

Chapter LXXI

All next day, Emma Haredale, Dolly, and Miggs, remained cooped up together in what had now been their prison for so many days, without seeing any person, or hearing any sound but the murmured conversation, in an outer room, of the men who kept watch over them. There appeared to be more of these fellows than there had been hitherto; and they could no longer hear the voices of women, which they had before plainly distinguished. Some new excitement, too, seemed to prevail among them; for there was much stealthy going in and out, and a constant questioning of those who were newly arrived. They had previously been quite reckless in their behaviour; often making a great uproar; quarrelling among themselves, fighting, dancing, and singing. They were now very subdued and silent, conversing almost in whispers, and stealing in and out with a soft and stealthy tread, very different from the boisterous trampling in which their arrivals and departures had hitherto been announced to the trembling captives.

Whether this change was occasioned by the presence among them of some person of authority in their ranks, or by any other cause, they were unable to decide. Sometimes they thought it was in part attributable to there being a sick man in the chamber, for last night there had been a shuffling of feet, as though a burden were brought in, and afterwards a moaning noise. But they had no means of ascertaining the truth: for any question or entreaty on their parts only provoked a storm of execrations, or something worse; and they were too happy to be left alone, unassailed by threats or admiration, to risk even that comfort, by any voluntary communication with those who held them in durance.

It was sufficiently evident, both to Emma and to the locksmith's poor little daughter herself, that she, Dolly, was the great object of attraction; and that so soon as they should have leisure to indulge in the softer passion, Hugh and Mr Tappertit would certainly fall to blows for her sake; in which latter case, it was not very difficult to see whose prize she would become. With all her old horror of that man revived, and deepened into a degree of aversion and abhorrence which no language can describe; with a thousand old recollections and regrets, and causes of distress, anxiety, and fear, besetting her on all sides; poor Dolly Varden - sweet, blooming, buxom Dolly - began to hang her head, and fade, and droop, like a beautiful flower. The colour fled from her cheeks, her courage forsook her, her gentle heart failed. Unmindful of all her provoking caprices, forgetful of all her conquests and inconstancy, with all her winning little vanities quite gone, she nestled all the livelong day in Emma Haredale's bosom; and, sometimes calling on her dear old grey-haired father, sometimes on

her mother, and sometimes even on her old home, pined slowly away, like a poor bird in its cage.

Light hearts, light hearts, that float so gaily on a smooth stream, that are so sparkling and buoyant in the sunshine - down upon fruit, bloom upon flowers, blush in summer air, life of the winged insect, whose whole existence is a day - how soon ye sink in troubled water! Poor Dolly's heart - a little, gentle, idle, fickle thing; giddy, restless, fluttering; constant to nothing but bright looks, and smiles and laughter - Dolly's heart was breaking.

Emma had known grief, and could bear it better. She had little comfort to impart, but she could soothe and tend her, and she did so; and Dolly clung to her like a child to its nurse. In endeavouring to inspire her with some fortitude, she increased her own; and though the nights were long, and the days dismal, and she felt the wasting influence of watching and fatigue, and had perhaps a more defined and clear perception of their destitute condition and its worst dangers, she uttered no complaint. Before the ruffians, in whose power they were, she bore herself so calmly, and with such an appearance, in the midst of all her terror, of a secret conviction that they dared not harm her, that there was not a man among them but held her in some degree of dread; and more than one believed she had a weapon hidden in her dress, and was prepared to use it.

Such was their condition when they were joined by Miss Miggs, who gave them to understand that she too had been taken prisoner because of her charms, and detailed such feats of resistance she had performed (her virtue having given her supernatural strength), that they felt it quite a happiness to have her for a champion. Nor was this the only comfort they derived at first from Miggs's presence and society: for that young lady displayed such resignation and long-suffering, and so much meek endurance, under her trials, and breathed in all her chaste discourse a spirit of such holy confidence and resignation, and devout belief that all would happen for the best, that Emma felt her courage strengthened by the bright example; never doubting but that everything she said was true, and that she, like them, was torn from all she loved, and agonised by doubt and apprehension. As to poor Dolly, she was roused, at first, by seeing one who came from home; but when she heard under what circumstances she had left it, and into whose hands her father had fallen, she wept more bitterly than ever, and refused all comfort.

Miss Miggs was at some trouble to reprove her for this state of mind, and to entreat her to take example by herself, who, she said, was now receiving back, with interest, tenfold the amount of her subscriptions to the red-brick dwelling-house, in the articles of peace of mind and a quiet conscience. And, while on serious topics, Miss Miggs considered

it her duty to try her hand at the conversion of Miss Haredale; for whose improvement she launched into a polemical address of some length, in the course whereof, she likened herself unto a chosen missionary, and that young lady to a cannibal in darkness. Indeed, she returned so often to these subjects, and so frequently called upon them to take a lesson from her, - at the same time vaunting and, as it were, rioting in, her huge unworthiness, and abundant excess of sin, - that, in the course of a short time, she became, in that small chamber, rather a nuisance than a comfort, and rendered them, if possible, even more unhappy than they had been before.

The night had now come; and for the first time (for their jailers had been regular in bringing food and candles), they were left in darkness. Any change in their condition in such a place inspired new fears; and when some hours had passed, and the gloom was still unbroken, Emma could no longer repress her alarm.

They listened attentively. There was the same murmuring in the outer room, and now and then a moan which seemed to be wrung from a person in great pain, who made an effort to subdue it, but could not. Even these men seemed to be in darkness too; for no light shone through the chinks in the door, nor were they moving, as their custom was, but quite still: the silence being unbroken by so much as the creaking of a board.

At first, Miss Miggs wondered greatly in her own mind who this sick person might be; but arriving, on second thoughts, at the conclusion that he was a part of the schemes on foot, and an artful device soon to be employed with great success, she opined, for Miss Haredale's comfort, that it must be some misguided Papist who had been wounded: and this happy supposition encouraged her to say, under her breath, 'Ally Looyer!' several times.

'Is it possible,' said Emma, with some indignation, 'that you who have seen these men committing the outrages you have told us of, and who have fallen into their hands, like us, can exult in their cruelties!'

'Personal considerations, miss,' rejoined Miggs, 'sinks into nothing, afore a noble cause. Ally Looyer! Ally Looyer! Ally Looyer, good gentlemen!'

It seemed from the shrill pertinacity with which Miss Miggs repeated this form of acclamation, that she was calling the same through the keyhole of the door; but in the profound darkness she could not be seen.

'If the time has come - Heaven knows it may come at any moment - when they are bent on prosecuting the designs, whatever they may be,

with which they have brought us here, can you still encourage, and take part with them?' demanded Emma.

'I thank my goodness-gracious-blessed-stars I can, miss,' returned Miggs, with increased energy. - 'Ally Looyer, good gentlemen!'

Even Dolly, cast down and disappointed as she was, revived at this, and bade Miggs hold her tongue directly.

'WHICH, was you pleased to observe, Miss Varden?' said Miggs, with a strong emphasis on the irrelative pronoun.

Dolly repeated her request.

'Ho, gracious me!' cried Miggs, with hysterical derision. 'Ho, gracious me! Yes, to be sure I will. Ho yes! I am a abject slave, and a toiling, moiling, constant-working, always-being-found-fault-with, never-giving-satisfactions, nor-having-no-time-to-clean-oneself, potter's wessel - an't I, miss! Ho yes! My situations is lowly, and my capacities is limited, and my duties is to humble myself afore the base degenerating daughters of their blessed mothers as is - fit to keep companies with holy saints but is born to persecutions from wicked relations - and to demean myself before them as is no better than Infidels - an't it, miss! Ho yes! My only becoming occupations is to help young flaunting pagins to brush and comb and titiwate theirselves into whitening and suppulchres, and leave the young men to think that there an't a bit of padding in it nor no pinching ins nor fillings out nor pomatums nor deceits nor earthly wanities - an't it, miss! Yes, to be sure it is - ho yes!'

Having delivered these ironical passages with a most wonderful volubility, and with a shrillness perfectly deafening (especially when she jerked out the interjections), Miss Miggs, from mere habit, and not because weeping was at all appropriate to the occasion, which was one of triumph, concluded by bursting into a flood of tears, and calling in an impassioned manner on the name of Simmuns.

What Emma Haredale and Dolly would have done, or how long Miss Miggs, now that she had hoisted her true colours, would have gone on waving them before their astonished senses, it is impossible to tell. Nor is it necessary to speculate on these matters, for a startling interruption occurred at that moment, which took their whole attention by storm.

This was a violent knocking at the door of the house, and then its sudden bursting open; which was immediately succeeded by a scuffle in the room without, and the clash of weapons. Transported with the hope that rescue had at length arrived, Emma and Dolly shrieked

aloud for help; nor were their shrieks unanswered; for after a hurried interval, a man, bearing in one hand a drawn sword, and in the other a taper, rushed into the chamber where they were confined.

It was some check upon their transport to find in this person an entire stranger, but they appealed to him, nevertheless, and besought him, in impassioned language, to restore them to their friends.

'For what other purpose am I here?' he answered, closing the door, and standing with his back against it. 'With what object have I made my way to this place, through difficulty and danger, but to preserve you?'

With a joy for which it was impossible to find adequate expression, they embraced each other, and thanked Heaven for this most timely aid. Their deliverer stepped forward for a moment to put the light upon the table, and immediately returning to his former position against the door, bared his head, and looked on smilingly.

'You have news of my uncle, sir?' said Emma, turning hastily towards him.

'And of my father and mother?' added Dolly.

'Yes,' he said. 'Good news.'

'They are alive and unhurt?' they both cried at once.

'Yes, and unhurt,' he rejoined.

'And close at hand?'

'I did not say close at hand,' he answered smoothly; 'they are at no great distance. YOUR friends, sweet one,' he added, addressing Dolly, 'are within a few hours' journey. You will be restored to them, I hope, to-night.'

'My uncle, sir - ' faltered Emma.

'Your uncle, dear Miss Haredale, happily - I say happily, because he has succeeded where many of our creed have failed, and is safe - has crossed the sea, and is out of Britain.'

'I thank God for it,' said Emma, faintly.

'You say well. You have reason to be thankful: greater reason than it is possible for you, who have seen but one night of these cruel outrages, to imagine.'

'Does he desire,' said Emma, 'that I should follow him?'

'Do you ask if he desires it?' cried the stranger in surprise. 'If he desires it! But you do not know the danger of remaining in England, the difficulty of escape, or the price hundreds would pay to secure the means, when you make that inquiry. Pardon me. I had forgotten that you could not, being prisoner here.'

'I gather, sir,' said Emma, after a moment's pause, 'from what you hint at, but fear to tell me, that I have witnessed but the beginning, and the least, of the violence to which we are exposed, and that it has not yet slackened in its fury?'

He shrugged his shoulders, shook his head, lifted up his hands; and with the same smooth smile, which was not a pleasant one to see, cast his eyes upon the ground, and remained silent.

'You may venture, sir, to speak plain,' said Emma, 'and to tell me the worst. We have undergone some preparation for it.'

But here Dolly interposed, and entreated her not to hear the worst, but the best; and besought the gentleman to tell them the best, and to keep the remainder of his news until they were safe among their friends again.

'It is told in three words,' he said, glancing at the locksmith's daughter with a look of some displeasure. 'The people have risen, to a man, against us; the streets are filled with soldiers, who support them and do their bidding. We have no protection but from above, and no safety but in flight; and that is a poor resource; for we are watched on every hand, and detained here, both by force and fraud. Miss Haredale, I cannot bear - believe me, that I cannot bear - by speaking of myself, or what I have done, or am prepared to do, to seem to vaunt my services before you. But, having powerful Protestant connections, and having my whole wealth embarked with theirs in shipping and commerce, I happily possessed the means of saving your uncle. I have the means of saving you; and in redemption of my sacred promise, made to him, I am here; pledged not to leave you until I have placed you in his arms. The treachery or penitence of one of the men about you, led to the discovery of your place of confinement; and that I have forced my way here, sword in hand, you see.'

'You bring,' said Emma, faltering, 'some note or token from my uncle?'

'No, he doesn't,' cried Dolly, pointing at him earnestly; 'now I am sure he doesn't. Don't go with him for the world!'

'Hush, pretty fool - be silent,' he replied, frowning angrily upon her. 'No, Miss Haredale, I have no letter, nor any token of any kind; for while I sympathise with you, and such as you, on whom misfortune so heavy and so undeserved has fallen, I value my life. I carry, therefore, no writing which, found upon me, would lead to its certain loss. I never thought of bringing any other token, nor did Mr Haredale think of entrusting me with one - possibly because he had good experience of my faith and honesty, and owed his life to me.' There was a reproof conveyed in these words, which to a nature like Emma Haredale's, was well addressed. But Dolly, who was differently constituted, was by no means touched by it, and still conjured her, in all the terms of affection and attachment she could think of, not to be lured away.

'Time presses,' said their visitor, who, although he sought to express the deepest interest, had something cold and even in his speech, that grated on the ear; 'and danger surrounds us. If I have exposed myself to it, in vain, let it be so; but if you and he should ever meet again, do me justice. If you decide to remain (as I think you do), remember, Miss Haredale, that I left you with a solemn caution, and acquitting myself of all the consequences to which you expose yourself.'

'Stay, sir!' cried Emma - one moment, I beg you. Cannot we - and she drew Dolly closer to her - 'cannot we go together?'

'The task of conveying one female in safety through such scenes as we must encounter, to say nothing of attracting the attention of those who crowd the streets,' he answered, 'is enough. I have said that she will be restored to her friends to-night. If you accept the service I tender, Miss Haredale, she shall be instantly placed in safe conduct, and that promise redeemed. Do you decide to remain? People of all ranks and creeds are flying from the town, which is sacked from end to end. Let me be of use in some quarter. Do you stay, or go?'

'Dolly,' said Emma, in a hurried manner, 'my dear girl, this is our last hope. If we part now, it is only that we may meet again in happiness and honour. I will trust to this gentleman.'

'No no-no!' cried Dolly, clinging to her. 'Pray, pray, do not!'

'You hear,' said Emma, 'that to-night - only to-night - within a few hours - think of that! - you will be among those who would die of grief to lose you, and who are now plunged in the deepest misery for your sake. Pray for me, dear girl, as I will for you; and never forget the many quiet hours we have passed together. Say one 'God bless you!' Say that at parting!'

But Dolly could say nothing; no, not when Emma kissed her cheek a hundred times, and covered it with tears, could she do more than hang upon her neck, and sob, and clasp, and hold her tight.

'We have time for no more of this,' cried the man, unclenching her hands, and pushing her roughly off, as he drew Emma Haredale towards the door: 'Now! Quick, outside there! are you ready?'

'Ay!' cried a loud voice, which made him start. 'Quite ready! Stand back here, for your lives!'

And in an instant he was felled like an ox in the butcher's shambles - struck down as though a block of marble had fallen from the roof and crushed him - and cheerful light, and beaming faces came pouring in - and Emma was clasped in her uncle's embrace, and Dolly, with a shriek that pierced the air, fell into the arms of her father and mother.

What fainting there was, what laughing, what crying, what sobbing, what smiling, how much questioning, no answering, all talking together, all beside themselves with joy; what kissing, congratulating, embracing, shaking of hands, and falling into all these raptures, over and over and over again; no language can describe.

At length, and after a long time, the old locksmith went up and fairly hugged two strangers, who had stood apart and left them to themselves; and then they saw - whom? Yes, Edward Chester and Joseph Willet.

'See here!' cried the locksmith. 'See here! where would any of us have been without these two? Oh, Mr Edward, Mr Edward - oh, Joe, Joe, how light, and yet how full, you have made my old heart to-night!'

'It was Mr Edward that knocked him down, sir,' said Joe: 'I longed to do it, but I gave it up to him. Come, you brave and honest gentleman! Get your senses together, for you haven't long to lie here.'

He had his foot upon the breast of their sham deliverer, in the absence of a spare arm; and gave him a gentle roll as he spoke. Gashford, for it was no other, crouching yet malignant, raised his scowling face, like sin subdued, and pleaded to be gently used.

'I have access to all my lord's papers, Mr Haredale,' he said, in a submissive voice: Mr Haredale keeping his back towards him, and not once looking round: 'there are very important documents among them. There are a great many in secret drawers, and distributed in various places, known only to my lord and me. I can give some very valuable information, and render important assistance to any inquiry. You will have to answer it, if I receive ill usage.'

'Pah!' cried Joe, in deep disgust. 'Get up, man; you're waited for, outside. Get up, do you hear?'

Gashford slowly rose; and picking up his hat, and looking with a baffled malevolence, yet with an air of despicable humility, all round the room, crawled out.

'And now, gentlemen,' said Joe, who seemed to be the spokesman of the party, for all the rest were silent; 'the sooner we get back to the Black Lion, the better, perhaps.'

Mr Haredale nodded assent, and drawing his niece's arm through his, and taking one of her hands between his own, passed out straightway; followed by the locksmith, Mrs Varden, and Dolly - who would scarcely have presented a sufficient surface for all the hugs and caresses they bestowed upon her though she had been a dozen Dollys. Edward Chester and Joe followed.

And did Dolly never once look behind - not once? Was there not one little fleeting glimpse of the dark eyelash, almost resting on her flushed cheek, and of the downcast sparkling eye it shaded? Joe thought there was - and he is not likely to have been mistaken; for there were not many eyes like Dolly's, that's the truth.

The outer room through which they had to pass, was full of men; among them, Mr Dennis in safe keeping; and there, had been since yesterday, lying in hiding behind a wooden screen which was now thrown down, Simon Tappertit, the recreant 'prentice, burnt and bruised, and with a gun-shot wound in his body; and his legs - his perfect legs, the pride and glory of his life, the comfort of his existence - crushed into shapeless ugliness. Wondering no longer at the moans they had heard, Dolly kept closer to her father, and shuddered at the sight; but neither bruises, burns, nor gun-shot wound, nor all the torture of his shattered limbs, sent half so keen a pang to Simon's breast, as Dolly passing out, with Joe for her preserver.

A coach was ready at the door, and Dolly found herself safe and whole inside, between her father and mother, with Emma Haredale and her uncle, quite real, sitting opposite. But there was no Joe, no Edward; and they had said nothing. They had only bowed once, and kept at a distance. Dear heart! what a long way it was to the Black Lion!