

Chapter LXXIX

Old John did not walk near the Golden Key, for between the Golden Key and the Black Lion there lay a wilderness of streets - as everybody knows who is acquainted with the relative bearings of Clerkenwell and Whitechapel - and he was by no means famous for pedestrian exercises. But the Golden Key lies in our way, though it was out of his; so to the Golden Key this chapter goes.

The Golden Key itself, fair emblem of the locksmith's trade, had been pulled down by the rioters, and roughly trampled under foot. But, now, it was hoisted up again in all the glory of a new coat of paint, and shewed more bravely even than in days of yore. Indeed the whole house-front was spruce and trim, and so freshened up throughout, that if there yet remained at large any of the rioters who had been concerned in the attack upon it, the sight of the old, goodly, prosperous dwelling, so revived, must have been to them as gall and wormwood.

The shutters of the shop were closed, however, and the window-blinds above were all pulled down, and in place of its usual cheerful appearance, the house had a look of sadness and an air of mourning; which the neighbours, who in old days had often seen poor Barnaby go in and out, were at no loss to understand. The door stood partly open; but the locksmith's hammer was unheard; the cat sat moping on the ashy forge; all was deserted, dark, and silent.

On the threshold of this door, Mr Haredale and Edward Chester met. The younger man gave place; and both passing in with a familiar air, which seemed to denote that they were tarrying there, or were well-accustomed to go to and fro unquestioned, shut it behind them.

Entering the old back-parlour, and ascending the flight of stairs, abrupt and steep, and quaintly fashioned as of old, they turned into the best room; the pride of Mrs Varden's heart, and erst the scene of Miggs's household labours.

'Varden brought the mother here last evening, he told me?' said Mr Haredale.

'She is above-stairs now - in the room over here,' Edward rejoined. 'Her grief, they say, is past all telling. I needn't add - for that you know beforehand, sir - that the care, humanity, and sympathy of these good people have no bounds.'

'I am sure of that. Heaven repay them for it, and for much more! Varden is out?'

'He returned with your messenger, who arrived almost at the moment of his coming home himself. He was out the whole night - but that of course you know. He was with you the greater part of it?'

'He was. Without him, I should have lacked my right hand. He is an older man than I; but nothing can conquer him.'

'The cheeriest, stoutest-hearted fellow in the world.'

'He has a right to be. He has a right to he. A better creature never lived. He reaps what he has sown - no more.'

'It is not all men,' said Edward, after a moment's hesitation, 'who have the happiness to do that.'

'More than you imagine,' returned Mr Haredale. 'We note the harvest more than the seed-time. You do so in me.'

In truth his pale and haggard face, and gloomy bearing, had so far influenced the remark, that Edward was, for the moment, at a loss to answer him.

'Tut, tut,' said Mr Haredale, 'twas not very difficult to read a thought so natural. But you are mistaken nevertheless. I have had my share of sorrows - more than the common lot, perhaps, but I have borne them ill. I have broken where I should have bent; and have mused and brooded, when my spirit should have mixed with all God's great creation. The men who learn endurance, are they who call the whole world, brother. I have turned FROM the world, and I pay the penalty.'

Edward would have interposed, but he went on without giving him time.

'It is too late to evade it now. I sometimes think, that if I had to live my life once more, I might amend this fault - not so much, I discover when I search my mind, for the love of what is right, as for my own sake. But even when I make these better resolutions, I instinctively recoil from the idea of suffering again what I have undergone; and in this circumstance I find the unwelcome assurance that I should still be the same man, though I could cancel the past, and begin anew, with its experience to guide me.'

'Nay, you make too sure of that,' said Edward.

'You think so,' Mr Haredale answered, 'and I am glad you do. I know myself better, and therefore distrust myself more. Let us leave this subject for another - not so far removed from it as it might, at first

sight, seem to be. Sir, you still love my niece, and she is still attached to you.'

'I have that assurance from her own lips,' said Edward, 'and you know - I am sure you know - that I would not exchange it for any blessing life could yield me.'

'You are frank, honourable, and disinterested,' said Mr Harecastle; 'you have forced the conviction that you are so, even on my once-jaundiced mind, and I believe you. Wait here till I come back.'

He left the room as he spoke; but soon returned with his niece. 'On that first and only time,' he said, looking from the one to the other, 'when we three stood together under her father's roof, I told you to quit it, and charged you never to return.'

'It is the only circumstance arising out of our love,' observed Edward, 'that I have forgotten.'

'You own a name,' said Mr Harecastle, 'I had deep reason to remember. I was moved and goaded by recollections of personal wrong and injury, I know, but, even now I cannot charge myself with having, then, or ever, lost sight of a heartfelt desire for her true happiness; or with having acted - however much I was mistaken - with any other impulse than the one pure, single, earnest wish to be to her, as far as in my inferior nature lay, the father she had lost.'

'Dear uncle,' cried Emma, 'I have known no parent but you. I have loved the memory of others, but I have loved you all my life. Never was father kinder to his child than you have been to me, without the interval of one harsh hour, since I can first remember.'

'You speak too fondly,' he answered, 'and yet I cannot wish you were less partial; for I have a pleasure in hearing those words, and shall have in calling them to mind when we are far asunder, which nothing else could give me. Bear with me for a moment longer, Edward, for she and I have been together many years; and although I believe that in resigning her to you I put the seal upon her future happiness, I find it needs an effort.'

He pressed her tenderly to his bosom, and after a minute's pause, resumed:

'I have done you wrong, sir, and I ask your forgiveness - in no common phrase, or show of sorrow; but with earnestness and sincerity. In the same spirit, I acknowledge to you both that the time has been when I connived at treachery and falsehood - which if I did not perpetrate myself, I still permitted - to rend you two asunder.'

'You judge yourself too harshly,' said Edward. 'Let these things rest.'

'They rise in judgment against me when I look back, and not now for the first time,' he answered. 'I cannot part from you without your full forgiveness; for busy life and I have little left in common now, and I have regrets enough to carry into solitude, without addition to the stock.'

'You bear a blessing from us both,' said Emma. 'Never mingle thoughts of me - of me who owe you so much love and duty - with anything but undying affection and gratitude for the past, and bright hopes for the future.'

'The future,' returned her uncle, with a melancholy smile, 'is a bright word for you, and its image should be wreathed with cheerful hopes. Mine is of another kind, but it will be one of peace, and free, I trust, from care or passion. When you quit England I shall leave it too. There are cloisters abroad; and now that the two great objects of my life are set at rest, I know no better home. You droop at that, forgetting that I am growing old, and that my course is nearly run. Well, we will speak of it again - not once or twice, but many times; and you shall give me cheerful counsel, Emma.'

'And you will take it?' asked his niece.

'I'll listen to it,' he answered, with a kiss, 'and it will have its weight, be certain. What have I left to say? You have, of late, been much together. It is better and more fitting that the circumstances attendant on the past, which wrought your separation, and sowed between you suspicion and distrust, should not be entered on by me.'

'Much, much better,' whispered Emma.

'I avow my share in them,' said Mr Harecastle, 'though I held it, at the time, in detestation. Let no man turn aside, ever so slightly, from the broad path of honour, on the plausible pretence that he is justified by the goodness of his end. All good ends can be worked out by good means. Those that cannot, are bad; and may be counted so at once, and left alone.'

He looked from her to Edward, and said in a gentler tone:

'In goods and fortune you are now nearly equal. I have been her faithful steward, and to that remnant of a richer property which my brother left her, I desire to add, in token of my love, a poor pittance, scarcely worth the mention, for which I have no longer any need. I am glad you go abroad. Let our ill-fated house remain the ruin it is. When

you return, after a few thriving years, you will command a better, and a more fortunate one. We are friends?'

Edward took his extended hand, and grasped it heartily.

'You are neither slow nor cold in your response,' said Mr Haredale, doing the like by him, 'and when I look upon you now, and know you, I feel that I would choose you for her husband. Her father had a generous nature, and you would have pleased him well. I give her to you in his name, and with his blessing. If the world and I part in this act, we part on happier terms than we have lived for many a day.'

He placed her in his arms, and would have left the room, but that he was stopped in his passage to the door by a great noise at a distance, which made them start and pause.

It was a loud shouting, mingled with boisterous acclamations, that rent the very air. It drew nearer and nearer every moment, and approached so rapidly, that, even while they listened, it burst into a deafening confusion of sounds at the street corner.

'This must be stopped - quieted,' said Mr Haredale, hastily. 'We should have foreseen this, and provided against it. I will go out to them at once.'

But, before he could reach the door, and before Edward could catch up his hat and follow him, they were again arrested by a loud shriek from above-stairs: and the locksmith's wife, bursting in, and fairly running into Mr Haredale's arms, cried out:

'She knows it all, dear sir! - she knows it all! We broke it out to her by degrees, and she is quite prepared.' Having made this communication, and furthermore thanked Heaven with great fervour and heartiness, the good lady, according to the custom of matrons, on all occasions of excitement, fainted away directly.

They ran to the window, drew up the sash, and looked into the crowded street. Among a dense mob of persons, of whom not one was for an instant still, the locksmith's ruddy face and burly form could be descried, beating about as though he was struggling with a rough sea. Now, he was carried back a score of yards, now onward nearly to the door, now back again, now forced against the opposite houses, now against those adjoining his own: now carried up a flight of steps, and greeted by the outstretched hands of half a hundred men, while the whole tumultuous concourse stretched their throats, and cheered with all their might. Though he was really in a fair way to be torn to pieces in the general enthusiasm, the locksmith, nothing discomposed, echoed their shouts till he was as hoarse as they, and in

a glow of joy and right good-humour, waved his hat until the daylight shone between its brim and crown.

But in all the bandyings from hand to hand, and strivings to and fro, and sweepings here and there, which - saving that he looked more jolly and more radiant after every struggle - troubled his peace of mind no more than if he had been a straw upon the water's surface, he never once released his firm grasp of an arm, drawn tight through his. He sometimes turned to clap this friend upon the back, or whisper in his ear a word of staunch encouragement, or cheer him with a smile; but his great care was to shield him from the pressure, and force a passage for him to the Golden Key. Passive and timid, scared, pale, and wondering, and gazing at the throng as if he were newly risen from the dead, and felt himself a ghost among the living, Barnaby - not Barnaby in the spirit, but in flesh and blood, with pulses, sinews, nerves, and beating heart, and strong affections - clung to his stout old friend, and followed where he led.

And thus, in course of time, they reached the door, held ready for their entrance by no unwilling hands. Then slipping in, and shutting out the crowd by main force, Gabriel stood between Mr Haredale and Edward Chester, and Barnaby, rushing up the stairs, fell upon his knees beside his mother's bed.

'Such is the blessed end, sir,' cried the panting locksmith, to Mr Haredale, 'of the best day's work we ever did. The rogues! it's been hard fighting to get away from 'em. I almost thought, once or twice, they'd have been too much for us with their kindness!'

They had striven, all the previous day, to rescue Barnaby from his impending fate. Failing in their attempts, in the first quarter to which they addressed themselves, they renewed them in another. Failing there, likewise, they began afresh at midnight; and made their way, not only to the judge and jury who had tried him, but to men of influence at court, to the young Prince of Wales, and even to the ante-chamber of the King himself. Successful, at last, in awakening an interest in his favour, and an inclination to inquire more dispassionately into his case, they had had an interview with the minister, in his bed, so late as eight o'clock that morning. The result of a searching inquiry (in which they, who had known the poor fellow from his childhood, did other good service, besides bringing it about) was, that between eleven and twelve o'clock, a free pardon to Barnaby Rudge was made out and signed, and entrusted to a horse-soldier for instant conveyance to the place of execution. This courier reached the spot just as the cart appeared in sight; and Barnaby being carried back to jail, Mr Haredale, assured that all was safe, had gone straight from Bloomsbury Square to the Golden Key, leaving to Gabriel the grateful task of bringing him home in triumph.

'I needn't say,' observed the locksmith, when he had shaken hands with all the males in the house, and hugged all the females, five-and-forty times, at least, 'that, except among ourselves, I didn't want to make a triumph of it. But, directly we got into the street we were known, and this hubbub began. Of the two,' he added, as he wiped his crimson face, 'and after experience of both, I think I'd rather be taken out of my house by a crowd of enemies, than escorted home by a mob of friends!'

It was plain enough, however, that this was mere talk on Gabriel's part, and that the whole proceeding afforded him the keenest delight; for the people continuing to make a great noise without, and to cheer as if their voices were in the freshest order, and good for a fortnight, he sent upstairs for Grip (who had come home at his master's back, and had acknowledged the favours of the multitude by drawing blood from every finger that came within his reach), and with the bird upon his arm presented himself at the first-floor window, and waved his hat again until it dangled by a shred, between his finger and thumb. This demonstration having been received with appropriate shouts, and silence being in some degree restored, he thanked them for their sympathy; and taking the liberty to inform them that there was a sick person in the house, proposed that they should give three cheers for King George, three more for Old England, and three more for nothing particular, as a closing ceremony. The crowd assenting, substituted Gabriel Varden for the nothing particular; and giving him one over, for good measure, dispersed in high good-humour.

What congratulations were exchanged among the inmates at the Golden Key, when they were left alone; what an overflowing of joy and happiness there was among them; how incapable it was of expression in Barnaby's own person; and how he went wildly from one to another, until he became so far tranquillised, as to stretch himself on the ground beside his mother's couch and fall into a deep sleep; are matters that need not be told. And it is well they happened to be of this class, for they would be very hard to tell, were their narration ever so indispensable.

Before leaving this bright picture, it may be well to glance at a dark and very different one which was presented to only a few eyes, that same night.

The scene was a churchyard; the time, midnight; the persons, Edward Chester, a clergyman, a grave-digger, and the four bearers of a homely coffin. They stood about a grave which had been newly dug, and one of the bearers held up a dim lantern, - the only light there - which shed its feeble ray upon the book of prayer. He placed it for a moment on the coffin, when he and his companions were about to lower it down. There was no inscription on the lid.

The mould fell solemnly upon the last house of this nameless man; and the rattling dust left a dismal echo even in the accustomed ears of those who had borne it to its resting-place. The grave was filled in to the top, and trodden down. They all left the spot together.

'You never saw him, living?' asked the clergyman, of Edward.

'Often, years ago; not knowing him for my brother.'

'Never since?'

'Never. Yesterday, he steadily refused to see me. It was urged upon him, many times, at my desire.'

'Still he refused? That was hardened and unnatural.'

'Do you think so?'

'I infer that you do not?'

'You are right. We hear the world wonder, every day, at monsters of ingratitude. Did it never occur to you that it often looks for monsters of affection, as though they were things of course?'

They had reached the gate by this time, and bidding each other good night, departed on their separate ways.