How came you to be so ill informed?'

'He cannot tell you, sir,' the widow interposed. 'It's of no use to ask him. We are but this morning come from a long distance in the country, and know nothing of these matters.'

'The cause has taken a deep root, and has spread its branches far and wide,' said Lord George to his secretary. 'This is a pleasant hearing. I thank Heaven for it!'

'Amen!' cried Gashford with a solemn face.

'You do not understand me, my lord,' said the widow. 'Pardon me, but you cruelly mistake my meaning. We know nothing of these matters. We have no desire or right to join in what you are about to do. This is my son, my poor afflicted son, dearer to me than my own life. In mercy's name, my lord, go your way alone, and do not tempt him into danger!'

'My good woman,' said Gashford, 'how can you! - Dear me! - What do you mean by tempting, and by danger? Do you think his lordship is a roaring lion, going about and seeking whom he may devour? God bless me!'

'No, no, my lord, forgive me,' implored the widow, laying both her hands upon his breast, and scarcely knowing what she did, or said, in the earnestness of her supplication, 'but there are reasons why you should hear my earnest, mother's prayer, and leave my son with me. Oh do! He is not in his right senses, he is not, indeed!'

'It is a bad sign of the wickedness of these times,' said Lord George, evading her touch, and colouring deeply, 'that those who cling to the truth and support the right cause, are set down as mad. Have you the heart to say this of your own son, unnatural mother!'

'I am astonished at you!' said Gashford, with a kind of meek severity. 'This is a very sad picture of female depravity.'

'He has surely no appearance,' said Lord George, glancing at Barnaby, and whispering in his secretary's ear, 'of being deranged? And even if he had, we must not construe any trifling peculiarity into madness. Which of us' - and here he turned red again - 'would be safe, if that were made the law!'

'Not one,' replied the secretary; 'in that case, the greater the zeal, the truth, and talent; the more direct the call from above; the clearer would be the madness. With regard to this young man, my lord,' he added, with a lip that slightly curled as he looked at Barnaby, who stood twirling his hat, and stealthily beckoning them to come away, 'he is as sensible and self-possessed as any one I ever saw.'

'And you desire to make one of this great body?' said Lord George, addressing him; 'and intended to make one, did you?'

'Yes - yes,' said Barnaby, with sparkling eyes. 'To be sure I did! I told her so myself.'

'I see,' replied Lord George, with a reproachful glance at the unhappy mother. 'I thought so. Follow me and this gentleman, and you shall have your wish.'

Barnaby kissed his mother tenderly on the cheek, and bidding her be of good cheer, for their fortunes were both made now, did as he was desired. She, poor woman, followed too - with how much fear and grief it would be hard to tell.

They passed quickly through the Bridge Road, where the shops were all shut up (for the passage of the great crowd and the expectation of their return had alarmed the tradesmen for their goods and windows), and where, in the upper stories, all the inhabitants were congregated, looking down into the street below, with faces variously expressive of alarm, of interest, expectancy, and indignation. Some of these applauded, and some hissed; but regardless of these interruptions - for the noise of a vast congregation of people at a little distance, sounded in his ears like the roaring of the sea - Lord George Gordon quickened his pace, and presently arrived before St George's Fields.

They were really fields at that time, and of considerable extent. Here an immense multitude was collected, bearing flags of various kinds and sizes, but all of the same colour - blue, like the cockades - some sections marching to and fro in military array, and others drawn up in circles, squares, and lines. A large portion, both of the bodies which paraded the ground, and of those which remained stationary, were occupied in singing hymns or psalms. With whomsoever this originated, it was well done; for the sound of so many thousand voices in the air must have stirred the heart of any man within him, and could not fail to have a wonderful effect upon enthusiasts, however mistaken.

Scouts had been posted in advance of the great body, to give notice of their leader's coming. These falling back, the word was quickly passed through the whole host, and for a short interval there ensued a profound and deathlike silence, during which the mass was so still and quiet, that the fluttering of a banner caught the eye, and became a circumstance of note. Then they burst into a tremendous shout, into another, and another; and the air seemed rent and shaken, as if by the discharge of cannon.

'Gashford!' cried Lord George, pressing his secretary's arm tight within his own, and speaking with as much emotion in his voice, as in his altered face, 'I am called indeed, now. I feel and know it. I am the leader of a host. If they summoned me at this moment with one voice to lead them on to death, I'd do it - Yes, and fall first myself!'

'It is a proud sight,' said the secretary. 'It is a noble day for England, and for the great cause throughout the world. Such homage, my lord, as I, an humble but devoted man, can render - '

'What are you doing?' cried his master, catching him by both hands; for he had made a show of kneeling at his feet. 'Do not unfit me, dear Gashford, for the solemn duty of this glorious day - ' the tears stood in the eyes of the poor gentleman as he said the words. - 'Let us go among them; we have to find a place in some division for this new recruit - give me your hand.'

Gashford slid his cold insidious palm into his master's grasp, and so, hand in hand, and followed still by Barnaby and by his mother too, they mingled with the concourse.

They had by this time taken to their singing again, and as their leader passed between their ranks, they raised their voices to their utmost. Many of those who were banded together to support the religion of their country, even unto death, had never heard a hymn or psalm in all their lives. But these fellows having for the most part strong lungs, and being naturally fond of singing, chanted any ribaldry or nonsense that occurred to them, feeling pretty certain that it would not be detected in the general chorus, and not caring much if it were. Many of these voluntaries were sung under the very nose of Lord George Gordon, who, quite unconscious of their burden, passed on with his usual stiff and solemn deportment, very much edified and delighted by the pious conduct of his followers.

So they went on and on, up this line, down that, round the exterior of this circle, and on every side of that hollow square; and still there were lines, and squares, and circles out of number to review. The day being now intensely hot, and the sun striking down his fiercest rays upon the field, those who carried heavy banners began to grow faint and weary; most of the number assembled were fain to pull off their neckcloths, and throw their coats and waistcoats open; and some, towards the centre, quite overpowered by the excessive heat, which was of course rendered more unendurable by the multitude around them, lay down upon the grass, and offered all they had about them for a drink of water. Still, no man left the ground, not even of those who were so distressed; still Lord George, streaming from every pore, went on with Gashford; and still Barnaby and his mother followed close behind them.

They had arrived at the top of a long line of some eight hundred men in single file, and Lord George had turned his head to look back, when a loud cry of recognition - in that peculiar and half-stifled tone which a voice has, when it is raised in the open air and in the midst of a great concourse of persons - was heard, and a man stepped with a

shout of laughter from the rank, and smote Barnaby on the shoulders with his heavy hand.

'How now!' he cried. 'Barnaby Rudge! Why, where have you been hiding for these hundred years?'

Barnaby had been thinking within himself that the smell of the trodden grass brought back his old days at cricket, when he was a young boy and played on Chigwell Green. Confused by this sudden and boisterous address, he stared in a bewildered manner at the man, and could scarcely say 'What! Hugh!'

'Hugh!' echoed the other; 'ay, Hugh - Maypole Hugh! You remember my dog? He's alive now, and will know you, I warrant. What, you wear the colour, do you? Well done! Ha ha ha!'

'You know this young man, I see,' said Lord George. 'Know him, my lord! as well as I know my own right hand. My captain knows him. We all know him.'

'Will you take him into your division?'

'It hasn't in it a better, nor a nimbler, nor a more active man, than Barnaby Rudge,' said Hugh. 'Show me the man who says it has! Fall in, Barnaby. He shall march, my lord, between me and Dennis; and he shall carry,' he added, taking a flag from the hand of a tired man who tendered it, 'the gayest silken streamer in this valiant army.'

'In the name of God, no!' shrieked the widow, darting forward. 'Barnaby - my lord - see - he'll come back - Barnaby - Barnaby!'

'Women in the field!' cried Hugh, stepping between them, and holding her off. 'Holloa! My captain there!'

'What's the matter here?' cried Simon Tappertit, bustling up in a great heat. 'Do you call this order?'

'Nothing like it, captain,' answered Hugh, still holding her back with his outstretched hand. 'It's against all orders. Ladies are carrying off our gallant soldiers from their duty. The word of command, captain! They're filing off the ground. Quick!'

'Close!' cried Simon, with the whole power of his lungs. 'Form! March!'

She was thrown to the ground; the whole field was in motion; Barnaby was whirled away into the heart of a dense mass of men, and she saw him no more.