CHAPTER XLVI - Stop Him!

Darkness rests upon Tom-All-Alone's. Dilating and dilating since the sun went down last night, it has gradually swelled until it fills every void in the place. For a time there were some dungeon lights burning, as the lamp of life hums in Tom-all-Alone's, heavily, heavily, in the nauseous air, and winking--as that lamp, too, winks in Tom-all-Alone's--at many horrible things. But they are blotted out. The moon has eyed Tom with a dull cold stare, as admitting some puny emulation of herself in his desert region unfit for life and blasted by volcanic fires; but she has passed on and is gone. The blackest nightmare in the infernal stables grazes on Tom-all-Alone's, and Tom is fast asleep.

Much mighty speech-making there has been, both in and out of Parliament, concerning Tom, and much wrathful disputation how Tom shall be got right. Whether he shall be put into the main road by constables, or by beadles, or by bell-ringing, or by force of figures, or by correct principles of taste, or by high church, or by low church, or by no church; whether he shall be set to splitting trusses of polemical straws with the crooked knife of his mind or whether he shall be put to stone-breaking instead. In the midst of which dust and noise there is but one thing perfectly clear, to wit, that Tom only may and can, or shall and will, be reclaimed according to somebody's theory but nobody's practice. And in the hopeful meantime, Tom goes to perdition head foremost in his old determined spirit.

But he has his revenge. Even the winds are his messengers, and they serve him in these hours of darkness. There is not a drop of Tom's corrupted blood but propagates infection and contagion somewhere. It shall pollute, this very night, the choice stream (in which chemists on analysis would find the genuine nobility) of a Norman house, and his Grace shall not be able to say nay to the infamous alliance. There is not an atom of Tom's slime, not a cubic inch of any pestilential gas in which he lives, not one obscenity or degradation about him, not an ignorance, not a wickedness, not a brutality of his committing, but shall work its retribution through every order of society up to the proudest of the proud and to the highest of the high. Verily, what with tainting, plundering, and spoiling, Tom has his revenge.

It is a moot point whether Tom-all-Alone's be uglier by day or by night, but on the argument that the more that is seen of it the more shocking it must be, and that no part of it left to the imagination is at all likely to be made so bad as the reality, day carries it. The day begins to break now; and in truth it might be better for the national glory even that the sun should sometimes set upon the British dominions than that it should ever rise upon so vile a wonder as Tom.

A brown sunburnt gentleman, who appears in some inaptitude for sleep to be wandering abroad rather than counting the hours on a restless pillow, strolls hitherward at this quiet time. Attracted by curiosity, he often pauses and looks about him, up and down the miserable by-ways. Nor is he merely curious, for in his bright dark eye there is compassionate interest; and as he looks here and there, he seems to understand such wretchedness and to have studied it before.

On the banks of the stagnant channel of mud which is the main street of Tom-all-Alone's, nothing is to be seen but the crazy houses, shut up and silent. No waking creature save himself appears except in one direction, where he sees the solitary figure of a woman sitting on a door-step. He walks that way. Approaching, he observes that she has journeyed a long distance and is footsore and travel- stained. She sits on the door-step in the manner of one who is waiting, with her elbow on her knee and her head upon her hand. Beside her is a canvas bag, or bundle, she has carried. She is dozing probably, for she gives no heed to his steps as he comes toward her.

The broken footway is so narrow that when Allan Woodcourt comes to where the woman sits, he has to turn into the road to pass her. Looking down at her face, his eye meets hers, and he stops.

'What is the matter?'

'Nothing, sir.'

'Can't you make them hear? Do you want to be let in?'

'I'm waiting till they get up at another house--a lodging-house-- not here,' the woman patiently returns. 'I'm waiting here because there will be sun here presently to warm me.'

'I am afraid you are tired. I am sorry to see you sitting in the street.'

'Thank you, sir. It don't matter.'

A habit in him of speaking to the poor and of avoiding patronage or condescension or childishness (which is the favourite device, many people deeming it quite a subtlety to talk to them like little spelling books) has put him on good terms with the woman easily.

'Let me look at your forehead,' he says, bending down. 'I am a doctor. Don't be afraid. I wouldn't hurt you for the world.'

He knows that by touching her with his skilful and accustomed hand he can soothe her yet more readily. She makes a slight objection,

saying, 'It's nothing'; but he has scarcely laid his fingers on the wounded place when she lifts it up to the light.

'Aye! A bad bruise, and the skin sadly broken. This must be very sore.'

'It do ache a little, sir,' returns the woman with a started tear upon her cheek.

'Let me try to make it more comfortable. My handkerchief won't hurt you.'

'Oh, dear no, sir, I'm sure of that!'

He cleanses the injured place and dries it, and having carefully examined it and gently pressed it with the palm of his hand, takes a small case from his pocket, dresses it, and binds it up. While he is thus employed, he says, after laughing at his establishing a surgery in the street, 'And so your husband is a brickmaker?'

'How do you know that, sir?' asks the woman, astonished.

'Why, I suppose so from the colour of the clay upon your bag and on your dress. And I know brickmakers go about working at piecework in different places. And I am sorry to say I have known them cruel to their wives too.'

The woman hastily lifts up her eyes as if she would deny that her injury is referable to such a cause. But feeling the hand upon her forehead, and seeing his busy and composed face, she quietly drops them again.

'Where is he now?' asks the surgeon.

'He got into trouble last night, sir; but he'll look for me at the lodging-house.'

'He will get into worse trouble if he often misuses his large and heavy hand as he has misused it here. But you forgive him, brutal as he is, and I say no more of him, except that I wish he deserved it. You have no young child?'

The woman shakes her head. 'One as I calls mine, sir, but it's Liz's.'

'Your own is dead. I see! Poor little thing!'

By this time he has finished and is putting up his case. 'I suppose you have some settled home. Is it far from here?' he asks, good-

humouredly making light of what he has done as she gets up and curtsys.

'It's a good two or three and twenty mile from here, sir. At Saint Albans. You know Saint Albans, sir? I thought you gave a start like, as if you did.'

'Yes, I know something of it. And now I will ask you a question in return. Have you money for your lodging?'

'Yes, sir,' she says, 'really and truly.' And she shows it. He tells her, in acknowledgment of her many subdued thanks, that she is very welcome, gives her good day, and walks away. Tom-all- Alone's is still asleep, and nothing is astir.

Yes, something is! As he retraces his way to the point from which he descried the woman at a distance sitting on the step, he sees a ragged figure coming very cautiously along, crouching close to the soiled walls--which the wretchedest figure might as well avoid--and furtively thrusting a hand before it. It is the figure of a youth whose face is hollow and whose eyes have an emaciated glare. He is so intent on getting along unseen that even the apparition of a stranger in whole garments does not tempt him to look back. He shades his face with his ragged elbow as he passes on the other side of the way, and goes shrinking and creeping on with his anxious hand before him and his shapeless clothes hanging in shreds. Clothes made for what purpose, or of what material, it would be impossible to say. They look, in colour and in substance, like a bundle of rank leaves of swampy growth that rotted long ago.

Allan Woodcourt pauses to look after him and note all this, with a shadowy belief that he has seen the boy before. He cannot recall how or where, but there is some association in his mind with such a form. He imagines that he must have seen it in some hospital or refuge, still, cannot make out why it comes with any special force on his remembrance.

He is gradually emerging from Tom-all-Alone's in the morning light, thinking about it, when he hears running feet behind him, and looking round, sees the boy scouring towards him at great speed, followed by the woman.

'Stop him, stop him!' cries the woman, almost breathless. 'Stop him, sir!'

He darts across the road into the boy's path, but the boy is quicker than he, makes a curve, ducks, dives under his hands, comes up half-a-dozen yards beyond him, and scours away again. Still the woman

follows, crying, ‘Stop him, sir, pray stop him!’ Allan, not knowing but that he has just robbed her of her money, follows in chase and runs so hard that he runs the boy down a dozen times, but each time he repeats the curve, the duck, the dive, and scours away again. To strike at him on any of these occasions would be to fell and disable him, but the pursuer cannot resolve to do that, and so the grimly ridiculous pursuit continues. At last the fugitive, hard-pressed, takes to a narrow passage and a court which has no thoroughfare. Here, against a hoarding of decaying timber, he is brought to bay and tumbles down, lying gasping at his pursuer, who stands and gasps at him until the woman comes up.

‘Oh, you, Jo!’ cries the woman. ‘What? I have found you at last!’

‘Jo,’ repeats Allan, looking at him with attention, ‘Jo! Stay. To be sure! I recollect this lad some time ago being brought before the coroner.’

‘Yes, I see you once afore at the inkwhich,’ whimpers Jo. ‘What of that? Can't you never let such an unfortnet as me alone? An't I unfortnet enough for you yet? How unfortnet do you want me fur to be? I've been a-chivied and a-chivied, fust by one on you and nixt by another on you, till I'm worritted to skins and bones. The inkwhich warn't MY fault. I done nothink. He wos wery good to me, he wos; he wos the only one I knowed to speak to, as ever come across my crossing. It ain't wery likely I should want him to be inkwhiched. I only wish I wos, myself. I don't know why I don't go and make a hole in the water, I'm sure I don't.’

He says it with such a pitiable air, and his grimy tears appear so real, and he lies in the corner up against the hoarding so like a growth of fungus or any unwholesome excrescence produced there in neglect and impurity, that Allan Woodcourt is softened towards him. He says to the woman, ‘Miserable creature, what has he done?’

To which she only replies, shaking her head at the prostrate figure more amazedly than angrily, ‘Oh, you Jo, you Jo. I have found you at last!’

‘What has he done?’ says Allan. ‘Has he robbed you?’

‘No, sir, no. Robbed me? He did nothing but what was kind-hearted by me, and that's the wonder of it.’

Allan looks from Jo to the woman, and from the woman to Jo, waiting for one of them to unravel the riddle.

‘But he was along with me, sir,’ says the woman. ‘Oh, you Jo! He was along with me, sir, down at Saint Albans, ill, and a young lady, Lord

bless her for a good friend to me, took pity on him when I durstn't, and took him home--'

Allan shrinks back from him with a sudden horror.

'Yes, sir, yes. Took him home, and made him comfortable, and like a thankless monster he ran away in the night and never has been seen or heard of since till I set eyes on him just now. And that young lady that was such a pretty dear caught his illness, lost her beautiful looks, and wouldn't hardly be known for the same young lady now if it wasn't for her angel temper, and her pretty shape, and her sweet voice. Do you know it? You ungrateful wretch, do you know that this is all along of you and of her goodness to you?' demands the woman, beginning to rage at him as she recalls it and breaking into passionate tears.

The boy, in rough sort stunned by what he hears, falls to smearing his dirty forehead with his dirty palm, and to staring at the ground, and to shaking from head to foot until the crazy hoarding against which he leans rattles.

Allan restrains the woman, merely by a quiet gesture, but effectually.

'Richard told me--' He falters. 'I mean, I have heard of this-- don't mind me for a moment, I will speak presently.'

He turns away and stands for a while looking out at the covered passage. When he comes back, he has recovered his composure, except that he contends against an avoidance of the boy, which is so very remarkable that it absorbs the woman's attention.

'You hear what she says. But get up, get up!'

Jo, shaking and chattering, slowly rises and stands, after the manner of his tribe in a difficulty, sideways against the hoarding, resting one of his high shoulders against it and covertly rubbing his right hand over his left and his left foot over his right.

'You hear what she says, and I know it's true. Have you been here ever since?'

'Wishermaydie if I seen Tom-all-Alone's till this blessed morning,' replies Jo hoarsely.

'Why have you come here now?'

Jo looks all round the confined court, looks at his questioner no higher than the knees, and finally answers, 'I don't know how to do

nothink, and I can't get nothink to do. I'm wery poor and ill, and I thought I'd come back here when there warn't nobody about, and lay down and hide somewheres as I knows on till arter dark, and then go and beg a trifle of Mr Snagsby. He wos allus willin fur to give me somethink he wos, though Mrs Snagsby she was allus a- chivying on me--like everybody everywheres.'

'Where have you come from?'

Jo looks all round the court again, looks at his questioner's knees again, and concludes by laying his profile against the hoarding in a sort of resignation.

'Did you hear me ask you where you have come from?'

'Tramp then,' says Jo.

'Now tell me,' proceeds Allan, making a strong effort to overcome his repugnance, going very near to him, and leaning over him with an expression of confidence, 'tell me how it came about that you left that house when the good young lady had been so unfortunate as to pity you and take you home.'

Jo suddenly comes out of his resignation and excitedly declares, addressing the woman, that he never known about the young lady, that he never heern about it, that he never went fur to hurt her, that he would sooner have hurt his own self, that he'd sooner have had his unfortnet ed chopped off than ever gone a-nigh her, and that she wos wery good to him, she wos. Conducting himself throughout as if in his poor fashion he really meant it, and winding up with some very miserable sobs.

Allan Woodcourt sees that this is not a sham. He constrains himself to touch him. 'Come, Jo. Tell me.'

'No. I dustn't,' says Jo, relapsing into the profile state. 'I dustn't, or I would.'

'But I must know,' returns the other, 'all the same. Come, Jo.'

After two or three such adjurations, Jo lifts up his head again, looks round the court again, and says in a low voice, 'Well, I'll tell you something. I was took away. There!'

'Took away? In the night?'

'Ah!' Very apprehensive of being overheard, Jo looks about him and even glances up some ten feet at the top of the hoarding and through

the cracks in it lest the object of his distrust should be looking over or hidden on the other side.

'Who took you away?'

'I dustn't name him,' says Jo. 'I dustn't do it, sir.'

'But I want, in the young lady's name, to know. You may trust me. No one else shall hear.'

'Ah, but I don't know,' replies Jo, shaking his head fearfully, 'as he DON'T hear.'

'Why, he is not in this place.'

'Oh, ain't he though?' says Jo. 'He's in all manner of places, all at wanst.'

Allan looks at him in perplexity, but discovers some real meaning and good faith at the bottom of this bewildering reply. He patiently awaits an explicit answer; and Jo, more baffled by his patience than by anything else, at last desperately whispers a name in his ear.

'Aye!' says Allan. 'Why, what had you been doing?'

'Nothink, sir. Never done nothink to get myself into no trouble, 'sept in not moving on and the inkwhich. But I'm a-moving on now. I'm a-moving on to the berryin ground--that's the move as I'm up to.'

'No, no, we will try to prevent that. But what did he do with you?'

'Put me in a horsepittle,' replied Jo, whispering, 'till I was discharged, then giv me a little money--four half-bulls, wot you may call half-crowns--and ses 'Hook it! Nobody wants you here,' he ses. 'You hook it. You go and tramp,' he ses. 'You move on,' he ses. 'Don't let me ever see you nowheres within forty mile of London, or you'll repent it.' So I shall, if ever he doos see me, and he'll see me if I'm above ground,' concludes Jo, nervously repeating all his former precautions and investigations.

Allan considers a little, then remarks, turning to the woman but keeping an encouraging eye on Jo, 'He is not so ungrateful as you supposed. He had a reason for going away, though it was an insufficient one.'

'Thankee, sir, thankee!' exclaims Jo. 'There now! See how hard you wos upon me. But ony you tell the young lady wot the genlmn ses, and it's all right. For YOU wos wery good to me too, and I knows it.'

‘Now, Jo,’ says Allan, keeping his eye upon him, ‘come with me and I will find you a better place than this to lie down and hide in. If I take one side of the way and you the other to avoid observation, you will not run away, I know very well, if you make me a promise.’

‘I won't, not unless I wos to see HIM a-coming, sir.’

‘Very well. I take your word. Half the town is getting up by this time, and the whole town will be broad awake in another hour. Come along. Good day again, my good woman.’

‘Good day again, sir, and I thank you kindly many times again.’

She has been sitting on her bag, deeply attentive, and now rises and takes it up. Jo, repeating, ‘Ony you tell the young lady as I never went fur to hurt her and wot the genlmn ses!’ nods and shambles and shivers, and smears and blinks, and half laughs and half cries, a farewell to her, and takes his creeping way along after Allan Woodcourt, close to the houses on the opposite side of the street. In this order, the two come up out of Tom-all-Alone's into the broad rays of the sunlight and the purer air.