

Chapter LXXVI

As the locksmith walked slowly away from Sir John Chester's chambers, he lingered under the trees which shaded the path, almost hoping that he might be summoned to return. He had turned back thrice, and still loitered at the corner, when the clock struck twelve.

It was a solemn sound, and not merely for its reference to to-morrow; for he knew that in that chime the murderer's knell was rung. He had seen him pass along the crowded street, amidst the execration of the throng; and marked his quivering lip, and trembling limbs; the ashy hue upon his face, his clammy brow, the wild distraction of his eye - the fear of death that swallowed up all other thoughts, and gnawed without cessation at his heart and brain. He had marked the wandering look, seeking for hope, and finding, turn where it would, despair. He had seen the remorseful, pitiful, desolate creature, riding, with his coffin by his side, to the gibbet. He knew that, to the last, he had been an unyielding, obdurate man; that in the savage terror of his condition he had hardened, rather than relented, to his wife and child; and that the last words which had passed his white lips were curses on them as his enemies.

Mr Haredale had determined to be there, and see it done. Nothing but the evidence of his own senses could satisfy that gloomy thirst for retribution which had been gathering upon him for so many years. The locksmith knew this, and when the chimes had ceased to vibrate, hurried away to meet him.

'For these two men,' he said, as he went, 'I can do no more. Heaven have mercy on them! - Alas! I say I can do no more for them, but whom can I help? Mary Rudge will have a home, and a firm friend when she most wants one; but Barnaby - poor Barnaby - willing Barnaby - what aid can I render him? There are many, many men of sense, God forgive me,' cried the honest locksmith, stopping in a narrow court to pass his hand across his eyes, 'I could better afford to lose than Barnaby. We have always been good friends, but I never knew, till now, how much I loved the lad.'

There were not many in the great city who thought of Barnaby that day, otherwise than as an actor in a show which was to take place to-morrow. But if the whole population had had him in their minds, and had wished his life to be spared, not one among them could have done so with a purer zeal or greater singleness of heart than the good locksmith.

Barnaby was to die. There was no hope. It is not the least evil attendant upon the frequent exhibition of this last dread punishment, of Death, that it hardens the minds of those who deal it out, and

makes them, though they be amiable men in other respects, indifferent to, or unconscious of, their great responsibility. The word had gone forth that Barnaby was to die. It went forth, every month, for lighter crimes. It was a thing so common, that very few were startled by the awful sentence, or cared to question its propriety. Just then, too, when the law had been so flagrantly outraged, its dignity must be asserted. The symbol of its dignity, - stamped upon every page of the criminal statute-book, - was the gallows; and Barnaby was to die.

They had tried to save him. The locksmith had carried petitions and memorials to the fountain-head, with his own hands. But the well was not one of mercy, and Barnaby was to die.

From the first his mother had never left him, save at night; and with her beside him, he was as usual contented. On this last day, he was more elated and more proud than he had been yet; and when she dropped the book she had been reading to him aloud, and fell upon his neck, he stopped in his busy task of folding a piece of crape about his hat, and wondered at her anguish. Grip uttered a feeble croak, half in encouragement, it seemed, and half in remonstrance, but he wanted heart to sustain it, and lapsed abruptly into silence.

With them who stood upon the brink of the great gulf which none can see beyond, Time, so soon to lose itself in vast Eternity, rolled on like a mighty river, swollen and rapid as it nears the sea. It was morning but now; they had sat and talked together in a dream; and here was evening. The dreadful hour of separation, which even yesterday had seemed so distant, was at hand.

They walked out into the courtyard, clinging to each other, but not speaking. Barnaby knew that the jail was a dull, sad, miserable place, and looked forward to to-morrow, as to a passage from it to something bright and beautiful. He had a vague impression too, that he was expected to be brave - that he was a man of great consequence, and that the prison people would be glad to make him weep. He trod the ground more firmly as he thought of this, and bade her take heart and cry no more, and feel how steady his hand was. 'They call me silly, mother. They shall see to-morrow!'

Dennis and Hugh were in the courtyard. Hugh came forth from his cell as they did, stretching himself as though he had been sleeping. Dennis sat upon a bench in a corner, with his knees and chin huddled together, and rocked himself to and fro like a person in severe pain.

The mother and son remained on one side of the court, and these two men upon the other. Hugh strode up and down, glancing fiercely every

now and then at the bright summer sky, and looking round, when he had done so, at the walls.

'No reprieve, no reprieve! Nobody comes near us. There's only the night left now!' moaned Dennis faintly, as he wrung his hands. 'Do you think they'll reprieve me in the night, brother? I've known reprieves come in the night, afore now. I've known 'em come as late as five, six, and seven o'clock in the morning. Don't you think there's a good chance yet, - don't you? Say you do. Say you do, young man,' whined the miserable creature, with an imploring gesture towards Barnaby, 'or I shall go mad!'

'Better be mad than sane, here,' said Hugh. 'GO mad.'

'But tell me what you think. Somebody tell me what he thinks!' cried the wretched object, - so mean, and wretched, and despicable, that even Pity's self might have turned away, at sight of such a being in the likeness of a man - 'isn't there a chance for me, - isn't there a good chance for me? Isn't it likely they may be doing this to frighten me? Don't you think it is? Oh!' he almost shrieked, as he wrung his hands, 'won't anybody give me comfort!'

'You ought to be the best, instead of the worst,' said Hugh, stopping before him. 'Ha, ha, ha! See the hangman, when it comes home to him!'

'You don't know what it is,' cried Dennis, actually writhing as he spoke: 'I do. That I should come to be worked off! I! I! That I should come!'

'And why not?' said Hugh, as he thrust back his matted hair to get a better view of his late associate. 'How often, before I knew your trade, did I hear you talking of this as if it was a treat?'

'I an't inconsistent,' screamed the miserable creature; 'I'd talk so again, if I was hangman. Some other man has got my old opinions at this minute. That makes it worse. Somebody's longing to work me off. I know by myself that somebody must be!'

'He'll soon have his longing,' said Hugh, resuming his walk. 'Think of that, and be quiet.'

Although one of these men displayed, in his speech and bearing, the most reckless hardihood; and the other, in his every word and action, testified such an extreme of abject cowardice that it was humiliating to see him; it would be difficult to say which of them would most have repelled and shocked an observer. Hugh's was the dogged desperation of a savage at the stake; the hangman was reduced to a condition little

better, if any, than that of a hound with the halter round his neck. Yet, as Mr Dennis knew and could have told them, these were the two commonest states of mind in persons brought to their pass. Such was the wholesome growth of the seed sown by the law, that this kind of harvest was usually looked for, as a matter of course.

In one respect they all agreed. The wandering and uncontrollable train of thought, suggesting sudden recollections of things distant and long forgotten and remote from each other - the vague restless craving for something undefined, which nothing could satisfy - the swift flight of the minutes, fusing themselves into hours, as if by enchantment - the rapid coming of the solemn night - the shadow of death always upon them, and yet so dim and faint, that objects the meanest and most trivial started from the gloom beyond, and forced themselves upon the view - the impossibility of holding the mind, even if they had been so disposed, to penitence and preparation, or of keeping it to any point while one hideous fascination tempted it away - these things were common to them all, and varied only in their outward tokens.

'Fetch me the book I left within - upon your bed,' she said to Barnaby, as the clock struck. 'Kiss me first.'

He looked in her face, and saw there, that the time was come. After a long embrace, he tore himself away, and ran to bring it to her; bidding her not stir till he came back. He soon returned, for a shriek recalled him, - but she was gone.

He ran to the yard-gate, and looked through. They were carrying her away. She had said her heart would break. It was better so.

'Don't you think,' whimpered Dennis, creeping up to him, as he stood with his feet rooted to the ground, gazing at the blank walls - 'don't you think there's still a chance? It's a dreadful end; it's a terrible end for a man like me. Don't you think there's a chance? I don't mean for you, I mean for me. Don't let HIM hear us (meaning Hugh); 'he's so desperate.'

Now then,' said the officer, who had been lounging in and out with his hands in his pockets, and yawning as if he were in the last extremity for some subject of interest: 'it's time to turn in, boys.'

'Not yet,' cried Dennis, 'not yet. Not for an hour yet.'

'I say, - your watch goes different from what it used to,' returned the man. 'Once upon a time it was always too fast. It's got the other fault now.'

'My friend,' cried the wretched creature, falling on his knees, 'my dear friend - you always were my dear friend - there's some mistake. Some letter has been mislaid, or some messenger has been stopped upon the way. He may have fallen dead. I saw a man once, fall down dead in the street, myself, and he had papers in his pocket. Send to inquire. Let somebody go to inquire. They never will hang me. They never can. - Yes, they will,' he cried, starting to his feet with a terrible scream. 'They'll hang me by a trick, and keep the pardon back. It's a plot against me. I shall lose my life!' And uttering another yell, he fell in a fit upon the ground.

'See the hangman when it comes home to him!' cried Hugh again, as they bore him away - 'Ha ha ha! Courage, bold Barnaby, what care we? Your hand! They do well to put us out of the world, for if we got loose a second time, we wouldn't let them off so easy, eh? Another shake! A man can die but once. If you wake in the night, sing that out lustily, and fall asleep again. Ha ha ha!'

Barnaby glanced once more through the grate into the empty yard; and then watched Hugh as he strode to the steps leading to his sleeping-cell. He heard him shout, and burst into a roar of laughter, and saw him flourish his hat. Then he turned away himself, like one who walked in his sleep; and, without any sense of fear or sorrow, lay down on his pallet, listening for the clock to strike again.