Chapter XXVI - Sharpshooters

Wintry morning, looking with dull eyes and sallow face upon the neighbourhood of Leicester Square, finds its inhabitants unwilling to get out of bed. Many of them are not early risers at the brightest of times, being birds of night who roost when the sun is high and are wide awake and keen for prey when the stars shine out. Behind dingy blind and curtain, in upper story and garret, skulking more or less under false names, false hair, false titles, false jewellery, and false histories, a colony of brigands lie in their first sleep. Gentlemen of the green-baize road who could discourse from personal experience of foreign galleys and home treadmills; spies of strong governments that eternally quake with weakness and miserable fear, broken traitors, cowards, bullies, gamesters, shufflers, swindlers, and false witnesses; some not unmarked by the branding-iron beneath their dirty braid; all with more cruelty in them than was in Nero, and more crime than is in Newgate. For howsoever bad the devil can be in fustian or smock-frock (and he can be very bad in both), he is a more designing, callous, and intolerable devil when he sticks a pin in his shirt-front, calls himself a gentleman, backs a card or colour, plays a game or so of billiards, and knows a little about bills and promissory notes than in any other form he wears. And in such form Mr Bucket shall find him, when he will, still pervading the tributary channels of Leicester Square.

But the wintry morning wants him not and wakes him not. It wakes Mr George of the shooting gallery and his familiar. They arise, roll up and stow away their mattresses. Mr George, having shaved himself before a looking-glass of minute proportions, then marches out, bare-headed and bare-chested, to the pump in the little yard and anon comes back shining with yellow soap, friction, drifting rain, and exceedingly cold water. As he rubs himself upon a large jack-towel, blowing like a military sort of diver just come up, his hair curling tighter and tighter on his sunburnt temples the more he rubs it so that it looks as if it never could be loosened by any less coercive instrument than an iron rake or a curry-comb--as he rubs, and puffs, and polishes, and blows, turning his head from side to side the more conveniently to excoriate his throat, and standing with his body well bent forward to keep the wet from his martial legs, Phil, on his knees lighting a fire, looks round as if it were enough washing for him to see all that done, and sufficient renovation for one day to take in the superfluous health his master throws off.

When Mr George is dry, he goes to work to brush his head with two hard brushes at once, to that unmerciful degree that Phil, shouldering his way round the gallery in the act of sweeping it, winks with sympathy. This chafing over, the ornamental part of Mr George's toilet is soon performed. He fills his pipe, lights it, and marches up and

down smoking, as his custom is, while Phil, raising a powerful odour of hot rolls and coffee, prepares breakfast. He smokes gravely and marches in slow time. Perhaps this morning's pipe is devoted to the memory of Gridley in his grave.

'And so, Phil,' says George of the shooting gallery after several turns in silence, 'you were dreaming of the country last night?'

Phil, by the by, said as much in a tone of surprise as he scrambled out of bed.

'Yes, guv'ner.'

'What was it like?'

'I hardly know what it was like, guv'ner,' said Phil, considering.

'How did you know it was the country?'

'On account of the grass, I think. And the swans upon it,' says Phil after further consideration.

'What were the swans doing on the grass?'

'They was a-eating of it, I expect,' says Phil.

The master resumes his march, and the man resumes his preparation of breakfast. It is not necessarily a lengthened preparation, being limited to the setting forth of very simple breakfast requisites for two and the broiling of a rasher of bacon at the fire in the rusty grate; but as Phil has to sidle round a considerable part of the gallery for every object he wants, and never brings two objects at once, it takes time under the circumstances. At length the breakfast is ready. Phil announcing it, Mr George knocks the ashes out of his pipe on the hob, stands his pipe itself in the chimney corner, and sits down to the meal. When he has helped himself, Phil follows suit, sitting at the extreme end of the little oblong table and taking his plate on his knees. Either in humility, or to hide his blackened hands, or because it is his natural manner of eating.

'The country,' says Mr George, plying his knife and fork; 'why, I suppose you never clapped your eyes on the country, Phil?'

'I see the marshes once,' says Phil, contentedly eating his breakfast.

'What marshes?'

'THE marshes, commander,' returns Phil.

‘Where are they?’

‘I don't know where they are,’ says Phil; ‘but I see 'em, guv'ner. They was flat. And miste.’

Governor and commander are interchangeable terms with Phil, expressive of the same respect and deference and applicable to nobody but Mr George.

‘I was born in the country, Phil.’

‘Was you indeed, commander?’

‘Yes. And bred there.’

Phil elevates his one eyebrow, and after respectfully staring at his master to express interest, swallows a great gulp of coffee, still staring at him.

‘There's not a bird's note that I don't know,’ says Mr George. ‘Not many an English leaf or berry that I couldn't name. Not many a tree that I couldn't climb yet if I was put to it. I was a real country boy, once. My good mother lived in the country.’

‘She must have been a fine old lady, guv'ner,’ Phil observes.

‘Aye! And not so old either, five and thirty years ago,’ says Mr George. ‘But I'll wager that at ninety she would be near as upright as me, and near as broad across the shoulders.’

‘Did she die at ninety, guv'ner?’ inquires Phil.

‘No. Bosh! Let her rest in peace, God bless her!’ says the trooper. ‘What set me on about country boys, and runaways, and good-for-nothings? You, to be sure! So you never clapped your eyes upon the country--marshes and dreams excepted. Eh?’

Phil shakes his head.

‘Do you want to see it?’

‘N-no, I don't know as I do, particular,’ says Phil.

‘The town's enough for you, eh?’

‘Why, you see, commander,’ says Phil, ‘I ain't acquainted with anythink else, and I doubt if I ain't a-getting too old to take to novelties.’

‘How old ARE you, Phil?’ asks the trooper, pausing as he conveys his smoking saucer to his lips.

‘I'm something with a eight in it,’ says Phil. ‘It can't be eighty. Nor yet eighteen. It's betwixt 'em, somewheres.’

Mr George, slowly putting down his saucer without tasting its contents, is laughingly beginning, ‘Why, what the deuce, Phil--’ when he stops, seeing that Phil is counting on his dirty fingers.

‘I was just eight,’ says Phil, ‘agreeable to the parish calculation, when I went with the tinker. I was sent on a errand, and I see him a-sittin under a old buildin with a fire all to himself wery comfortable, and he says, 'Would you like to come along a me, my man?' I says 'Yes,' and him and me and the fire goes home to Clerkenwell together. That was April Fool Day. I was able to count up to ten; and when April Fool Day come round again, I says to myself, 'Now, old chap, you're one and a eight in it.' April Fool Day after that, I says, 'Now, old chap, you're two and a eight in it.' In course of time, I come to ten and a eight in it; two tens and a eight in it. When it got so high, it got the upper hand of me, but this is how I always know there's a eight in it.’

‘Ah!’ says Mr George, resuming his breakfast. ‘And where's the tinker?’

‘Drink put him in the hospital, guv'ner, and the hospital put him-- in a glass-case, I HAVE heerd,’ Phil replies mysteriously.

‘By that means you got promotion? Took the business, Phil?’

‘Yes, commander, I took the business. Such as it was. It wasn't much of a beat--round Saffron Hill, Hatton Garden, Clerkenwell, Smiffeld, and there--poor neighbourhood, where they uses up the kettles till they're past mending. Most of the tramping tinkers used to come and lodge at our place; that was the best part of my master's earnings. But they didn't come to me. I warn't like him. He could sing 'em a good song. I couldn't! He could play 'em a tune on any sort of pot you please, so as it was iron or block tin. I never could do nothing with a pot but mend it or bile it--never had a note of music in me. Besides, I was too ill-looking, and their wives complained of me.’

‘They were mighty particular. You would pass muster in a crowd, Phil!’ says the trooper with a pleasant smile.

‘No, guv'ner,’ returns Phil, shaking his head. ‘No, I shouldn't. I was passable enough when I went with the tinker, though nothing to boast of then; but what with blowing the fire with my mouth when I was young, and spileing my complexion, and singeing my hair off, and swallering the smoke, and what with being nat'rally unfort'nate in the

way of running against hot metal and marking myself by sich means, and what with having turn-ups with the tinker as I got older, almost whenever he was too far gone in drink--which was almost always--my beauty was queer, wery queer, even at that time. As to since, what with a dozen years in a dark forge where the men was given to larking, and what with being scorched in a accident at a gas-works, and what with being blowed out of winder case-filling at the firework business, I am ugly enough to be made a show on!'

Resigning himself to which condition with a perfectly satisfied manner, Phil begs the favour of another cup of coffee. While drinking it, he says, 'It was after the case-filling blow-up when I first see you, commander. You remember?'

'I remember, Phil. You were walking along in the sun.'

'Crawling, guv'ner, again a wall--'

'True, Phil--shouldering your way on--'

'In a night-cap!' exclaims Phil, excited.

'In a night-cap--'

'And hobbling with a couple of sticks!' cries Phil, still more excited.

'With a couple of sticks. When--'

'When you stops, you know,' cries Phil, putting down his cup and saucer and hastily removing his plate from his knees, 'and says to me, 'What, comrade! You have been in the wars!' I didn't say much to you, commander, then, for I was took by surprise that a person so strong and healthy and bold as you was should stop to speak to such a limping bag of bones as I was. But you says to me, says you, delivering it out of your chest as hearty as possible, so that it was like a glass of something hot, 'What accident have you met with? You have been badly hurt. What's amiss, old boy? Cheer up, and tell us about it!' Cheer up! I was cheered already! I says as much to you, you says more to me, I says more to you, you says more to me, and here I am, commander! Here I am, commander!' cries Phil, who has started from his chair and unaccountably begun to sidle away. 'If a mark's wanted, or if it will improve the business, let the customers take aim at me. They can't spoil MY beauty. I'M all right. Come on! If they want a man to box at, let 'em box at me. Let 'em knock me well about the head. I don't mind. If they want a light-weight to be throwed for practice, Cornwall, Devonshire, or Lancashire, let 'em throw me. They won't hurt ME. I have been throwed, all sorts of styles, all my life!'

With this unexpected speech, energetically delivered and accompanied by action illustrative of the various exercises referred to, Phil Squod shoulders his way round three sides of the gallery, and abruptly tacking off at his commander, makes a butt at him with his head, intended to express devotion to his service. He then begins to clear away the breakfast.

Mr George, after laughing cheerfully and clapping him on the shoulder, assists in these arrangements and helps to get the gallery into business order. That done, he takes a turn at the dumb-bells, and afterwards weighing himself and opining that he is getting 'too fleshy,' engages with great gravity in solitary broadsword practice. Meanwhile Phil has fallen to work at his usual table, where he screws and unscrews, and cleans, and files, and whistles into small apertures, and blackens himself more and more, and seems to do and undo everything that can be done and undone about a gun.

Master and man are at length disturbed by footsteps in the passage, where they make an unusual sound, denoting the arrival of unusual company. These steps, advancing nearer and nearer to the gallery, bring into it a group at first sight scarcely reconcilable with any day in the year but the fifth of November.

It consists of a limp and ugly figure carried in a chair by two bearers and attended by a lean female with a face like a pinched mask, who might be expected immediately to recite the popular verses commemorative of the time when they did contrive to blow Old England up alive but for her keeping her lips tightly and defiantly closed as the chair is put down. At which point the figure in it gasping, 'O Lord! Oh, dear me! I am shaken!' adds, 'How de do, my dear friend, how de do?' Mr George then descries, in the procession, the venerable Mr Smallweed out for an airing, attended by his granddaughter Judy as body-guard.

'Mr George, my dear friend,' says Grandfather Smallweed, removing his right arm from the neck of one of his bearers, whom he has nearly throttled coming along, 'how de do? You're surprised to see me, my dear friend.'

'I should hardly have been more surprised to have seen your friend in the city,' returns Mr George.

'I am very seldom out,' pants Mr Smallweed. 'I haven't been out for many months. It's inconvenient--and it comes expensive. But I longed so much to see you, my dear Mr George. How de do, sir?'

'I am well enough,' says Mr George. 'I hope you are the same.'

‘You can't be too well, my dear friend.’ Mr Smallweed takes him by both hands. ‘I have brought my granddaughter Judy. I couldn't keep her away. She longed so much to see you.’

‘Hum! She bears it calmly!’ mutters Mr George.

‘So we got a hackney-cab, and put a chair in it, and just round the corner they lifted me out of the cab and into the chair, and carried me here that I might see my dear friend in his own establishment! This,’ says Grandfather Smallweed, alluding to the bearer, who has been in danger of strangulation and who withdraws adjusting his windpipe, ‘is the driver of the cab. He has nothing extra. It is by agreement included in his fare. This person,’ the other bearer, ‘we engaged in the street outside for a pint of beer. Which is twopence. Judy, give the person twopence. I was not sure you had a workman of your own here, my dear friend, or we needn't have employed this person.’

Grandfather Smallweed refers to Phil with a glance of considerable terror and a half-subdued ‘O Lord! Oh, dear me!’ Nor in his apprehension, on the surface of things, without some reason, for Phil, who has never beheld the apparition in the black-velvet cap before, has stopped short with a gun in his hand with much of the air of a dead shot intent on picking Mr Smallweed off as an ugly old bird of the crow species.

‘Judy, my child,’ says Grandfather Smallweed, ‘give the person his twopence. It's a great deal for what he has done.’

The person, who is one of those extraordinary specimens of human fungus that spring up spontaneously in the western streets of London, ready dressed in an old red jacket, with a ‘mission’ for holding horses and calling coaches, received his twopence with anything but transport, tosses the money into the air, catches it over-handed, and retires.

‘My dear Mr George,’ says Grandfather Smallweed, ‘would you be so kind as help to carry me to the fire? I am accustomed to a fire, and I am an old man, and I soon chill. Oh, dear me!’

His closing exclamation is jerked out of the venerable gentleman by the suddenness with which Mr Squod, like a genie, catches him up, chair and all, and deposits him on the hearth-stone.

‘O Lord!’ says Mr Smallweed, panting. ‘Oh, dear me! Oh, my stars! My dear friend, your workman is very strong--and very prompt. O Lord, he is very prompt! Judy, draw me back a little. I'm being scorched in the legs,’ which indeed is testified to the noses of all present by the smell of his worsted stockings.

The gentle Judy, having backed her grandfather a little way from the fire, and having shaken him up as usual, and having released his overshadowed eye from its black-velvet extinguisher, Mr Smallweed again says, 'Oh, dear me! O Lord!' and looking about and meeting Mr George's glance, again stretches out both hands.

'My dear friend! So happy in this meeting! And this is your establishment? It's a delightful place. It's a picture! You never find that anything goes off here accidentally, do you, my dear friend?' adds Grandfather Smallweed, very ill at ease.

'No, no. No fear of that.'

'And your workman. He--Oh, dear me!--he never lets anything off without meaning it, does he, my dear friend?'

'He has never hurt anybody but himself,' says Mr George, smiling.

'But he might, you know. He seems to have hurt himself a good deal, and he might hurt somebody else,' the old gentleman returns. 'He mightn't mean it--or he even might. Mr George, will you order him to leave his infernal fire-arms alone and go away?'

Obedient to a nod from the trooper, Phil retires, empty-handed, to the other end of the gallery. Mr Smallweed, reassured, falls to rubbing his legs.

'And you're doing well, Mr George?' he says to the trooper, squarely standing faced about towards him with his broadsword in his hand. 'You are prospering, please the Powers?'

Mr George answers with a cool nod, adding, 'Go on. You have not come to say that, I know.'

'You are so sprightly, Mr George,' returns the venerable grandfather. 'You are such good company.'

'Ha ha! Go on!' says Mr George.

'My dear friend! But that sword looks awful gleaming and sharp. It might cut somebody, by accident. It makes me shiver, Mr George. Curse him!' says the excellent old gentleman apart to Judy as the trooper takes a step or two away to lay it aside. 'He owes me money, and might think of paying off old scores in this murdering place. I wish your brimstone grandmother was here, and he'd shave her head off.'

Mr George, returning, folds his arms, and looking down at the old man, sliding every moment lower and lower in his chair, says quietly, 'Now for it!'

'Ho!' cries Mr Smallweed, rubbing his hands with an artful chuckle. 'Yes. Now for it. Now for what, my dear friend?'

'For a pipe,' says Mr George, who with great composure sets his chair in the chimney-corner, takes his pipe from the grate, fills it and lights it, and falls to smoking peacefully.

This tends to the discomfiture of Mr Smallweed, who finds it so difficult to resume his object, whatever it may be, that he becomes exasperated and secretly claws the air with an impotent vindictiveness expressive of an intense desire to tear and rend the visage of Mr George. As the excellent old gentleman's nails are long and leaden, and his hands lean and veinous, and his eyes green and watery; and, over and above this, as he continues, while he claws, to slide down in his chair and to collapse into a shapeless bundle, he becomes such a ghastly spectacle, even in the accustomed eyes of Judy, that that young virgin pounces at him with something more than the ardour of affection and so shakes him up and pats and pokes him in divers parts of his body, but particularly in that part which the science of self-defence would call his wind, that in his grievous distress he utters enforced sounds like a paviour's rammer.

When Judy has by these means set him up again in his chair, with a white face and a frosty nose (but still clawing), she stretches out her weazen forefinger and gives Mr George one poke in the back. The trooper raising his head, she makes another poke at her esteemed grandfather, and having thus brought them together, stares rigidly at the fire.

'Aye, aye! Ho, ho! U--u--u--ugh!' chatters Grandfather Smallweed, swallowing his rage. 'My dear friend!' (still clawing).

'I tell you what,' says Mr George. 'If you want to converse with me, you must speak out. I am one of the roughs, and I can't go about and about. I haven't the art to do it. I am not clever enough. It don't suit me. When you go winding round and round me,' says the trooper, putting his pipe between his lips again, 'damme, if I don't feel as if I was being smothered!'

And he inflates his broad chest to its utmost extent as if to assure himself that he is not smothered yet.

'If you have come to give me a friendly call,' continues Mr George, 'I am obliged to you; how are you? If you have come to see whether

there's any property on the premises, look about you; you are welcome. If you want to out with something, out with it!'

The blooming Judy, without removing her gaze from the fire, gives her grandfather one ghostly poke.

'You see! It's her opinion too. And why the devil that young woman won't sit down like a Christian,' says Mr George with his eyes musingly fixed on Judy, 'I can't comprehend.'

'She keeps at my side to attend to me, sir,' says Grandfather Smallweed. 'I am an old man, my dear Mr George, and I need some attention. I can carry my years; I am not a brimstone poll-parrot' (snarling and looking unconsciously for the cushion), 'but I need attention, my dear friend.'

'Well!' returns the trooper, wheeling his chair to face the old man. 'Now then?'

'My friend in the city, Mr George, has done a little business with a pupil of yours.'

'Has he?' says Mr George. 'I am sorry to hear it.'

'Yes, sir.' Grandfather Smallweed rubs his legs. 'He is a fine young soldier now, Mr George, by the name of Carstone. Friends came forward and paid it all up, honourable.' 'Did they?' returns Mr George. 'Do you think your friend in the city would like a piece of advice?'

'I think he would, my dear friend. From you.'

'I advise him, then, to do no more business in that quarter. There's no more to be got by it. The young gentleman, to my knowledge, is brought to a dead halt.'

'No, no, my dear friend. No, no, Mr George. No, no, no, sir,' remonstrates Grandfather Smallweed, cunningly rubbing his spare legs. 'Not quite a dead halt, I think. He has good friends, and he is good for his pay, and he is good for the selling price of his commission, and he is good for his chance in a lawsuit, and he is good for his chance in a wife, and--oh, do you know, Mr George, I think my friend would consider the young gentleman good for something yet?' says Grandfather Smallweed, turning up his velvet cap and scratching his ear like a monkey.

Mr George, who has put aside his pipe and sits with an arm on his chair-back, beats a tattoo on the ground with his right foot as if he

were not particularly pleased with the turn the conversation has taken.

'But to pass from one subject to another,' resumes Mr Smallweed. "To promote the conversation,' as a joker might say. To pass, Mr George, from the ensign to the captain.'

'What are you up to, now?' asks Mr George, pausing with a frown in stroking the recollection of his moustache. 'What captain?'

'Our captain. The captain we know of. Captain Hawdon.'

'Oh! That's it, is it?' says Mr George with a low whistle as he sees both grandfather and granddaughter looking hard at him. 'You are there! Well? What about it? Come, I won't be smothered any more. Speak!'

'My dear friend,' returns the old man, 'I was applied--Judy, shake me up a little!--I was applied to yesterday about the captain, and my opinion still is that the captain is not dead.'

'Bosh!' observes Mr George.

'What was your remark, my dear friend?' inquires the old man with his hand to his ear.

'Bosh!'

'Ho!' says Grandfather Smallweed. 'Mr George, of my opinion you can judge for yourself according to the questions asked of me and the reasons given for asking 'em. Now, what do you think the lawyer making the inquiries wants?'

'A job,' says Mr George.

'Nothing of the kind!'

'Can't be a lawyer, then,' says Mr George, folding his arms with an air of confirmed resolution.

'My dear friend, he is a lawyer, and a famous one. He wants to see some fragment in Captain Hawdon's writing. He don't want to keep it. He only wants to see it and compare it with a writing in his possession.'

'Well?'

'Well, Mr George. Happening to remember the advertisement concerning Captain Hawdon and any information that could be given

respecting him, he looked it up and came to me--just as you did, my dear friend. WILL you shake hands? So glad you came that day! I should have missed forming such a friendship if you hadn't come!'

'Well, Mr Smallweed?' says Mr George again after going through the ceremony with some stiffness.

'I had no such thing. I have nothing but his signature. Plague pestilence and famine, battle murder and sudden death upon him,' says the old man, making a curse out of one of his few remembrances of a prayer and squeezing up his velvet cap between his angry hands, 'I have half a million of his signatures, I think! But you,' breathlessly recovering his mildness of speech as Judy re- adjusts the cap on his skittle-ball of a head, 'you, my dear Mr George, are likely to have some letter or paper that would suit the purpose. Anything would suit the purpose, written in the hand.'

'Some writing in that hand,' says the trooper, pondering; 'may be, I have.'

'My dearest friend!'

'May be, I have not.'

'Ho!' says Grandfather Smallweed, crest-fallen.

'But if I had bushels of it, I would not show as much as would make a cartridge without knowing why.'

'Sir, I have told you why. My dear Mr George, I have told you why.'

'Not enough,' says the trooper, shaking his head. 'I must know more, and approve it.'

'Then, will you come to the lawyer? My dear friend, will you come and see the gentleman?' urges Grandfather Smallweed, pulling out a lean old silver watch with hands like the leg of a skeleton. 'I told him it was probable I might call upon him between ten and eleven this forenoon, and it's now half after ten. Will you come and see the gentleman, Mr George?'

'Hum!' says he gravely. 'I don't mind that. Though why this should concern you so much, I don't know.'

'Everything concerns me that has a chance in it of bringing anything to light about him. Didn't he take us all in? Didn't he owe us immense sums, all round? Concern me? Who can anything about him concern more than me? Not, my dear friend,' says Grandfather Smallweed,

lowering his tone, ‘that I want YOU to betray anything. Far from it. Are you ready to come, my dear friend?’

‘Aye! I'll come in a moment. I promise nothing, you know.’

‘No, my dear Mr George; no.’

‘And you mean to say you're going to give me a lift to this place, wherever it is, without charging for it?’ Mr George inquires, getting his hat and thick wash-leather gloves.

This pleasantry so tickles Mr Smallweed that he laughs, long and low, before the fire. But ever while he laughs, he glances over his paralytic shoulder at Mr George and eagerly watches him as he unlocks the padlock of a homely cupboard at the distant end of the gallery, looks here and there upon the higher shelves, and ultimately takes something out with a rustling of paper, folds it, and puts it in his breast. Then Judy pokes Mr Smallweed once, and Mr Smallweed pokes Judy once.

‘I am ready,’ says the trooper, coming back. ‘Phil, you can carry this old gentleman to his coach, and make nothing of him.’

‘Oh, dear me! O Lord! Stop a moment!’ says Mr Smallweed. ‘He's so very prompt! Are you sure you can do it carefully, my worthy man?’

Phil makes no reply, but seizing the chair and its load, sidles away, tightly hugged by the now speechless Mr Smallweed, and bolts along the passage as if he had an acceptable commission to carry the old gentleman to the nearest volcano. His shorter trust, however, terminating at the cab, he deposits him there; and the fair Judy takes her place beside him, and the chair embellishes the roof, and Mr George takes the vacant place upon the box.

Mr George is quite confounded by the spectacle he beholds from time to time as he peeps into the cab through the window behind him, where the grim Judy is always motionless, and the old gentleman with his cap over one eye is always sliding off the seat into the straw and looking upward at him out of his other eye with a helpless expression of being jolted in the back.