

Chapter LXXX

That afternoon, when he had slept off his fatigue; had shaved, and washed, and dressed, and freshened himself from top to toe; when he had dined, comforted himself with a pipe, an extra Toby, a nap in the great arm-chair, and a quiet chat with Mrs Varden on everything that had happened, was happening, or about to happen, within the sphere of their domestic concern; the locksmith sat himself down at the tea-table in the little back-parlour: the rosiest, cosiest, merriest, heartiest, best-contented old buck, in Great Britain or out of it.

There he sat, with his beaming eye on Mrs V., and his shining face suffused with gladness, and his capacious waistcoat smiling in every wrinkle, and his jovial humour peeping from under the table in the very plumpness of his legs; a sight to turn the vinegar of misanthropy into purest milk of human kindness. There he sat, watching his wife as she decorated the room with flowers for the greater honour of Dolly and Joseph Willet, who had gone out walking, and for whom the tea-kettle had been singing gaily on the hob full twenty minutes, chirping as never kettle chirped before; for whom the best service of real undoubted china, patterned with divers round-faced mandarins holding up broad umbrellas, was now displayed in all its glory; to tempt whose appetites a clear, transparent, juicy ham, garnished with cool green lettuce-leaves and fragrant cucumber, reposed upon a shady table, covered with a snow-white cloth; for whose delight, preserves and jams, crisp cakes and other pastry, short to eat, with cunning twists, and cottage loaves, and rolls of bread both white and brown, were all set forth in rich profusion; in whose youth Mrs V. herself had grown quite young, and stood there in a gown of red and white: symmetrical in figure, buxom in bodice, ruddy in cheek and lip, faultless in ankle, laughing in face and mood, in all respects delicious to behold - there sat the locksmith among all and every these delights, the sun that shone upon them all: the centre of the system: the source of light, heat, life, and frank enjoyment in the bright household world.

And when had Dolly ever been the Dolly of that afternoon? To see how she came in, arm-in-arm with Joe; and how she made an effort not to blush or seem at all confused; and how she made believe she didn't care to sit on his side of the table; and how she coaxed the locksmith in a whisper not to joke; and how her colour came and went in a little restless flutter of happiness, which made her do everything wrong, and yet so charmingly wrong that it was better than right! - why, the locksmith could have looked on at this (as he mentioned to Mrs Varden when they retired for the night) for four-and-twenty hours at a stretch, and never wished it done.

The recollections, too, with which they made merry over that long protracted tea! The glee with which the locksmith asked Joe if he

remembered that stormy night at the Maypole when he first asked after Dolly - the laugh they all had, about that night when she was going out to the party in the sedan-chair - the unmerciful manner in which they rallied Mrs Varden about putting those flowers outside that very window - the difficulty Mrs Varden found in joining the laugh against herself, at first, and the extraordinary perception she had of the joke when she overcame it - the confidential statements of Joe concerning the precise day and hour when he was first conscious of being fond of Dolly, and Dolly's blushing admissions, half volunteered and half extorted, as to the time from which she dated the discovery that she 'didn't mind' Joe - here was an exhaustless fund of mirth and conversation.

Then, there was a great deal to be said regarding Mrs Varden's doubts, and motherly alarms, and shrewd suspicions; and it appeared that from Mrs Varden's penetration and extreme sagacity nothing had ever been hidden. She had known it all along. She had seen it from the first. She had always predicted it. She had been aware of it before the principals. She had said within herself (for she remembered the exact words) 'that young Willet is certainly looking after our Dolly, and I must look after HIM.' Accordingly, she had looked after him, and had observed many little circumstances (all of which she named) so exceedingly minute that nobody else could make anything out of them even now; and had, it seemed from first to last, displayed the most unbounded tact and most consummate generalship.

Of course the night when Joe WOULD ride homeward by the side of the chaise, and when Mrs Varden WOULD insist upon his going back again, was not forgotten - nor the night when Dolly fainted on his name being mentioned - nor the times upon times when Mrs Varden, ever watchful and prudent, had found her pining in her own chamber. In short, nothing was forgotten; and everything by some means or other brought them back to the conclusion, that that was the happiest hour in all their lives; consequently, that everything must have occurred for the best, and nothing could be suggested which would have made it better.

While they were in the full glow of such discourse as this, there came a startling knock at the door, opening from the street into the workshop, which had been kept closed all day that the house might be more quiet. Joe, as in duty bound, would hear of nobody but himself going to open it; and accordingly left the room for that purpose.

It would have been odd enough, certainly, if Joe had forgotten the way to this door; and even if he had, as it was a pretty large one and stood straight before him, he could not easily have missed it. But Dolly, perhaps because she was in the flutter of spirits before mentioned, or perhaps because she thought he would not be able to open it with his

one arm - she could have had no other reason - hurried out after him; and they stopped so long in the passage - no doubt owing to Joe's entreaties that she would not expose herself to the draught of July air which must infallibly come rushing in on this same door being opened - that the knock was repeated, in a yet more startling manner than before.

'Is anybody going to open that door?' cried the locksmith. 'Or shall I come?'

Upon that, Dolly went running back into the parlour, all dimples and blushes; and Joe opened it with a mighty noise, and other superfluous demonstrations of being in a violent hurry.

'Well,' said the locksmith, when he reappeared: 'what is it? eh Joe? what are you laughing at?'

'Nothing, sir. It's coming in.'

'Who's coming in? what's coming in?' Mrs Varden, as much at a loss as her husband, could only shake her head in answer to his inquiring look: so, the locksmith wheeled his chair round to command a better view of the room-door, and stared at it with his eyes wide open, and a mingled expression of curiosity and wonder shining in his jolly face.

Instead of some person or persons straightway appearing, divers remarkable sounds were heard, first in the workshop and afterwards in the little dark passage between it and the parlour, as though some unwieldy chest or heavy piece of furniture were being brought in, by an amount of human strength inadequate to the task. At length after much struggling and humping, and bruising of the wall on both sides, the door was forced open as by a battering-ram; and the locksmith, steadily regarding what appeared beyond, smote his thigh, elevated his eyebrows, opened his mouth, and cried in a loud voice expressive of the utmost consternation:

'Damme, if it an't Miggs come back!'

The young damsel whom he named no sooner heard these words, than deserting a small boy and a very large box by which she was accompanied, and advancing with such precipitation that her bonnet flew off her head, burst into the room, clasped her hands (in which she held a pair of pattens, one in each), raised her eyes devotedly to the ceiling, and shed a flood of tears.

'The old story!' cried the locksmith, looking at her in inexpressible desperation. 'She was born to be a damper, this young woman! nothing can prevent it!'

'Ho master, ho mim!' cried Miggs, 'can I constrain my feelings in these here once agin united moments! Ho Mr Warsen, here's blessedness among relations, sir! Here's forgivenesses of injuries, here's amicablebnesses!'

The locksmith looked from his wife to Dolly, and from Dolly to Joe, and from Joe to Miggs, with his eyebrows still elevated and his mouth still open. When his eyes got back to Miggs, they rested on her; fascinated.

'To think,' cried Miggs with hysterical joy, 'that Mr Joe, and dear Miss Dolly, has raly come together after all as has been said and done contrairy! To see them two a-settin' along with him and her, so pleasant and in all respects so affable and mild; and me not knowing of it, and not being in the ways to make no preparations for their teas. Ho what a cutting thing it is, and yet what sweet sensations is awoke within me!'

Either in clasping her hands again, or in an ecstasy of pious joy, Miss Miggs clinked her pattens after the manner of a pair of cymbals, at this juncture; and then resumed, in the softest accents:

'And did my missis think - ho goodness, did she think - as her own Miggs, which supported her under so many trials, and understood her natur' when them as intended well but acted rough, went so deep into her feelings - did she think as her own Miggs would ever leave her? Did she think as Miggs, though she was but a servant, and knowed that servitudes was no inheritances, would forgit that she was the humble instruments as always made it comfortable between them two when they fell out, and always told master of the meekness and forgiveness of her blessed dispositions! Did she think as Miggs had no attachments! Did she think that wages was her only object!'

To none of these interrogatories, whereof every one was more pathetically delivered than the last, did Mrs Varden answer one word: but Miggs, not at all abashed by this circumstance, turned to the small boy in attendance - her eldest nephew - son of her own married sister - born in Golden Lion Court, number twenty-sivin, and bred in the very shadow of the second bell-handle on the right-hand door-post - and with a plentiful use of her pocket-handkerchief, addressed herself to him: requesting that on his return home he would console his parents for the loss of her, his aunt, by delivering to them a faithful statement of his having left her in the bosom of that family, with which, as his aforesaid parents well knew, her best affections were incorporated; that he would remind them that nothing less than her imperious sense of duty, and devoted attachment to her old master and missis, likewise Miss Dolly and young Mr Joe, should ever have induced her to decline that pressing invitation which they, his

parents, had, as he could testify, given her, to lodge and board with them, free of all cost and charge, for evermore; lastly, that he would help her with her box upstairs, and then repair straight home, bearing her blessing and her strong injunctions to mingle in his prayers a supplication that he might in course of time grow up a locksmith, or a Mr Joe, and have Mrs Vardens and Miss Dollys for his relations and friends.

Having brought this admonition to an end - upon which, to say the truth, the young gentleman for whose benefit it was designed, bestowed little or no heed, having to all appearance his faculties absorbed in the contemplation of the sweetmeats, - Miss Miggs signified to the company in general that they were not to be uneasy, for she would soon return; and, with her nephew's aid, prepared to bear her wardrobe up the staircase.

'My dear,' said the locksmith to his wife. 'Do you desire this?'

'I desire it!' she answered. 'I am astonished - I am amazed - at her audacity. Let her leave the house this moment.'

Miggs, hearing this, let her end of the box fall heavily to the floor, gave a very loud sniff, crossed her arms, screwed down the corners of her mouth, and cried, in an ascending scale, 'Ho, good gracious!' three distinct times.

'You hear what your mistress says, my love,' remarked the locksmith. 'You had better go, I think. Stay; take this with you, for the sake of old service.'

Miss Miggs clutched the bank-note he took from his pocket-book and held out to her; deposited it in a small, red leather purse; put the purse in her pocket (displaying, as she did so, a considerable portion of some under-garment, made of flannel, and more black cotton stocking than is commonly seen in public); and, tossing her head, as she looked at Mrs Varden, repeated -

'Ho, good gracious!'

'I think you said that once before, my dear,' observed the locksmith.

'Times is changed, is they, mim!' cried Miggs, bridling; 'you can spare me now, can you? You can keep 'em down without me? You're not in wants of any one to scold, or throw the blame upon, no longer, an't you, mim? I'm glad to find you've grown so independent. I wish you joy, I'm sure!'

With that she dropped a curtsey, and keeping her head erect, her ear towards Mrs Varden, and her eye on the rest of the company, as she alluded to them in her remarks, proceeded:

'I'm quite delighted, I'm sure, to find sich independency, feeling sorry though, at the same time, mim, that you should have been forced into submissions when you couldn't help yourself - he he he! It must be great vexations, 'specially considering how ill you always spoke of Mr Joe - to have him for a son-in-law at last; and I wonder Miss Dolly can put up with him, either, after being off and on for so many years with a coachmaker. But I HAVE heerd say, that the coachmaker thought twice about it - he he he! - and that he told a young man as was a frind of his, that he hoped he knowed better than to be drawed into that; though she and all the family DID pull uncommon strong!'

Here she paused for a reply, and receiving none, went on as before.

'I HAVE heerd say, mim, that the illnesses of some ladies was all pretensions, and that they could faint away, stone dead, whenever they had the inclinations so to do. Of course I never see sich cases with my own eyes - ho no! He he he! Nor master neither - ho no! He he he! I HAVE heerd the neighbours make remark as some one as they was acquainted with, was a poor good-natur'd mean-spirited creetur, as went out fishing for a wife one day, and caught a Tartar. Of course I never to my knowledge see the poor person himself. Nor did you neither, mim - ho no. I wonder who it can be - don't you, mim? No doubt you do, mim. Ho yes. He he he!'

Again Miggs paused for a reply; and none being offered, was so oppressed with teeming spite and spleen, that she seemed like to burst.

'I'm glad Miss Dolly can laugh,' cried Miggs with a feeble titter. 'I like to see folks a-laughing - so do you, mim, don't you? You was always glad to see people in spirits, wasn't you, mim? And you always did your best to keep 'em cheerful, didn't you, mim? Though there an't such a great deal to laugh at now either; is there, mim? It an't so much of a catch, after looking out so sharp ever since she was a little chit, and costing such a deal in dress and show, to get a poor, common soldier, with one arm, is it, mim? He he! I wouldn't have a husband with one arm, anyways. I would have two arms. I would have two arms, if it was me, though instead of hands they'd only got hooks at the end, like our dustman!'

Miss Miggs was about to add, and had, indeed, begun to add, that, taking them in the abstract, dustmen were far more eligible matches than soldiers, though, to be sure, when people were past choosing they must take the best they could get, and think themselves well off

too; but her vexation and chagrin being of that internally bitter sort which finds no relief in words, and is aggravated to madness by want of contradiction, she could hold out no longer, and burst into a storm of sobs and tears.

In this extremity she fell on the unlucky nephew, tooth and nail, and plucking a handful of hair from his head, demanded to know how long she was to stand there to be insulted, and whether or no he meant to help her to carry out the box again, and if he took a pleasure in hearing his family reviled: with other inquiries of that nature; at which disgrace and provocation, the small boy, who had been all this time gradually lashed into rebellion by the sight of unattainable pastry, walked off indignant, leaving his aunt and the box to follow at their leisure. Somehow or other, by dint of pushing and pulling, they did attain the street at last; where Miss Miggs, all blowzed with the exertion of getting there, and with her sobs and tears, sat down upon her property to rest and grieve, until she could ensnare some other youth to help her home.

'It's a thing to laugh at, Martha, not to care for,' whispered the locksmith, as he followed his wife to the window, and good-humouredly dried her eyes. 'What does it matter? You had seen your fault before. Come! Bring up Toby again, my dear; Dolly shall sing us a song; and we'll be all the merrier for this interruption!'