

Chapter LXXVIII

On this same day, and about this very hour, Mr Willet the elder sat smoking his pipe in a chamber at the Black Lion. Although it was hot summer weather, Mr Willet sat close to the fire. He was in a state of profound cogitation, with his own thoughts, and it was his custom at such times to stew himself slowly, under the impression that that process of cookery was favourable to the melting out of his ideas, which, when he began to simmer, sometimes oozed forth so copiously as to astonish even himself.

Mr Willet had been several thousand times comforted by his friends and acquaintance, with the assurance that for the loss he had sustained in the damage done to the Maypole, he could 'come upon the county.' But as this phrase happened to bear an unfortunate resemblance to the popular expression of 'coming on the parish,' it suggested to Mr Willet's mind no more consolatory visions than pauperism on an extensive scale, and ruin in a capacious aspect. Consequently, he had never failed to receive the intelligence with a rueful shake of the head, or a dreary stare, and had been always observed to appear much more melancholy after a visit of condolence than at any other time in the whole four-and-twenty hours.

It chanced, however, that sitting over the fire on this particular occasion - perhaps because he was, as it were, done to a turn; perhaps because he was in an unusually bright state of mind; perhaps because he had considered the subject so long; perhaps because of all these favouring circumstances, taken together - it chanced that, sitting over the fire on this particular occasion, Mr Willet did, afar off and in the remotest depths of his intellect, perceive a kind of lurking hint or faint suggestion, that out of the public purse there might issue funds for the restoration of the Maypole to its former high place among the taverns of the earth. And this dim ray of light did so diffuse itself within him, and did so kindle up and shine, that at last he had it as plainly and visibly before him as the blaze by which he sat; and, fully persuaded that he was the first to make the discovery, and that he had started, hunted down, fallen upon, and knocked on the head, a perfectly original idea which had never presented itself to any other man, alive or dead, he laid down his pipe, rubbed his hands, and chuckled audibly.

'Why, father!' cried Joe, entering at the moment, 'you're in spirits to-day!'

'It's nothing partickler,' said Mr Willet, chuckling again. 'It's nothing at all partickler, Joseph. Tell me something about the Salwanners.' Having preferred this request, Mr Willet chuckled a third time, and

after these unusual demonstrations of levity, he put his pipe in his mouth again.

'What shall I tell you, father?' asked Joe, laying his hand upon his sire's shoulder, and looking down into his face. 'That I have come back, poorer than a church mouse? You know that. That I have come back, maimed and crippled? You know that.'

'It was took off,' muttered Mr Willet, with his eyes upon the fire, 'at the defence of the Salwanners, in America, where the war is.'

'Quite right,' returned Joe, smiling, and leaning with his remaining elbow on the back of his father's chair; 'the very subject I came to speak to you about. A man with one arm, father, is not of much use in the busy world.'

This was one of those vast propositions which Mr Willet had never considered for an instant, and required time to 'tackle.' Wherefore he made no answer.

'At all events,' said Joe, 'he can't pick and choose his means of earning a livelihood, as another man may. He can't say 'I will turn my hand to this,' or 'I won't turn my hand to that,' but must take what he can do, and be thankful it's no worse. - What did you say?'

Mr Willet had been softly repeating to himself, in a musing tone, the words 'defence of the Salwanners:' but he seemed embarrassed at having been overheard, and answered 'Nothing.'

'Now look here, father. - Mr Edward has come to England from the West Indies. When he was lost sight of (I ran away on the same day, father), he made a voyage to one of the islands, where a school-friend of his had settled; and, finding him, wasn't too proud to be employed on his estate, and - and in short, got on well, and is prospering, and has come over here on business of his own, and is going back again speedily. Our returning nearly at the same time, and meeting in the course of the late troubles, has been a good thing every way; for it has not only enabled us to do old friends some service, but has opened a path in life for me which I may tread without being a burden upon you. To be plain, father, he can employ me; I have satisfied myself that I can be of real use to him; and I am going to carry my one arm away with him, and to make the most of it.'

In the mind's eye of Mr Willet, the West Indies, and indeed all foreign countries, were inhabited by savage nations, who were perpetually burying pipes of peace, flourishing tomahawks, and puncturing strange patterns in their bodies. He no sooner heard this announcement, therefore, than he leaned back in his chair, took his

pipe from his lips, and stared at his son with as much dismay as if he already beheld him tied to a stake, and tortured for the entertainment of a lively population. In what form of expression his feelings would have found a vent, it is impossible to say. Nor is it necessary: for, before a syllable occurred to him, Dolly Varden came running into the room, in tears, threw herself on Joe's breast without a word of explanation, and clasped her white arms round his neck.

'Dolly!' cried Joe. 'Dolly!'

'Ay, call me that; call me that always,' exclaimed the locksmith's little daughter; 'never speak coldly to me, never be distant, never again reprove me for the follies I have long repented, or I shall die, Joe.'

'I reprove you!' said Joe.

'Yes - for every kind and honest word you uttered, went to my heart. For you, who have borne so much from me - for you, who owe your sufferings and pain to my caprice - for you to be so kind - so noble to me, Joe - '

He could say nothing to her. Not a syllable. There was an odd sort of eloquence in his one arm, which had crept round her waist: but his lips were mute.

'If you had reminded me by a word - only by one short word,' sobbed Dolly, clinging yet closer to him, 'how little I deserved that you should treat me with so much forbearance; if you had exulted only for one moment in your triumph, I could have borne it better.'

'Triumph!' repeated Joe, with a smile which seemed to say, 'I am a pretty figure for that.'

'Yes, triumph,' she cried, with her whole heart and soul in her earnest voice, and gushing tears; 'for it is one. I am glad to think and know it is. I wouldn't be less humbled, dear - I wouldn't be without the recollection of that last time we spoke together in this place - no, not if I could recall the past, and make our parting, yesterday.'

Did ever lover look as Joe looked now!

'Dear Joe,' said Dolly, 'I always loved you - in my own heart I always did, although I was so vain and giddy. I hoped you would come back that night. I made quite sure you would. I prayed for it on my knees. Through all these long, long years, I have never once forgotten you, or left off hoping that this happy time might come.'

The eloquence of Joe's arm surpassed the most impassioned language; and so did that of his lips - yet he said nothing, either.

'And now, at last,' cried Dolly, trembling with the fervour of her speech, 'if you were sick, and shattered in your every limb; if you were ailing, weak, and sorrowful; if, instead of being what you are, you were in everybody's eyes but mine the wreck and ruin of a man; I would be your wife, dear love, with greater pride and joy, than if you were the stateliest lord in England!'

'What have I done,' cried Joe, 'what have I done to meet with this reward?'

'You have taught me,' said Dolly, raising her pretty face to his, 'to know myself, and your worth; to be something better than I was; to be more deserving of your true and manly nature. In years to come, dear Joe, you shall find that you have done so; for I will be, not only now, when we are young and full of hope, but when we have grown old and weary, your patient, gentle, never-tiring wife. I will never know a wish or care beyond our home and you, and I will always study how to please you with my best affection and my most devoted love. I will: indeed I will!'

Joe could only repeat his former eloquence - but it was very much to the purpose.

'They know of this, at home,' said Dolly. 'For your sake, I would leave even them; but they know it, and are glad of it, and are as proud of you as I am, and as full of gratitude. - You'll not come and see me as a poor friend who knew me when I was a girl, will you, dear Joe?'

Well, well! It don't matter what Joe said in answer, but he said a great deal; and Dolly said a great deal too: and he folded Dolly in his one arm pretty tight, considering that it was but one; and Dolly made no resistance: and if ever two people were happy in this world - which is not an utterly miserable one, with all its faults - we may, with some appearance of certainty, conclude that they were.

To say that during these proceedings Mr Willet the elder underwent the greatest emotions of astonishment of which our common nature is susceptible - to say that he was in a perfect paralysis of surprise, and that he wandered into the most stupendous and theretofore unattainable heights of complicated amazement - would be to shadow forth his state of mind in the feeblest and lamest terms. If a roc, an eagle, a griffin, a flying elephant, a winged sea-horse, had suddenly appeared, and, taking him on its back, carried him bodily into the heart of the 'Salwanners,' it would have been to him as an everyday occurrence, in comparison with what he now beheld. To be sitting

quietly by, seeing and hearing these things; to be completely overlooked, unnoticed, and disregarded, while his son and a young lady were talking to each other in the most impassioned manner, kissing each other, and making themselves in all respects perfectly at home; was a position so tremendous, so inexplicable, so utterly beyond the widest range of his capacity of comprehension, that he fell into a lethargy of wonder, and could no more rouse himself than an enchanted sleeper in the first year of his fairy lease, a century long.

'Father,' said Joe, presenting Dolly. 'You know who this is?'

Mr Willet looked first at her, then at his son, then back again at Dolly, and then made an ineffectual effort to extract a whiff from his pipe, which had gone out long ago.

'Say a word, father, if it's only 'how d'ye do,' urged Joe.

'Certainly, Joseph,' answered Mr Willet. 'Oh yes! Why not?'

'To be sure,' said Joe. 'Why not?'

'Ah!' replied his father. 'Why not?' and with this remark, which he uttered in a low voice as though he were discussing some grave question with himself, he used the little finger - if any of his fingers can be said to have come under that denomination - of his right hand as a tobacco-stopper, and was silent again.

And so he sat for half an hour at least, although Dolly, in the most endearing of manners, hoped, a dozen times, that he was not angry with her. So he sat for half an hour, quite motionless, and looking all the while like nothing so much as a great Dutch Pin or Skittle. At the expiration of that period, he suddenly, and without the least notice, burst (to the great consternation of the young people) into a very loud and very short laugh; and repeating, 'Certainly, Joseph. Oh yes! Why not?' went out for a walk.