

Chapter LXXIV

Mr Dennis, having been made prisoner late in the evening, was removed to a neighbouring round-house for that night, and carried before a justice for examination on the next day, Saturday. The charges against him being numerous and weighty, and it being in particular proved, by the testimony of Gabriel Varden, that he had shown a special desire to take his life, he was committed for trial. Moreover he was honoured with the distinction of being considered a chief among the insurgents, and received from the magistrate's lips the complimentary assurance that he was in a position of imminent danger, and would do well to prepare himself for the worst.

To say that Mr Dennis's modesty was not somewhat startled by these honours, or that he was altogether prepared for so flattering a reception, would be to claim for him a greater amount of stoical philosophy than even he possessed. Indeed this gentleman's stoicism was of that not uncommon kind, which enables a man to bear with exemplary fortitude the afflictions of his friends, but renders him, by way of counterpoise, rather selfish and sensitive in respect of any that happen to befall himself. It is therefore no disparagement to the great officer in question to state, without disguise or concealment, that he was at first very much alarmed, and that he betrayed divers emotions of fear, until his reasoning powers came to his relief, and set before him a more hopeful prospect.

In proportion as Mr Dennis exercised these intellectual qualities with which he was gifted, in reviewing his best chances of coming off handsomely and with small personal inconvenience, his spirits rose, and his confidence increased. When he remembered the great estimation in which his office was held, and the constant demand for his services; when he bethought himself, how the Statute Book regarded him as a kind of Universal Medicine applicable to men, women, and children, of every age and variety of criminal constitution; and how high he stood, in his official capacity, in the favour of the Crown, and both Houses of Parliament, the Mint, the Bank of England, and the Judges of the land; when he recollected that whatever Ministry was in or out, he remained their peculiar pet and panacea, and that for his sake England stood single and conspicuous among the civilised nations of the earth: when he called these things to mind and dwelt upon them, he felt certain that the national gratitude MUST relieve him from the consequences of his late proceedings, and would certainly restore him to his old place in the happy social system.

With these crumbs, or as one may say, with these whole loaves of comfort to regale upon, Mr Dennis took his place among the escort that awaited him, and repaired to jail with a manly indifference.

Arriving at Newgate, where some of the ruined cells had been hastily fitted up for the safe keeping of rioters, he was warmly received by the turnkeys, as an unusual and interesting case, which agreeably relieved their monotonous duties. In this spirit, he was fettered with great care, and conveyed into the interior of the prison.

'Brother,' cried the hangman, as, following an officer, he traversed under these novel circumstances the remains of passages with which he was well acquainted, 'am I going to be along with anybody?'

'If you'd have left more walls standing, you'd have been alone,' was the reply. 'As it is, we're cramped for room, and you'll have company.'

'Well,' returned Dennis, 'I don't object to company, brother. I rather like company. I was formed for society, I was.'

'That's rather a pity, an't it?' said the man.

'No,' answered Dennis, 'I'm not aware that it is. Why should it be a pity, brother?'

'Oh! I don't know,' said the man carelessly. 'I thought that was what you meant. Being formed for society, and being cut off in your flower, you know - '

'I say,' interposed the other quickly, 'what are you talking of? Don't. Who's a-going to be cut off in their flowers?'

'Oh, nobody particular. I thought you was, perhaps,' said the man.

Mr Dennis wiped his face, which had suddenly grown very hot, and remarking in a tremulous voice to his conductor that he had always been fond of his joke, followed him in silence until he stopped at a door.

'This is my quarters, is it?' he asked facetiously.

'This is the shop, sir,' replied his friend.

He was walking in, but not with the best possible grace, when he suddenly stopped, and started back.

'Halloa!' said the officer. 'You're nervous.'

'Nervous!' whispered Dennis in great alarm. 'Well I may be. Shut the door.'

'I will, when you're in,' returned the man.

'But I can't go in there,' whispered Dennis. 'I can't be shut up with that man. Do you want me to be throttled, brother?'

The officer seemed to entertain no particular desire on the subject one way or other, but briefly remarking that he had his orders, and intended to obey them, pushed him in, turned the key, and retired.

Dennis stood trembling with his back against the door, and involuntarily raising his arm to defend himself, stared at a man, the only other tenant of the cell, who lay, stretched at his full length, upon a stone bench, and who paused in his deep breathing as if he were about to wake. But he rolled over on one side, let his arm fall negligently down, drew a long sigh, and murmuring indistinctly, fell fast asleep again.

Relieved in some degree by this, the hangman took his eyes for an instant from the slumbering figure, and glanced round the cell in search of some 'vantage-ground or weapon of defence. There was nothing moveable within it, but a clumsy table which could not be displaced without noise, and a heavy chair. Stealing on tiptoe towards this latter piece of furniture, he retired with it into the remotest corner, and intrenching himself behind it, watched the enemy with the utmost vigilance and caution.

The sleeping man was Hugh; and perhaps it was not unnatural for Dennis to feel in a state of very uncomfortable suspense, and to wish with his whole soul that he might never wake again. Tired of standing, he crouched down in his corner after some time, and rested on the cold pavement; but although Hugh's breathing still proclaimed that he was sleeping soundly, he could not trust him out of his sight for an instant. He was so afraid of him, and of some sudden onslaught, that he was not content to see his closed eyes through the chair-back, but every now and then, rose stealthily to his feet, and peered at him with outstretched neck, to assure himself that he really was still asleep, and was not about to spring upon him when he was off his guard.

He slept so long and so soundly, that Mr Dennis began to think he might sleep on until the turnkey visited them. He was congratulating himself upon these promising appearances, and blessing his stars with much fervour, when one or two unpleasant symptoms manifested themselves: such as another motion of the arm, another sigh, a restless tossing of the head. Then, just as it seemed that he was about to fall heavily to the ground from his narrow bed, Hugh's eyes opened.

It happened that his face was turned directly towards his unexpected visitor. He looked lazily at him for some half-dozen seconds without any aspect of surprise or recognition; then suddenly jumped up, and with a great oath pronounced his name.

'Keep off, brother, keep off!' cried Dennis, dodging behind the chair. 'Don't do me a mischief. I'm a prisoner like you. I haven't the free use of my limbs. I'm quite an old man. Don't hurt me!'

He whined out the last three words in such piteous accents, that Hugh, who had dragged away the chair, and aimed a blow at him with it, checked himself, and bade him get up.

'I'll get up certainly, brother,' cried Dennis, anxious to propitiate him by any means in his power. 'I'll comply with any request of yours, I'm sure. There - I'm up now. What can I do for you? Only say the word, and I'll do it.'

'What can you do for me!' cried Hugh, clutching him by the collar with both hands, and shaking him as though he were bent on stopping his breath by that means. 'What have you done for me?'

'The best. The best that could be done,' returned the hangman.

Hugh made him no answer, but shaking him in his strong grip until his teeth chattered in his head, cast him down upon the floor, and flung himself on the bench again.

'If it wasn't for the comfort it is to me, to see you here,' he muttered, 'I'd have crushed your head against it; I would.'

It was some time before Dennis had breath enough to speak, but as soon as he could resume his propitiatory strain, he did so.

'I did the best that could be done, brother,' he whined; 'I did indeed. I was forced with two bayonets and I don't know how many bullets on each side of me, to point you out. If you hadn't been taken, you'd have been shot; and what a sight that would have been - a fine young man like you!'

'Will it be a better sight now?' asked Hugh, raising his head, with such a fierce expression, that the other durst not answer him just then.

'A deal better,' said Dennis meekly, after a pause. 'First, there's all the chances of the law, and they're five hundred strong. We may get off scot-free. Unlikelier things than that have come to pass. Even if we shouldn't, and the chances fail, we can but be worked off once: and when it's well done, it's so neat, so skilful, so captiwating, if that don't seem too strong a word, that you'd hardly believe it could be brought to sich perfection. Kill one's fellow-creeturs off, with muskets! - Pah!' and his nature so revolted at the bare idea, that he spat upon the dungeon pavement.

His warming on this topic, which to one unacquainted with his pursuits and tastes appeared like courage; together with his artful suppression of his own secret hopes, and mention of himself as being in the same condition with Hugh; did more to soothe that ruffian than the most elaborate arguments could have done, or the most abject submission. He rested his arms upon his knees, and stooping forward, looked from beneath his shaggy hair at Dennis, with something of a smile upon his face.

'The fact is, brother,' said the hangman, in a tone of greater confidence, 'that you got into bad company. The man that was with you was looked after more than you, and it was him I wanted. As to me, what have I got by it? Here we are, in one and the same plight.'

'Lookee, rascal,' said Hugh, contracting his brows, 'I'm not altogether such a shallow blade but I know you expected to get something by it, or you wouldn't have done it. But it's done, and you're here, and it will soon be all over with you and me; and I'd as soon die as live, or live as die. Why should I trouble myself to have revenge on you? To eat, and drink, and go to sleep, as long as I stay here, is all I care for. If there was but a little more sun to bask in, than can find its way into this cursed place, I'd lie in it all day, and not trouble myself to sit or stand up once. That's all the care I have for myself. Why should I care for YOU?'

Finishing this speech with a growl like the yawn of a wild beast, he stretched himself upon the bench again, and closed his eyes once more.

After looking at him in silence for some moments, Dennis, who was greatly relieved to find him in this mood, drew the chair towards his rough couch and sat down near him - taking the precaution, however, to keep out of the range of his brawny arm.

'Well said, brother; nothing could be better said,' he ventured to observe. 'We'll eat and drink of the best, and sleep our best, and make the best of it every way. Anything can be got for money. Let's spend it merrily.'

'Ay,' said Hugh, coiling himself into a new position. - 'Where is it?'

'Why, they took mine from me at the lodge,' said Mr Dennis; 'but mine's a peculiar case.'

'Is it? They took mine too.'

'Why then, I tell you what, brother,' Dennis began. 'You must look up your friends - '

'My friends!' cried Hugh, starting up and resting on his hands. 'Where are my friends?'

'Your relations then,' said Dennis.

'Ha ha ha!' laughed Hugh, waving one arm above his head. 'He talks of friends to me - talks of relations to a man whose mother died the death in store for her son, and left him, a hungry brat, without a face he knew in all the world! He talks of this to me!'

'Brother,' cried the hangman, whose features underwent a sudden change, 'you don't mean to say - '

'I mean to say,' Hugh interposed, 'that they hung her up at Tyburn. What was good enough for her, is good enough for me. Let them do the like by me as soon as they please - the sooner the better. Say no more to me. I'm going to sleep.'

'But I want to speak to you; I want to hear more about that,' said Dennis, changing colour.

'If you're a wise man,' growled Hugh, raising his head to look at him with a frown, 'you'll hold your tongue. I tell you I'm going to sleep.'

Dennis venturing to say something more in spite of this caution, the desperate fellow struck at him with all his force, and missing him, lay down again with many muttered oaths and imprecations, and turned his face towards the wall. After two or three ineffectual twitches at his dress, which he was hardy enough to venture upon, notwithstanding his dangerous humour, Mr Dennis, who burnt, for reasons of his own, to pursue the conversation, had no alternative but to sit as patiently as he could: waiting his further pleasure.