

Chapter LXII

The prisoner, left to himself, sat down upon his bedstead: and resting his elbows on his knees, and his chin upon his hands, remained in that attitude for hours. It would be hard to say, of what nature his reflections were. They had no distinctness, and, saving for some flashes now and then, no reference to his condition or the train of circumstances by which it had been brought about. The cracks in the pavement of his cell, the chinks in the wall where stone was joined to stone, the bars in the window, the iron ring upon the floor, - such things as these, subsiding strangely into one another, and awakening an indescribable kind of interest and amusement, engrossed his whole mind; and although at the bottom of his every thought there was an uneasy sense of guilt, and dread of death, he felt no more than that vague consciousness of it, which a sleeper has of pain. It pursues him through his dreams, gnaws at the heart of all his fancied pleasures, robs the banquet of its taste, music of its sweetness, makes happiness itself unhappy, and yet is no bodily sensation, but a phantom without shape, or form, or visible presence; pervading everything, but having no existence; recognisable everywhere, but nowhere seen, or touched, or met with face to face, until the sleep is past, and waking agony returns.

After a long time the door of his cell opened. He looked up; saw the blind man enter; and relapsed into his former position.

Guided by his breathing, the visitor advanced to where he sat; and stopping beside him, and stretching out his hand to assure himself that he was right, remained, for a good space, silent.

'This is bad, Rudge. This is bad,' he said at length.

The prisoner shuffled with his feet upon the ground in turning his body from him, but made no other answer.

'How were you taken?' he asked. 'And where? You never told me more than half your secret. No matter; I know it now. How was it, and where, eh?' he asked again, coming still nearer to him.

'At Chigwell,' said the other.

'At Chigwell! How came you there?'

'Because I went there to avoid the man I stumbled on,' he answered. 'Because I was chased and driven there, by him and Fate. Because I was urged to go there, by something stronger than my own will. When I found him watching in the house she used to live in, night after

night, I knew I never could escape him - never! and when I heard the Bell - '

He shivered; muttered that it was very cold; paced quickly up and down the narrow cell; and sitting down again, fell into his old posture.

'You were saying,' said the blind man, after another pause, 'that when you heard the Bell - '

'Let it be, will you?' he retorted in a hurried voice. 'It hangs there yet.'

The blind man turned a wistful and inquisitive face towards him, but he continued to speak, without noticing him.

'I went to Chigwell, in search of the mob. I have been so hunted and beset by this man, that I knew my only hope of safety lay in joining them. They had gone on before; I followed them when it left off.'

'When what left off?'

'The Bell. They had quitted the place. I hoped that some of them might be still lingering among the ruins, and was searching for them when I heard - ' he drew a long breath, and wiped his forehead with his sleeve - 'his voice.'

'Saying what?'

'No matter what. I don't know. I was then at the foot of the turret, where I did the - '

'Ay,' said the blind man, nodding his head with perfect composure, 'I understand.'

'I climbed the stair, or so much of it as was left; meaning to hide till he had gone. But he heard me; and followed almost as soon as I set foot upon the ashes.'

'You might have hidden in the wall, and thrown him down, or stabbed him,' said the blind man.

'Might I? Between that man and me, was one who led him on - I saw it, though he did not - and raised above his head a bloody hand. It was in the room above that HE and I stood glaring at each other on the night of the murder, and before he fell he raised his hand like that, and fixed his eyes on me. I knew the chase would end there.'

'You have a strong fancy,' said the blind man, with a smile.

'Strengthen yours with blood, and see what it will come to.'

He groaned, and rocked himself, and looking up for the first time, said, in a low, hollow voice:

'Eight-and-twenty years! Eight-and-twenty years! He has never changed in all that time, never grown older, nor altered in the least degree. He has been before me in the dark night, and the broad sunny day; in the twilight, the moonlight, the sunlight, the light of fire, and lamp, and candle; and in the deepest gloom. Always the same! In company, in solitude, on land, on shipboard; sometimes leaving me alone for months, and sometimes always with me. I have seen him, at sea, come gliding in the dead of night along the bright reflection of the moon in the calm water; and I have seen him, on quays and market-places, with his hand uplifted, towering, the centre of a busy crowd, unconscious of the terrible form that had its silent stand among them. Fancy! Are you real? Am I? Are these iron fetters, riveted on me by the smith's hammer, or are they fancies I can shatter at a blow?'

The blind man listened in silence.

'Fancy! Do I fancy that I killed him? Do I fancy that as I left the chamber where he lay, I saw the face of a man peeping from a dark door, who plainly showed me by his fearful looks that he suspected what I had done? Do I remember that I spoke fairly to him - that I drew nearer - nearer yet - with the hot knife in my sleeve? Do I fancy how HE died? Did he stagger back into the angle of the wall into which I had hemmed him, and, bleeding inwardly, stand, not fall, a corpse before me? Did I see him, for an instant, as I see you now, erect and on his feet - but dead!'

The blind man, who knew that he had risen, motioned him to sit down again upon his bedstead; but he took no notice of the gesture.

'It was then I thought, for the first time, of fastening the murder upon him. It was then I dressed him in my clothes, and dragged him down the back-stairs to the piece of water. Do I remember listening to the bubbles that came rising up when I had rolled him in? Do I remember wiping the water from my face, and because the body splashed it there, in its descent, feeling as if it MUST be blood?'

'Did I go home when I had done? And oh, my God! how long it took to do! Did I stand before my wife, and tell her? Did I see her fall upon the ground; and, when I stooped to raise her, did she thrust me back with a force that cast me off as if I had been a child, staining the hand with which she clasped my wrist? Is THAT fancy?'

'Did she go down upon her knees, and call on Heaven to witness that she and her unborn child renounced me from that hour; and did she, in words so solemn that they turned me cold - me, fresh from the horrors my own hands had made - warn me to fly while there was time; for though she would be silent, being my wretched wife, she would not shelter me? Did I go forth that night, abjured of God and man, and anchored deep in hell, to wander at my cable's length about the earth, and surely be drawn down at last?'

'Why did you return?' said the blind man.

'Why is blood red? I could no more help it, than I could live without breath. I struggled against the impulse, but I was drawn back, through every difficult and adverse circumstance, as by a mighty engine. Nothing could stop me. The day and hour were none of my choice. Sleeping and waking, I had been among the old haunts for years - had visited my own grave. Why did I come back? Because this jail was gapping for me, and he stood beckoning at the door.'

'You were not known?' said the blind man.

'I was a man who had been twenty-two years dead. No. I was not known.'

'You should have kept your secret better.'

'MY secret? MINE? It was a secret, any breath of air could whisper at its will. The stars had it in their twinkling, the water in its flowing, the leaves in their rustling, the seasons in their return. It lurked in strangers' faces, and their voices. Everything had lips on which it always trembled. - MY secret!'

'It was revealed by your own act at any rate,' said the blind man.

'The act was not mine. I did it, but it was not mine. I was forced at times to wander round, and round, and round that spot. If you had chained me up when the fit was on me, I should have broken away, and gone there. As truly as the loadstone draws iron towards it, so he, lying at the bottom of his grave, could draw me near him when he would. Was that fancy? Did I like to go there, or did I strive and wrestle with the power that forced me?'

The blind man shrugged his shoulders, and smiled incredulously. The prisoner again resumed his old attitude, and for a long time both were mute.

'I suppose then,' said his visitor, at length breaking silence, 'that you are penitent and resigned; that you desire to make peace with

everybody (in particular, with your wife who has brought you to this); and that you ask no greater favour than to be carried to Tyburn as soon as possible? That being the case, I had better take my leave. I am not good enough to be company for you.'

'Have I not told you,' said the other fiercely, 'that I have striven and wrestled with the power that brought me here? Has my whole life, for eight-and-twenty years, been one perpetual struggle and resistance, and do you think I want to lie down and die? Do all men shrink from death - I most of all!'

'That's better said. That's better spoken, Rudge - but I'll not call you that again - than anything you have said yet,' returned the blind man, speaking more familiarly, and laying his hands upon his arm. 'Lookye, - I never killed a man myself, for I have never been placed in a position that made it worth my while. Farther, I am not an advocate for killing men, and I don't think I should recommend it or like it - for it's very hazardous - under any circumstances. But as you had the misfortune to get into this trouble before I made your acquaintance, and as you have been my companion, and have been of use to me for a long time now, I overlook that part of the matter, and am only anxious that you shouldn't die unnecessarily. Now, I do not consider that, at present, it is at all necessary.'

'What else is left me?' returned the prisoner. 'To eat my way through these walls with my teeth?'

'Something easier than that,' returned his friend. 'Promise me that you will talk no more of these fancies of yours - idle, foolish things, quite beneath a man - and I'll tell you what I mean.'

'Tell me,' said the other.

'Your worthy lady with the tender conscience; your scrupulous, virtuous, punctilious, but not blindly affectionate wife - '

'What of her?'

'Is now in London.'

'A curse upon her, be she where she may!'

'That's natural enough. If she had taken her annuity as usual, you would not have been here, and we should have been better off. But that's apart from the business. She's in London. Scared, as I suppose, and have no doubt, by my representation when I waited upon her, that you were close at hand (which I, of course, urged only as an

inducement to compliance, knowing that she was not pining to see you), she left that place, and travelled up to London.'

'How do you know?'

'From my friend the noble captain - the illustrious general - the bladder, Mr Tappertit. I learnt from him the last time I saw him, which was yesterday, that your son who is called Barnaby - not after his father, I suppose - '

'Death! does that matter now!'

' - You are impatient,' said the blind man, calmly; 'it's a good sign, and looks like life - that your son Barnaby had been lured away from her by one of his companions who knew him of old, at Chigwell; and that he is now among the rioters.'

'And what is that to me? If father and son be hanged together, what comfort shall I find in that?'

'Stay - stay, my friend,' returned the blind man, with a cunning look, 'you travel fast to journeys' ends. Suppose I track my lady out, and say thus much: 'You want your son, ma'am - good. I, knowing those who tempt him to remain among them, can restore him to you, ma'am - good. You must pay a price, ma'am, for his restoration - good again. The price is small, and easy to be paid - dear ma'am, that's best of all.'

'What mockery is this?'

'Very likely, she may reply in those words. 'No mockery at all,' I answer: 'Madam, a person said to be your husband (identity is difficult of proof after the lapse of many years) is in prison, his life in peril - the charge against him, murder. Now, ma'am, your husband has been dead a long, long time. The gentleman never can be confounded with him, if you will have the goodness to say a few words, on oath, as to when he died, and how; and that this person (who I am told resembles him in some degree) is no more he than I am. Such testimony will set the question quite at rest. Pledge yourself to me to give it, ma' am, and I will undertake to keep your son (a fine lad) out of harm's way until you have done this trifling service, when he shall be delivered up to you, safe and sound. On the other hand, if you decline to do so, I fear he will be betrayed, and handed over to the law, which will assuredly sentence him to suffer death. It is, in fact, a choice between his life and death. If you refuse, he swings. If you comply, the timber is not grown, nor the hemp sown, that shall do him any harm.'

'There is a gleam of hope in this!' cried the prisoner.

'A gleam!' returned his friend, 'a noon-blaze; a full and glorious daylight. Hush! I hear the tread of distant feet. Rely on me.'

'When shall I hear more?'

'As soon as I do. I should hope, to-morrow. They are coming to say that our time for talk is over. I hear the jingling of the keys. Not another word of this just now, or they may overhear us.'

As he said these words, the lock was turned, and one of the prison turnkeys appearing at the door, announced that it was time for visitors to leave the jail.

'So soon!' said Stagg, meekly. 'But it can't be helped. Cheer up, friend. This mistake will soon be set at rest, and then you are a man again! If this charitable gentleman will lead a blind man (who has nothing in return but prayers) to the prison-porch, and set him with his face towards the west, he will do a worthy deed. Thank you, good sir. I thank you very kindly.'

So saying, and pausing for an instant at the door to turn his grinning face towards his friend, he departed.

When the officer had seen him to the porch, he returned, and again unlocking and unbarring the door of the cell, set it wide open, informing its inmate that he was at liberty to walk in the adjacent yard, if he thought proper, for an hour.

The prisoner answered with a sullen nod; and being left alone again, sat brooding over what he had heard, and pondering upon the hopes the recent conversation had awakened; gazing abstractedly, the while he did so, on the light without, and watching the shadows thrown by one wall on another, and on the stone-paved ground.

It was a dull, square yard, made cold and gloomy by high walls, and seeming to chill the very sunlight. The stone, so bare, and rough, and obdurate, filled even him with longing thoughts of meadow-land and trees; and with a burning wish to be at liberty. As he looked, he rose, and leaning against the door-post, gazed up at the bright blue sky, smiling even on that dreary home of crime. He seemed, for a moment, to remember lying on his back in some sweet-scented place, and gazing at it through moving branches, long ago.

His attention was suddenly attracted by a clanking sound - he knew what it was, for he had startled himself by making the same noise in walking to the door. Presently a voice began to sing, and he saw the

shadow of a figure on the pavement. It stopped - was silent all at once, as though the person for a moment had forgotten where he was, but soon remembered - and so, with the same clanking noise, the shadow disappeared.

He walked out into the court and paced it to and fro; startling the echoes, as he went, with the harsh jangling of his fetters. There was a door near his, which, like his, stood ajar.

He had not taken half-a-dozen turns up and down the yard, when, standing still to observe this door, he heard the clanking sound again. A face looked out of the grated window - he saw it very dimly, for the cell was dark and the bars were heavy - and directly afterwards, a man appeared, and came towards him.

For the sense of loneliness he had, he might have been in jail a year. Made eager by the hope of companionship, he quickened his pace, and hastened to meet the man half way -

What was this! His son!

They stood face to face, staring at each other. He shrinking and cowed, despite himself; Barnaby struggling with his imperfect memory, and wondering where he had seen that face before. He was not uncertain long, for suddenly he laid hands upon him, and striving to bear him to the ground, cried:

'Ah! I know! You are the robber!'

He said nothing in reply at first, but held down his head, and struggled with him silently. Finding the younger man too strong for him, he raised his face, looked close into his eyes, and said,

'I am your father.'

God knows what magic the name had for his ears; but Barnaby released his hold, fell back, and looked at him aghast. Suddenly he sprung towards him, put his arms about his neck, and pressed his head against his cheek.

Yes, yes, he was; he was sure he was. But where had he been so long, and why had he left his mother by herself, or worse than by herself, with her poor foolish boy? And had she really been as happy as they said? And where was she? Was she near there? She was not happy now, and he in jail? Ah, no.

Not a word was said in answer; but Grip croaked loudly, and hopped about them, round and round, as if enclosing them in a magic circle, and invoking all the powers of mischief.