

Chapter LXXV

A month has elapsed, - and we stand in the bedchamber of Sir John Chester. Through the half-opened window, the Temple Garden looks green and pleasant; the placid river, gay with boat and barge, and dimpled with the splash of many an oar, sparkles in the distance; the sky is blue and clear; and the summer air steals gently in, filling the room with perfume. The very town, the smoky town, is radiant. High roofs and steeple-tops, wont to look black and sullen, smile a cheerful grey; every old gilded vane, and ball, and cross, glitters anew in the bright morning sun; and, high among them all, St Paul's towers up, showing its lofty crest in burnished gold.

Sir John was breakfasting in bed. His chocolate and toast stood upon a little table at his elbow; books and newspapers lay ready to his hand, upon the coverlet; and, sometimes pausing to glance with an air of tranquil satisfaction round the well-ordered room, and sometimes to gaze indolently at the summer sky, he ate, and drank, and read the news luxuriously.

The cheerful influence of the morning seemed to have some effect, even upon his equable temper. His manner was unusually gay; his smile more placid and agreeable than usual; his voice more clear and pleasant. He laid down the newspaper he had been reading; leaned back upon his pillow with the air of one who resigned himself to a train of charming recollections; and after a pause, soliloquised as follows:

'And my friend the centaur, goes the way of his mamma! I am not surprised. And his mysterious friend Mr Dennis, likewise! I am not surprised. And my old postman, the exceedingly free-and-easy young madman of Chigwell! I am quite rejoiced. It's the very best thing that could possibly happen to him.'

After delivering himself of these remarks, he fell again into his smiling train of reflection; from which he roused himself at length to finish his chocolate, which was getting cold, and ring the bell for more.

The new supply arriving, he took the cup from his servant's hand; and saying, with a charming affability, 'I am obliged to you, Peak,' dismissed him.

'It is a remarkable circumstance,' he mused, dallying lazily with the teaspoon, 'that my friend the madman should have been within an ace of escaping, on his trial; and it was a good stroke of chance (or, as the world would say, a providential occurrence) that the brother of my Lord Mayor should have been in court, with other country justices, into whose very dense heads curiosity had penetrated. For though the

brother of my Lord Mayor was decidedly wrong; and established his near relationship to that amusing person beyond all doubt, in stating that my friend was sane, and had, to his knowledge, wandered about the country with a vagabond parent, avowing revolutionary and rebellious sentiments; I am not the less obliged to him for volunteering that evidence. These insane creatures make such very odd and embarrassing remarks, that they really ought to be hanged for the comfort of society.'

The country justice had indeed turned the wavering scale against poor Barnaby, and solved the doubt that trembled in his favour. Grip little thought how much he had to answer for.

'They will be a singular party,' said Sir John, leaning his head upon his hand, and sipping his chocolate; 'a very curious party. The hangman himself; the centaur; and the madman. The centaur would make a very handsome preparation in Surgeons' Hall, and would benefit science extremely. I hope they have taken care to bespeak him. - Peak, I am not at home, of course, to anybody but the hairdresser.'

This reminder to his servant was called forth by a knock at the door, which the man hastened to open. After a prolonged murmur of question and answer, he returned; and as he cautiously closed the room-door behind him, a man was heard to cough in the passage.

'Now, it is of no use, Peak,' said Sir John, raising his hand in deprecation of his delivering any message; 'I am not at home. I cannot possibly hear you. I told you I was not at home, and my word is sacred. Will you never do as you are desired?'

Having nothing to oppose to this reproof, the man was about to withdraw, when the visitor who had given occasion to it, probably rendered impatient by delay, knocked with his knuckles at the chamber-door, and called out that he had urgent business with Sir John Chester, which admitted of no delay.

'Let him in,' said Sir John. 'My good fellow,' he added, when the door was opened, 'how come you to intrude yourself in this extraordinary manner upon the privacy of a gentleman? How can you be so wholly destitute of self-respect as to be guilty of such remarkable ill-breeding?'

'My business, Sir John, is not of a common kind, I do assure you,' returned the person he addressed. 'If I have taken any uncommon course to get admission to you, I hope I shall be pardoned on that account.'

'Well! we shall see; we shall see,' returned Sir John, whose face cleared up when he saw who it was, and whose prepossessing smile was now restored. 'I am sure we have met before,' he added in his winning tone, 'but really I forget your name?'

'My name is Gabriel Varden, sir.'

'Varden, of course, Varden,' returned Sir John, tapping his forehead. 'Dear me, how very defective my memory becomes! Varden to be sure - Mr Varden the locksmith. You have a charming wife, Mr Varden, and a most beautiful daughter. They are well?'

Gabriel thanked him, and said they were.

'I rejoice to hear it,' said Sir John. 'Commend me to them when you return, and say that I wished I were fortunate enough to convey, myself, the salute which I entrust you to deliver. And what,' he asked very sweetly, after a moment's pause, 'can I do for you? You may command me freely.'

'I thank you, Sir John,' said Gabriel, with some pride in his manner, 'but I have come to ask no favour of you, though I come on business. - Private,' he added, with a glance at the man who stood looking on, 'and very pressing business.'

'I cannot say you are the more welcome for being independent, and having nothing to ask of me,' returned Sir John, graciously, 'for I should have been happy to render you a service; still, you are welcome on any terms. Oblige me with some more chocolate, Peak, and don't wait.'

The man retired, and left them alone.

'Sir John,' said Gabriel, 'I am a working-man, and have been so, all my life. If I don't prepare you enough for what I have to tell; if I come to the point too abruptly; and give you a shock, which a gentleman could have spared you, or at all events lessened very much; I hope you will give me credit for meaning well. I wish to be careful and considerate, and I trust that in a straightforward person like me, you'll take the will for the deed.'

'Mr Varden,' returned the other, perfectly composed under this exordium; 'I beg you'll take a chair. Chocolate, perhaps, you don't relish? Well! it IS an acquired taste, no doubt.'

'Sir John,' said Gabriel, who had acknowledged with a bow the invitation to be seated, but had not availed himself of it. 'Sir John' - he

dropped his voice and drew nearer to the bed - 'I am just now come from Newgate - '

'Good Gad!' cried Sir John, hastily sitting up in bed; 'from Newgate, Mr Varden! How could you be so very imprudent as to come from Newgate! Newgate, where there are jail-fevers, and ragged people, and bare-footed men and women, and a thousand horrors! Peak, bring the camphor, quick! Heaven and earth, Mr Varden, my dear, good soul, how COULD you come from Newgate?'

Gabriel returned no answer, but looked on in silence while Peak (who had entered with the hot chocolate) ran to a drawer, and returning with a bottle, sprinkled his master's dressing-gown and the bedding; and besides moistening the locksmith himself, plentifully, described a circle round about him on the carpet. When he had done this, he again retired; and Sir John, reclining in an easy attitude upon his pillow, once more turned a smiling face towards his visitor.

'You will forgive me, Mr Varden, I am sure, for being at first a little sensitive both on your account and my own. I confess I was startled, notwithstanding your delicate exordium. Might I ask you to do me the favour not to approach any nearer? - You have really come from Newgate!'

The locksmith inclined his head.

'In-deed! And now, Mr Varden, all exaggeration and embellishment apart,' said Sir John Chester, confidentially, as he sipped his chocolate, 'what kind of place IS Newgate?'

'A strange place, Sir John,' returned the locksmith, 'of a sad and doleful kind. A strange place, where many strange things are heard and seen; but few more strange than that I come to tell you of. The case is urgent. I am sent here.'

'Not - no, no - not from the jail?'

'Yes, Sir John; from the jail.'

'And my good, credulous, open-hearted friend,' said Sir John, setting down his cup, and laughing, - 'by whom?'

'By a man called Dennis - for many years the hangman, and to-morrow morning the hanged,' returned the locksmith.

Sir John had expected - had been quite certain from the first - that he would say he had come from Hugh, and was prepared to meet him on that point. But this answer occasioned him a degree of astonishment,

which, for the moment, he could not, with all his command of feature, prevent his face from expressing. He quickly subdued it, however, and said in the same light tone:

'And what does the gentleman require of me? My memory may be at fault again, but I don't recollect that I ever had the pleasure of an introduction to him, or that I ever numbered him among my personal friends, I do assure you, Mr Varden.'

'Sir John,' returned the locksmith, gravely, 'I will tell you, as nearly as I can, in the words he used to me, what he desires that you should know, and what you ought to know without a moment's loss of time.'

Sir John Chester settled himself in a position of greater repose, and looked at his visitor with an expression of face which seemed to say, 'This is an amusing fellow! I'll hear him out.'

'You may have seen in the newspapers, sir,' said Gabriel, pointing to the one which lay by his side, 'that I was a witness against this man upon his trial some days since; and that it was not his fault I was alive, and able to speak to what I knew.'

'MAY have seen!' cried Sir John. 'My dear Mr Varden, you are quite a public character, and live in all men's thoughts most deservedly. Nothing can exceed the interest with which I read your testimony, and remembered that I had the pleasure of a slight acquaintance with you. - I hope we shall have your portrait published?'

'This morning, sir,' said the locksmith, taking no notice of these compliments, 'early this morning, a message was brought to me from Newgate, at this man's request, desiring that I would go and see him, for he had something particular to communicate. I needn't tell you that he is no friend of mine, and that I had never seen him, until the rioters beset my house.'

Sir John fanned himself gently with the newspaper, and nodded.

'I knew, however, from the general report,' resumed Gabriel, 'that the order for his execution to-morrow, went down to the prison last night; and looking upon him as a dying man, I complied with his request.'

'You are quite a Christian, Mr Varden,' said Sir John; 'and in that amiable capacity, you increase my desire that you should take a chair.'

'He said,' continued Gabriel, looking steadily at the knight, 'that he had sent to me, because he had no friend or companion in the whole world (being the common hangman), and because he believed, from

the way in which I had given my evidence, that I was an honest man, and would act truly by him. He said that, being shunned by every one who knew his calling, even by people of the lowest and most wretched grade, and finding, when he joined the rioters, that the men he acted with had no suspicion of it (which I believe is true enough, for a poor fool of an old 'prentice of mine was one of them), he had kept his own counsel, up to the time of his being taken and put in jail.'

'Very discreet of Mr Dennis,' observed Sir John with a slight yawn, though still with the utmost affability, 'but - except for your admirable and lucid manner of telling it, which is perfect - not very interesting to me.'

'When,' pursued the locksmith, quite unabashed and wholly regardless of these interruptions, 'when he was taken to the jail, he found that his fellow-prisoner, in the same room, was a young man, Hugh by name, a leader in the riots, who had been betrayed and given up by himself. From something which fell from this unhappy creature in the course of the angry words they had at meeting, he discovered that his mother had suffered the death to which they both are now condemned. - The time is very short, Sir John.'

The knight laid down his paper fan, replaced his cup upon the table at his side, and, saving for the smile that lurked about his mouth, looked at the locksmith with as much steadiness as the locksmith looked at him.

'They have been in prison now, a month. One conversation led to many more; and the hangman soon found, from a comparison of time, and place, and dates, that he had executed the sentence of the law upon this woman, himself. She had been tempted by want - as so many people are - into the easy crime of passing forged notes. She was young and handsome; and the traders who employ men, women, and children in this traffic, looked upon her as one who was well adapted for their business, and who would probably go on without suspicion for a long time. But they were mistaken; for she was stopped in the commission of her very first offence, and died for it. She was of gipsy blood, Sir John - '

It might have been the effect of a passing cloud which obscured the sun, and cast a shadow on his face; but the knight turned deadly pale. Still he met the locksmith's eye, as before.

'She was of gipsy blood, Sir John,' repeated Gabriel, 'and had a high, free spirit. This, and her good looks, and her lofty manner, interested some gentlemen who were easily moved by dark eyes; and efforts were made to save her. They might have been successful, if she would have given them any clue to her history. But she never would, or did. There

was reason to suspect that she would make an attempt upon her life. A watch was set upon her night and day; and from that time she never spoke again - '

Sir John stretched out his hand towards his cup. The locksmith going on, arrested it half-way.

- 'Until she had but a minute to live. Then she broke silence, and said, in a low firm voice which no one heard but this executioner, for all other living creatures had retired and left her to her fate, 'If I had a dagger within these fingers and he was within my reach, I would strike him dead before me, even now!' The man asked 'Who?' She said, 'The father of her boy.'

Sir John drew back his outstretched hand, and seeing that the locksmith paused, signed to him with easy politeness and without any new appearance of emotion, to proceed.

'It was the first word she had ever spoken, from which it could be understood that she had any relative on earth. 'Was the child alive?' he asked. 'Yes.' He asked her where it was, its name, and whether she had any wish respecting it. She had but one, she said. It was that the boy might live and grow, in utter ignorance of his father, so that no arts might teach him to be gentle and forgiving. When he became a man, she trusted to the God of their tribe to bring the father and the son together, and revenge her through her child. He asked her other questions, but she spoke no more. Indeed, he says, she scarcely said this much, to him, but stood with her face turned upwards to the sky, and never looked towards him once.'

Sir John took a pinch of snuff; glanced approvingly at an elegant little sketch, entitled 'Nature,' on the wall; and raising his eyes to the locksmith's face again, said, with an air of courtesy and patronage, 'You were observing, Mr Varden - '

'That she never,' returned the locksmith, who was not to be diverted by any artifice from his firm manner, and his steady gaze, 'that she never looked towards him once, Sir John; and so she died, and he forgot her. But, some years afterwards, a man was sentenced to die the same death, who was a gipsy too; a sunburnt, swarthy fellow, almost a wild man; and while he lay in prison, under sentence, he, who had seen the hangman more than once while he was free, cut an image of him on his stick, by way of braving death, and showing those who attended on him, how little he cared or thought about it. He gave this stick into his hands at Tyburn, and told him then, that the woman I have spoken of had left her own people to join a fine gentleman, and that, being deserted by him, and cast off by her old friends, she had sworn within her own proud breast, that whatever

her misery might be, she would ask no help of any human being. He told him that she had kept her word to the last; and that, meeting even him in the streets - he had been fond of her once, it seems - she had slipped from him by a trick, and he never saw her again, until, being in one of the frequent crowds at Tyburn, with some of his rough companions, he had been driven almost mad by seeing, in the criminal under another name, whose death he had come to witness, herself. Standing in the same place in which she had stood, he told the hangman this, and told him, too, her real name, which only her own people and the gentleman for whose sake she had left them, knew. That name he will tell again, Sir John, to none but you.'

'To none but me!' exclaimed the knight, pausing in the act of raising his cup to his lips with a perfectly steady hand, and curling up his little finger for the better display of a brilliant ring with which it was ornamented: 'but me! - My dear Mr Varden, how very preposterous, to select me for his confidence! With you at his elbow, too, who are so perfectly trustworthy!'

'Sir John, Sir John,' returned the locksmith, 'at twelve tomorrow, these men die. Hear the few words I have to add, and do not hope to deceive me; for though I am a plain man of humble station, and you are a gentleman of rank and learning, the truth raises me to your level, and I KNOW that you anticipate the disclosure with which I am about to end, and that you believe this doomed man, Hugh, to be your son.'

'Nay,' said Sir John, bantering him with a gay air; 'the wild gentleman, who died so suddenly, scarcely went as far as that, I think?'

'He did not,' returned the locksmith, 'for she had bound him by some pledge, known only to these people, and which the worst among them respect, not to tell your name: but, in a fantastic pattern on the stick, he had carved some letters, and when the hangman asked it, he bade him, especially if he should ever meet with her son in after life, remember that place well.'

'What place?'

'Chester.'

The knight finished his cup of chocolate with an appearance of infinite relish, and carefully wiped his lips upon his handkerchief.

'Sir John,' said the locksmith, 'this is all that has been told to me; but since these two men have been left for death, they have conferred together closely. See them, and hear what they can add. See this Dennis, and learn from him what he has not trusted to me. If you,

who hold the clue to all, want corroboration (which you do not), the means are easy.'

'And to what,' said Sir John Chester, rising on his elbow, after smoothing the pillow for its reception; 'my dear, good-natured, estimable Mr Varden - with whom I cannot be angry if I would - to what does all this tend?'

'I take you for a man, Sir John, and I suppose it tends to some pleading of natural affection in your breast,' returned the locksmith. 'I suppose to the straining of every nerve, and the exertion of all the influence you have, or can make, in behalf of your miserable son, and the man who has disclosed his existence to you. At the worst, I suppose to your seeing your son, and awakening him to a sense of his crime and danger. He has no such sense now. Think what his life must have been, when he said in my hearing, that if I moved you to anything, it would be to hastening his death, and ensuring his silence, if you had it in your power!'

'And have you, my good Mr Varden,' said Sir John in a tone of mild reproof, 'have you really lived to your present age, and remained so very simple and credulous, as to approach a gentleman of established character with such credentials as these, from desperate men in their last extremity, catching at any straw? Oh dear! Oh fie, fie!'

The locksmith was going to interpose, but he stopped him:

'On any other subject, Mr Varden, I shall be delighted - I shall be charmed - to converse with you, but I owe it to my own character not to pursue this topic for another moment.'

'Think better of it, sir, when I am gone,' returned the locksmith; 'think better of it, sir. Although you have, thrice within as many weeks, turned your lawful son, Mr Edward, from your door, you may have time, you may have years to make your peace with HIM, Sir John: but that twelve o'clock will soon be here, and soon be past for ever.'

'I thank you very much,' returned the knight, kissing his delicate hand to the locksmith, 'for your guileless advice; and I only wish, my good soul, although your simplicity is quite captivating, that you had a little more worldly wisdom. I never so much regretted the arrival of my hairdresser as I do at this moment. God bless you! Good morning! You'll not forget my message to the ladies, Mr Varden? Peak, show Mr Varden to the door.'

Gabriel said no more, but gave the knight a parting look, and left him. As he quitted the room, Sir John's face changed; and the smile gave place to a haggard and anxious expression, like that of a weary actor

jaded by the performance of a difficult part. He rose from his bed with a heavy sigh, and wrapped himself in his morning-gown.

'So she kept her word,' he said, 'and was constant to her threat! I would I had never seen that dark face of hers, - I might have read these consequences in it, from the first. This affair would make a noise abroad, if it rested on better evidence; but, as it is, and by not joining the scattered links of the chain, I can afford to slight it. - Extremely distressing to be the parent of such an uncouth creature! Still, I gave him very good advice. I told him he would certainly be hanged. I could have done no more if I had known of our relationship; and there are a great many fathers who have never done as much for THEIR natural children. - The hairdresser may come in, Peak!'

The hairdresser came in; and saw in Sir John Chester (whose accommodating conscience was soon quieted by the numerous precedents that occurred to him in support of his last observation), the same imperturbable, fascinating, elegant gentleman he had seen yesterday, and many yesterdays before.