

Chapter LI

Promising as these outrages were to Gashford's view, and much like business as they looked, they extended that night no farther. The soldiers were again called out, again they took half-a-dozen prisoners, and again the crowd dispersed after a short and bloodless scuffle. Hot and drunken though they were, they had not yet broken all bounds and set all law and government at defiance. Something of their habitual deference to the authority erected by society for its own preservation yet remained among them, and had its majesty been vindicated in time, the secretary would have had to digest a bitter disappointment.

By midnight, the streets were clear and quiet, and, save that there stood in two parts of the town a heap of nodding walls and pile of rubbish, where there had been at sunset a rich and handsome building, everything wore its usual aspect. Even the Catholic gentry and tradesmen, of whom there were many resident in different parts of the City and its suburbs, had no fear for their lives or property, and but little indignation for the wrong they had already sustained in the plunder and destruction of their temples of worship. An honest confidence in the government under whose protection they had lived for many years, and a well-founded reliance on the good feeling and right thinking of the great mass of the community, with whom, notwithstanding their religious differences, they were every day in habits of confidential, affectionate, and friendly intercourse, reassured them, even under the excesses that had been committed; and convinced them that they who were Protestants in anything but the name, were no more to be considered as abettors of these disgraceful occurrences, than they themselves were chargeable with the uses of the block, the rack, the gibbet, and the stake in cruel Mary's reign.

The clock was on the stroke of one, when Gabriel Varden, with his lady and Miss Miggs, sat waiting in the little parlour. This fact; the toppling wicks of the dull, wasted candles; the silence that prevailed; and, above all, the nightcaps of both maid and matron, were sufficient evidence that they had been prepared for bed some time ago, and had some reason for sitting up so far beyond their usual hour.

If any other corroborative testimony had been required, it would have been abundantly furnished in the actions of Miss Miggs, who, having arrived at that restless state and sensitive condition of the nervous system which are the result of long watching, did, by a constant rubbing and tweaking of her nose, a perpetual change of position (arising from the sudden growth of imaginary knots and knobs in her chair), a frequent friction of her eyebrows, the incessant recurrence of a small cough, a small groan, a gasp, a sigh, a sniff, a spasmodic start, and by other demonstrations of that nature, so file down and

rasp, as it were, the patience of the locksmith, that after looking at her in silence for some time, he at last broke out into this apostrophe: -

'Miggs, my good girl, go to bed - do go to bed. You're really worse than the dripping of a hundred water-butts outside the window, or the scratching of as many mice behind the wainscot. I can't bear it. Do go to bed, Miggs. To oblige me - do.'

'You haven't got nothing to untie, sir,' returned Miss Miggs, 'and therefore your requests does not surprise me. But missis has - and while you sit up, mim' - she added, turning to the locksmith's wife, 'I couldn't, no, not if twenty times the quantity of cold water was aperiently running down my back at this moment, go to bed with a quiet spirit.'

Having spoken these words, Miss Miggs made divers efforts to rub her shoulders in an impossible place, and shivered from head to foot; thereby giving the beholders to understand that the imaginary cascade was still in full flow, but that a sense of duty upheld her under that and all other sufferings, and nerved her to endurance.

Mrs Varden being too sleepy to speak, and Miss Miggs having, as the phrase is, said her say, the locksmith had nothing for it but to sigh and be as quiet as he could.

But to be quiet with such a basilisk before him was impossible. If he looked another way, it was worse to feel that she was rubbing her cheek, or twitching her ear, or winking her eye, or making all kinds of extraordinary shapes with her nose, than to see her do it. If she was for a moment free from any of these complaints, it was only because of her foot being asleep, or of her arm having got the fidgets, or of her leg being doubled up with the cramp, or of some other horrible disorder which racked her whole frame. If she did enjoy a moment's ease, then with her eyes shut and her mouth wide open, she would be seen to sit very stiff and upright in her chair; then to nod a little way forward, and stop with a jerk; then to nod a little farther forward, and stop with another jerk; then to recover herself; then to come forward again - lower - lower - lower - by very slow degrees, until, just as it seemed impossible that she could preserve her balance for another instant, and the locksmith was about to call out in an agony, to save her from dashing down upon her forehead and fracturing her skull, then all of a sudden and without the smallest notice, she would come upright and rigid again with her eyes open, and in her countenance an expression of defiance, sleepy but yet most obstinate, which plainly said, 'I've never once closed 'em since I looked at you last, and I'll take my oath of it!'

At length, after the clock had struck two, there was a sound at the street door, as if somebody had fallen against the knocker by accident. Miss Miggs immediately jumping up and clapping her hands, cried with a drowsy mingling of the sacred and profane, 'Ally Looyer, mim! there's Simmuns's knock!'

'Who's there?' said Gabriel.

'Me!' cried the well-known voice of Mr Tappertit. Gabriel opened the door, and gave him admission.

He did not cut a very insinuating figure, for a man of his stature suffers in a crowd; and having been active in yesterday morning's work, his dress was literally crushed from head to foot: his hat being beaten out of all shape, and his shoes trodden down at heel like slippers. His coat fluttered in strips about him, the buckles were torn away both from his knees and feet, half his neckerchief was gone, and the bosom of his shirt was rent to tatters. Yet notwithstanding all these personal disadvantages; despite his being very weak from heat and fatigue; and so begrimed with mud and dust that he might have been in a case, for anything of the real texture (either of his skin or apparel) that the eye could discern; he stalked haughtily into the parlour, and throwing himself into a chair, and endeavouring to thrust his hands into the pockets of his small-clothes, which were turned inside out and displayed upon his legs, like tassels, surveyed the household with a gloomy dignity.

'Simon,' said the locksmith gravely, 'how comes it that you return home at this time of night, and in this condition? Give me an assurance that you have not been among the rioters, and I am satisfied.'

'Sir,' replied Mr Tappertit, with a contemptuous look, 'I wonder at YOUR assurance in making such demands.'

'You have been drinking,' said the locksmith.

'As a general principle, and in the most offensive sense of the words, sir,' returned his journeyman with great self-possession, 'I consider you a liar. In that last observation you have unintentionally - unintentionally, sir, - struck upon the truth.'

'Martha,' said the locksmith, turning to his wife, and shaking his head sorrowfully, while a smile at the absurd figure beside him still played upon his open face, 'I trust it may turn out that this poor lad is not the victim of the knaves and fools we have so often had words about, and who have done so much harm to-day. If he has been at Warwick Street or Duke Street to-night - '

'He has been at neither, sir,' cried Mr Tappertit in a loud voice, which he suddenly dropped into a whisper as he repeated, with eyes fixed upon the locksmith, 'he has been at neither.'

'I am glad of it, with all my heart,' said the locksmith in a serious tone; 'for if he had been, and it could be proved against him, Martha, your Great Association would have been to him the cart that draws men to the gallows and leaves them hanging in the air. It would, as sure as we're alive!'

Mrs Varden was too much scared by Simon's altered manner and appearance, and by the accounts of the rioters which had reached her ears that night, to offer any retort, or to have recourse to her usual matrimonial policy. Miss Miggs wrung her hands, and wept.

'He was not at Duke Street, or at Warwick Street, G. Varden,' said Simon, sternly; 'but he WAS at Westminster. Perhaps, sir, he kicked a county member, perhaps, sir, he tapped a lord - you may stare, sir, I repeat it - blood flowed from noses, and perhaps he tapped a lord. Who knows? This,' he added, putting his hand into his waistcoat-pocket, and taking out a large tooth, at the sight of which both Miggs and Mrs Varden screamed, 'this was a bishop's. Beware, G. Varden!'

'Now, I would rather,' said the locksmith hastily, 'have paid five hundred pounds, than had this come to pass. You idiot, do you know what peril you stand in?'

'I know it, sir,' replied his journeyman, 'and it is my glory. I was there, everybody saw me there. I was conspicuous, and prominent. I will abide the consequences.'

The locksmith, really disturbed and agitated, paced to and fro in silence - glancing at his former 'prentice every now and then - and at length stopping before him, said:

'Get to bed, and sleep for a couple of hours that you may wake penitent, and with some of your senses about you. Be sorry for what you have done, and we will try to save you. If I call him by five o'clock,' said Varden, turning hurriedly to his wife, and he washes himself clean and changes his dress, he may get to the Tower Stairs, and away by the Gravesend tide-boat, before any search is made for him. From there he can easily get on to Canterbury, where your cousin will give him work till this storm has blown over. I am not sure that I do right in screening him from the punishment he deserves, but he has lived in this house, man and boy, for a dozen years, and I should be sorry if for this one day's work he made a miserable end. Lock the front-door, Miggs, and show no light towards the street when you go upstairs. Quick, Simon! Get to bed!'

'And do you suppose, sir,' retorted Mr Tappertit, with a thickness and slowness of speech which contrasted forcibly with the rapidity and earnestness of his kind-hearted master - 'and do you suppose, sir, that I am base and mean enough to accept your servile proposition? - Miscreant!'

'Whatever you please, Sim, but get to bed. Every minute is of consequence. The light here, Miggs!'

'Yes yes, oh do! Go to bed directly,' cried the two women together.

Mr Tappertit stood upon his feet, and pushing his chair away to show that he needed no assistance, answered, swaying himself to and fro, and managing his head as if it had no connection whatever with his body:

'You spoke of Miggs, sir - Miggs may be smothered!'

'Oh Simmun!' ejaculated that young lady in a faint voice. 'Oh mim! Oh sir! Oh goodness gracious, what a turn he has give me!'

'This family may ALL be smothered, sir,' returned Mr Tappertit, after glancing at her with a smile of ineffable disdain, 'excepting Mrs V. I have come here, sir, for her sake, this night. Mrs Varden, take this piece of paper. It's a protection, ma'am. You may need it.'

With these words he held out at arm's length, a dirty, crumpled scrap of writing. The locksmith took it from him, opened it, and read as follows:

'All good friends to our cause, I hope will be particular, and do no injury to the property of any true Protestant. I am well assured that the proprietor of this house is a staunch and worthy friend to the cause.

GEORGE GORDON.'

'What's this!' said the locksmith, with an altered face.

'Something that'll do you good service, young feller,' replied his journeyman, 'as you'll find. Keep that safe, and where you can lay your hand upon it in an instant. And chalk 'No Popery' on your door to-morrow night, and for a week to come - that's all.'

'This is a genuine document,' said the locksmith, 'I know, for I have seen the hand before. What threat does it imply? What devil is abroad?'

'A fiery devil,' retorted Sim; 'a flaming, furious devil. Don't you put yourself in its way, or you're done for, my buck. Be warned in time, G. Varden. Farewell!'

But here the two women threw themselves in his way - especially Miss Miggs, who fell upon him with such fervour that she pinned him against the wall - and conjured him in moving words not to go forth till he was sober; to listen to reason; to think of it; to take some rest, and then determine.

'I tell you,' said Mr Tappertit, 'that my mind is made up. My bleeding country calls me and I go! Miggs, if you don't get out of the way, I'll pinch you.'

Miss Miggs, still clinging to the rebel, screamed once vociferously - but whether in the distraction of her mind, or because of his having executed his threat, is uncertain.

'Release me,' said Simon, struggling to free himself from her chaste, but spider-like embrace. 'Let me go! I have made arrangements for you in an altered state of society, and mean to provide for you comfortably in life - there! Will that satisfy you?'

'Oh Simmun!' cried Miss Miggs. 'Oh my blessed Simmun! Oh mim! what are my feelings at this conflicting moment!'

Of a rather turbulent description, it would seem; for her nightcap had been knocked off in the scuffle, and she was on her knees upon the floor, making a strange revelation of blue and yellow curl-papers, straggling locks of hair, tags of staylaces, and strings of it's impossible to say what; panting for breath, clasping her hands, turning her eyes upwards, shedding abundance of tears, and exhibiting various other symptoms of the acutest mental suffering.

'I leave,' said Simon, turning to his master, with an utter disregard of Miggs's maidenly affliction, 'a box of things upstairs. Do what you like with 'em. I don't want 'em. I'm never coming back here, any more. Provide yourself, sir, with a journeyman; I'm my country's journeyman; henceforward that's MY line of business.'

'Be what you like in two hours' time, but now go up to bed,' returned the locksmith, planting himself in the doorway. 'Do you hear me? Go to bed!'

'I hear you, and defy you, Varden,' rejoined Simon Tappertit. 'This night, sir, I have been in the country, planning an expedition which shall fill your bell-hanging soul with wonder and dismay. The plot demands my utmost energy. Let me pass!'

'I'll knock you down if you come near the door,' replied the locksmith. 'You had better go to bed!'

Simon made no answer, but gathering himself up as straight as he could, plunged head foremost at his old master, and the two went driving out into the workshop together, plying their hands and feet so briskly that they looked like half-a-dozen, while Miggs and Mrs Varden screamed for twelve.

It would have been easy for Varden to knock his old 'prentice down, and bind him hand and foot; but as he was loth to hurt him in his then defenceless state, he contented himself with parrying his blows when he could, taking them in perfect good part when he could not, and keeping between him and the door, until a favourable opportunity should present itself for forcing him to retreat up-stairs, and shutting him up in his own room. But, in the goodness of his heart, he calculated too much upon his adversary's weakness, and forgot that drunken men who have lost the power of walking steadily, can often run. Watching his time, Simon Tappertit made a cunning show of falling back, staggered unexpectedly forward, brushed past him, opened the door (he knew the trick of that lock well), and darted down the street like a mad dog. The locksmith paused for a moment in the excess of his astonishment, and then gave chase.

It was an excellent season for a run, for at that silent hour the streets were deserted, the air was cool, and the flying figure before him distinctly visible at a great distance, as it sped away, with a long gaunt shadow following at its heels. But the short-winded locksmith had no chance against a man of Sim's youth and spare figure, though the day had been when he could have run him down in no time. The space between them rapidly increased, and as the rays of the rising sun streamed upon Simon in the act of turning a distant corner, Gabriel Varden was fain to give up, and sit down on a doorstep to fetch his breath. Simon meanwhile, without once stopping, fled at the same degree of swiftness to The Boot, where, as he well knew, some of his company were lying, and at which respectable hostelry - for he had already acquired the distinction of being in great peril of the law - a friendly watch had been expecting him all night, and was even now on the look-out for his coming.

'Go thy ways, Sim, go thy ways,' said the locksmith, as soon as he could speak. 'I have done my best for thee, poor lad, and would have saved thee, but the rope is round thy neck, I fear.'

So saying, and shaking his head in a very sorrowful and disconsolate manner, he turned back, and soon re-entered his own house, where Mrs Varden and the faithful Miggs had been anxiously expecting his return.

Now Mrs Varden (and by consequence Miss Miggs likewise) was impressed with a secret misgiving that she had done wrong; that she had, to the utmost of her small means, aided and abetted the growth of disturbances, the end of which it was impossible to foresee; that she had led remotely to the scene which had just passed; and that the locksmith's time for triumph and reproach had now arrived indeed. And so strongly did Mrs Varden feel this, and so crestfallen was she in consequence, that while her husband was pursuing their lost journeyman, she secreted under her chair the little red-brick dwelling-house with the yellow roof, lest it should furnish new occasion for reference to the painful theme; and now hid the same still more, with the skirts of her dress.

But it happened that the locksmith had been thinking of this very article on his way home, and that, coming into the room and not seeing it, he at once demanded where it was.

Mrs Varden had no resource but to produce it, which she did with many tears, and broken protestations that if she could have known -

'Yes, yes,' said Varden, 'of course - I know that. I don't mean to reproach you, my dear. But recollect from this time that all good things perverted to evil purposes, are worse than those which are naturally bad. A thoroughly wicked woman, is wicked indeed. When religion goes wrong, she is very wrong, for the same reason. Let us say no more about it, my dear.'

So he dropped the red-brick dwelling-house on the floor, and setting his heel upon it, crushed it into pieces. The halfpence, and sixpences, and other voluntary contributions, rolled about in all directions, but nobody offered to touch them, or to take them up.

'That,' said the locksmith, 'is easily disposed of, and I would to Heaven that everything growing out of the same society could be settled as easily.'

'It happens very fortunately, Varden,' said his wife, with her handkerchief to her eyes, 'that in case any more disturbances should happen - which I hope not; I sincerely hope not - '

'I hope so too, my dear.'

' - That in case any should occur, we have the piece of paper which that poor misguided young man brought.'

'Ay, to be sure,' said the locksmith, turning quickly round. 'Where is that piece of paper?'

Mrs Varden stood aghast as he took it from her outstretched band, tore it into fragments, and threw them under the grate.

'Not use it?' she said.

'Use it!' cried the locksmith. No! Let them come and pull the roof about our ears; let them burn us out of house and home; I'd neither have the protection of their leader, nor chalk their howl upon my door, though, for not doing it, they shot me on my own threshold. Use it! Let them come and do their worst. The first man who crosses my doorstep on such an errand as theirs, had better be a hundred miles away. Let him look to it. The others may have their will. I wouldn't beg or buy them off, if, instead of every pound of iron in the place, there was a hundred weight of gold. Get you to bed, Martha. I shall take down the shutters and go to work.'

'So early!' said his wife.

'Ay,' replied the locksmith cheerily, 'so early. Come when they may, they shall not find us skulking and hiding, as if we feared to take our portion of the light of day, and left it all to them. So pleasant dreams to you, my dear, and cheerful sleep!'

With that he gave his wife a hearty kiss, and bade her delay no longer, or it would be time to rise before she lay down to rest. Mrs Varden quite amiably and meekly walked upstairs, followed by Miggs, who, although a good deal subdued, could not refrain from sundry stimulative coughs and sniffs by the way, or from holding up her hands in astonishment at the daring conduct of master.