

## Chapter LIV

Rumours of the prevailing disturbances had, by this time, begun to be pretty generally circulated through the towns and villages round London, and the tidings were everywhere received with that appetite for the marvellous and love of the terrible which have probably been among the natural characteristics of mankind since the creation of the world. These accounts, however, appeared, to many persons at that day - as they would to us at the present, but that we know them to be matter of history - so monstrous and improbable, that a great number of those who were resident at a distance, and who were credulous enough on other points, were really unable to bring their minds to believe that such things could be; and rejected the intelligence they received on all hands, as wholly fabulous and absurd.

Mr Willet - not so much, perhaps, on account of his having argued and settled the matter with himself, as by reason of his constitutional obstinacy - was one of those who positively refused to entertain the current topic for a moment. On this very evening, and perhaps at the very time when Gashford kept his solitary watch, old John was so red in the face with perpetually shaking his head in contradiction of his three ancient cronies and pot companions, that he was quite a phenomenon to behold, and lighted up the Maypole Porch wherein they sat together, like a monstrous carbuncle in a fairy tale.

'Do you think, sir,' said Mr Willet, looking hard at Solomon Daisy - for it was his custom in cases of personal altercation to fasten upon the smallest man in the party - 'do you think, sir, that I'm a born fool?' 'No, no, Johnny,' returned Solomon, looking round upon the little circle of which he formed a part: 'We all know better than that. You're no fool, Johnny. No, no!'

Mr Cobb and Mr Parkes shook their heads in unison, muttering, 'No, no, Johnny, not you!' But as such compliments had usually the effect of making Mr Willet rather more dogged than before, he surveyed them with a look of deep disdain, and returned for answer:

'Then what do you mean by coming here, and telling me that this evening you're a-going to walk up to London together - you three - you - and have the evidence of your own senses? An't,' said Mr Willet, putting his pipe in his mouth with an air of solemn disgust, 'an't the evidence of MY senses enough for you?'

'But we haven't got it, Johnny,' pleaded Parkes, humbly.

'You haven't got it, sir?' repeated Mr Willet, eyeing him from top to toe. 'You haven't got it, sir? You HAVE got it, sir. Don't I tell you that His blessed Majesty King George the Third would no more stand a rioting

and rollicking in his streets, than he'd stand being crowed over by his own Parliament?'

'Yes, Johnny, but that's your sense - not your senses,' said the adventurous Mr Parkes.

'How do you know?' retorted John with great dignity. 'You're a contradicting pretty free, you are, sir. How do YOU know which it is? I'm not aware I ever told you, sir.'

Mr Parkes, finding himself in the position of having got into metaphysics without exactly seeing his way out of them, stammered forth an apology and retreated from the argument. There then ensued a silence of some ten minutes or a quarter of an hour, at the expiration of which period Mr Willet was observed to rumble and shake with laughter, and presently remarked, in reference to his late adversary, 'that he hoped he had tackled him enough.' Thereupon Messrs Cobb and Daisy laughed, and nodded, and Parkes was looked upon as thoroughly and effectually put down.

'Do you suppose if all this was true, that Mr Haredale would be constantly away from home, as he is?' said John, after another silence. 'Do you think he wouldn't be afraid to leave his house with them two young women in it, and only a couple of men, or so?'

'Ay, but then you know,' returned Solomon Daisy, 'his house is a goodish way out of London, and they do say that the rioters won't go more than two miles, or three at the farthest, off the stones. Besides, you know, some of the Catholic gentlefolks have actually sent trinkets and suchlike down here for safety - at least, so the story goes.'

'The story goes!' said Mr Willet testily. 'Yes, sir. The story goes that you saw a ghost last March. But nobody believes it.'

'Well!' said Solomon, rising, to divert the attention of his two friends, who tittered at this retort: 'believed or disbelieved, it's true; and true or not, if we mean to go to London, we must be going at once. So shake hands, Johnny, and good night.'

'I shall shake hands,' returned the landlord, putting his into his pockets, 'with no man as goes to London on such nonsensical errands.'

The three cronies were therefore reduced to the necessity of shaking his elbows; having performed that ceremony, and brought from the house their hats, and sticks, and greatcoats, they bade him good night and departed; promising to bring him on the morrow full and

true accounts of the real state of the city, and if it were quiet, to give him the full merit of his victory.

John Willet looked after them, as they plodded along the road in the rich glow of a summer evening; and knocking the ashes out of his pipe, laughed inwardly at their folly, until his sides were sore. When he had quite exhausted himself - which took some time, for he laughed as slowly as he thought and spoke - he sat himself comfortably with his back to the house, put his legs upon the bench, then his apron over his face, and fell sound asleep.

How long he slept, matters not; but it was for no brief space, for when he awoke, the rich light had faded, the sombre hues of night were falling fast upon the landscape, and a few bright stars were already twinkling overhead. The birds were all at roost, the daisies on the green had closed their fairy hoods, the honeysuckle twining round the porch exhaled its perfume in a twofold degree, as though it lost its coyness at that silent time and loved to shed its fragrance on the night; the ivy scarcely stirred its deep green leaves. How tranquil, and how beautiful it was!

Was there no sound in the air, besides the gentle rustling of the trees and the grasshopper's merry chirp? Hark! Something very faint and distant, not unlike the murmuring in a sea-shell. Now it grew louder, fainter now, and now it altogether died away. Presently, it came again, subsided, came once more, grew louder, fainter - swelled into a roar. It was on the road, and varied with its windings. All at once it burst into a distinct sound - the voices, and the tramping feet of many men.

It is questionable whether old John Willet, even then, would have thought of the rioters but for the cries of his cook and housemaid, who ran screaming upstairs and locked themselves into one of the old garrets, - shrieking dismally when they had done so, by way of rendering their place of refuge perfectly secret and secure. These two females did afterwards depone that Mr Willet in his consternation uttered but one word, and called that up the stairs in a stentorian voice, six distinct times. But as this word was a monosyllable, which, however inoffensive when applied to the quadruped it denotes, is highly reprehensible when used in connection with females of unimpeachable character, many persons were inclined to believe that the young women laboured under some hallucination caused by excessive fear; and that their ears deceived them.

Be this as it may, John Willet, in whom the very uttermost extent of dull-headed perplexity supplied the place of courage, stationed himself in the porch, and waited for their coming up. Once, it dimly occurred to him that there was a kind of door to the house, which had a lock and bolts; and at the same time some shadowy ideas of shutters to

the lower windows, flitted through his brain. But he stood stock still, looking down the road in the direction in which the noise was rapidly advancing, and did not so much as take his hands out of his pockets.

He had not to wait long. A dark mass, looming through a cloud of dust, soon became visible; the mob quickened their pace; shouting and whooping like savages, they came rushing on pell mell; and in a few seconds he was bandied from hand to hand, in the heart of a crowd of men.

'Halloa!' cried a voice he knew, as the man who spoke came cleaving through the throng. 'Where is he? Give him to me. Don't hurt him. How now, old Jack! Ha ha ha!'

Mr Willet looked at him, and saw it was Hugh; but he said nothing, and thought nothing.

'These lads are thirsty and must drink!' cried Hugh, thrusting him back towards the house. 'Bustle, Jack, bustle. Show us the best - the very best - the over-proof that you keep for your own drinking, Jack!'

John faintly articulated the words, 'Who's to pay?'

'He says "Who's to pay?"' cried Hugh, with a roar of laughter which was loudly echoed by the crowd. Then turning to John, he added, 'Pay! Why, nobody.'

John stared round at the mass of faces - some grinning, some fierce, some lighted up by torches, some indistinct, some dusky and shadowy: some looking at him, some at his house, some at each other - and while he was, as he thought, in the very act of doing so, found himself, without any consciousness of having moved, in the bar; sitting down in an arm-chair, and watching the destruction of his property, as if it were some queer play or entertainment, of an astonishing and stupefying nature, but having no reference to himself - that he could make out - at all.

Yes. Here was the bar - the bar that the boldest never entered without special invitation - the sanctuary, the mystery, the hallowed ground: here it was, crammed with men, clubs, sticks, torches, pistols; filled with a deafening noise, oaths, shouts, screams, hootings; changed all at once into a bear-garden, a madhouse, an infernal temple: men darting in and out, by door and window, smashing the glass, turning the taps, drinking liquor out of China punchbowls, sitting astride of casks, smoking private and personal pipes, cutting down the sacred grove of lemons, hacking and hewing at the celebrated cheese, breaking open inviolable drawers, putting things in their pockets which didn't belong to them, dividing his own money before his own

eyes, wantonly wasting, breaking, pulling down and tearing up: nothing quiet, nothing private: men everywhere - above, below, overhead, in the bedrooms, in the kitchen, in the yard, in the stables - clambering in at windows when there were doors wide open; dropping out of windows when the stairs were handy; leaping over the bannisters into chasms of passages: new faces and figures presenting themselves every instant - some yelling, some singing, some fighting, some breaking glass and crockery, some laying the dust with the liquor they couldn't drink, some ringing the bells till they pulled them down, others beating them with pokers till they beat them into fragments: more men still - more, more, more - swarming on like insects: noise, smoke, light, darkness, frolic, anger, laughter, groans, plunder, fear, and ruin!

Nearly all the time while John looked on at this bewildering scene, Hugh kept near him; and though he was the loudest, wildest, most destructive villain there, he saved his old master's bones a score of times. Nay, even when Mr Tappertit, excited by liquor, came up, and in assertion of his prerogative politely kicked John Willet on the shins, Hugh bade him return the compliment; and if old John had had sufficient presence of mind to understand this whispered direction, and to profit by it, he might no doubt, under Hugh's protection, have done so with impunity.

At length the band began to reassemble outside the house, and to call to those within, to join them, for they were losing time. These murmurs increasing, and attaining a high pitch, Hugh, and some of those who yet lingered in the bar, and who plainly were the leaders of the troop, took counsel together, apart, as to what was to be done with John, to keep him quiet until their Chigwell work was over. Some proposed to set the house on fire and leave him in it; others, that he should be reduced to a state of temporary insensibility, by knocking on the head; others, that he should be sworn to sit where he was until to-morrow at the same hour; others again, that he should be gagged and taken off with them, under a sufficient guard. All these propositions being overruled, it was concluded, at last, to bind him in his chair, and the word was passed for Dennis.

'Look'ee here, Jack!' said Hugh, striding up to him: 'We are going to tie you, hand and foot, but otherwise you won't be hurt. D'ye hear?'

John Willet looked at another man, as if he didn't know which was the speaker, and muttered something about an ordinary every Sunday at two o'clock.

'You won't be hurt I tell you, Jack - do you hear me?' roared Hugh, impressing the assurance upon him by means of a heavy blow on the

back. 'He's so dead scared, he's woolgathering, I think. Give him a drop of something to drink here. Hand over, one of you.'

A glass of liquor being passed forward, Hugh poured the contents down old John's throat. Mr Willet feebly smacked his lips, thrust his hand into his pocket, and inquired what was to pay; adding, as he looked vacantly round, that he believed there was a trifle of broken glass -

'He's out of his senses for the time, it's my belief,' said Hugh, after shaking him, without any visible effect upon his system, until his keys rattled in his pocket. 'Where's that Dennis?'

The word was again passed, and presently Mr Dennis, with a long cord bound about his middle, something after the manner of a friar, came hurrying in, attended by a body-guard of half-a-dozen of his men.

'Come! Be alive here!' cried Hugh, stamping his foot upon the ground. 'Make haste!'

Dennis, with a wink and a nod, unwound the cord from about his person, and raising his eyes to the ceiling, looked all over it, and round the walls and cornice, with a curious eye; then shook his head.

'Move, man, can't you!' cried Hugh, with another impatient stamp of his foot. 'Are we to wait here, till the cry has gone for ten miles round, and our work's interrupted?'

'It's all very fine talking, brother,' answered Dennis, stepping towards him; 'but unless - ' and here he whispered in his ear - 'unless we do it over the door, it can't be done at all in this here room.'

'What can't?' Hugh demanded.

'What can't!' retorted Dennis. 'Why, the old man can't.'

'Why, you weren't going to hang him!' cried Hugh.

'No, brother?' returned the hangman with a stare. 'What else?'

Hugh made no answer, but snatching the rope from his companion's hand, proceeded to bind old John himself; but his very first move was so bungling and unskilful, that Mr Dennis entreated, almost with tears in his eyes, that he might be permitted to perform the duty. Hugh consenting, he achieved it in a twinkling.

'There,' he said, looking mournfully at John Willet, who displayed no more emotion in his bonds than he had shown out of them. 'That's what I call pretty and workmanlike. He's quite a picter now. But, brother, just a word with you - now that he's ready trussed, as one may say, wouldn't it be better for all parties if we was to work him off? It would read uncommon well in the newspapers, it would indeed. The public would think a great deal more on us!'

Hugh, inferring what his companion meant, rather from his gestures than his technical mode of expressing himself (to which, as he was ignorant of his calling, he wanted the clue), rejected this proposition for the second time, and gave the word 'Forward!' which was echoed by a hundred voices from without.

'To the Warren!' shouted Dennis as he ran out, followed by the rest. 'A witness's house, my lads!'

A loud yell followed, and the whole throng hurried off, mad for pillage and destruction. Hugh lingered behind for a few moments to stimulate himself with more drink, and to set all the taps running, a few of which had accidentally been spared; then, glancing round the despoiled and plundered room, through whose shattered window the rioters had thrust the Maypole itself, - for even that had been sawn down, - lighted a torch, clapped the mute and motionless John Willet on the back, and waving his light above his head, and uttering a fierce shout, hastened after his companions.