

CHAPTER LVII - Esther's Narrative

I had gone to bed and fallen asleep when my guardian knocked at the door of my room and begged me to get up directly. On my hurrying to speak to him and learn what had happened, he told me, after a word or two of preparation, that there had been a discovery at Sir Leicester Dedlock's. That my mother had fled, that a person was now at our door who was empowered to convey to her the fullest assurances of affectionate protection and forgiveness if he could possibly find her, and that I was sought for to accompany him in the hope that my entreaties might prevail upon her if his failed. Something to this general purpose I made out, but I was thrown into such a tumult of alarm, and hurry and distress, that in spite of every effort I could make to subdue my agitation, I did not seem, to myself, fully to recover my right mind until hours had passed.

But I dressed and wrapped up expeditiously without waking Charley or any one and went down to Mr Bucket, who was the person entrusted with the secret. In taking me to him my guardian told me this, and also explained how it was that he had come to think of me. Mr Bucket, in a low voice, by the light of my guardian's candle, read to me in the hall a letter that my mother had left upon her table; and I suppose within ten minutes of my having been aroused I was sitting beside him, rolling swiftly through the streets.

His manner was very keen, and yet considerate when he explained to me that a great deal might depend on my being able to answer, without confusion, a few questions that he wished to ask me. These were, chiefly, whether I had had much communication with my mother (to whom he only referred as Lady Dedlock), when and where I had spoken with her last, and how she had become possessed of my handkerchief. When I had satisfied him on these points, he asked me particularly to consider--taking time to think--whether within my knowledge there was any one, no matter where, in whom she might be at all likely to confide under circumstances of the last necessity. I could think of no one but my guardian. But by and by I mentioned Mr Boythorn. He came into my mind as connected with his old chivalrous manner of mentioning my mother's name and with what my guardian had informed me of his engagement to her sister and his unconscious connexion with her unhappy story.

My companion had stopped the driver while we held this conversation, that we might the better hear each other. He now told him to go on again and said to me, after considering within himself for a few moments, that he had made up his mind how to proceed. He was quite willing to tell me what his plan was, but I did not feel clear enough to understand it.

We had not driven very far from our lodgings when we stopped in a by-street at a public-looking place lighted up with gas. Mr Bucket took me in and sat me in an arm-chair by a bright fire. It was now past one, as I saw by the clock against the wall. Two police officers, looking in their perfectly neat uniform not at all like people who were up all night, were quietly writing at a desk; and the place seemed very quiet altogether, except for some beating and calling out at distant doors underground, to which nobody paid any attention.

A third man in uniform, whom Mr Bucket called and to whom he whispered his instructions, went out; and then the two others advised together while one wrote from Mr Bucket's subdued dictation. It was a description of my mother that they were busy with, for Mr Bucket brought it to me when it was done and read it in a whisper. It was very accurate indeed.

The second officer, who had attended to it closely, then copied it out and called in another man in uniform (there were several in an outer room), who took it up and went away with it. All this was done with the greatest dispatch and without the waste of a moment; yet nobody was at all hurried. As soon as the paper was sent out upon its travels, the two officers resumed their former quiet work of writing with neatness and care. Mr Bucket thoughtfully came and warmed the soles of his boots, first one and then the other, at the fire.

'Are you well wrapped up, Miss Summerson?' he asked me as his eyes met mine. 'It's a desperate sharp night for a young lady to be out in.'

I told him I cared for no weather and was warmly clothed.

'It may be a long job,' he observed; 'but so that it ends well, never mind, miss.'

'I pray to heaven it may end well!' said I.

He nodded comfortably. 'You see, whatever you do, don't you go and fret yourself. You keep yourself cool and equal for anything that may happen, and it'll be the better for you, the better for me, the better for Lady Dedlock, and the better for Sir Leicester Dedlock, Baronet.'

He was really very kind and gentle, and as he stood before the fire warming his boots and rubbing his face with his forefinger, I felt a confidence in his sagacity which reassured me. It was not yet a quarter to two when I heard horses' feet and wheels outside. 'Now, Miss Summerson,' said he, 'we are off, if you please!'

He gave me his arm, and the two officers courteously bowed me out, and we found at the door a phaeton or barouche with a postilion and

post horses. Mr Bucket handed me in and took his own seat on the box. The man in uniform whom he had sent to fetch this equipage then handed him up a dark lantern at his request, and when he had given a few directions to the driver, we rattled away.

I was far from sure that I was not in a dream. We rattled with great rapidity through such a labyrinth of streets that I soon lost all idea where we were, except that we had crossed and re-crossed the river, and still seemed to be traversing a low-lying, waterside, dense neighbourhood of narrow thoroughfares chequered by docks and basins, high piles of warehouses, swing-bridges, and masts of ships. At length we stopped at the corner of a little slimy turning, which the wind from the river, rushing up it, did not purify; and I saw my companion, by the light of his lantern, in conference with several men who looked like a mixture of police and sailors. Against the mouldering wall by which they stood, there was a bill, on which I could discern the words, 'Found Drowned'; and this and an inscription about drags possessed me with the awful suspicion shadowed forth in our visit to that place.

I had no need to remind myself that I was not there by the indulgence of any feeling of mine to increase the difficulties of the search, or to lessen its hopes, or enhance its delays. I remained quiet, but what I suffered in that dreadful spot I never can forget. And still it was like the horror of a dream. A man yet dark and muddy, in long swollen sodden boots and a hat like them, was called out of a boat and whispered with Mr Bucket, who went away with him down some slippery steps--as if to look at something secret that he had to show. They came back, wiping their hands upon their coats, after turning over something wet; but thank God it was not what I feared!

After some further conference, Mr Bucket (whom everybody seemed to know and defer to) went in with the others at a door and left me in the carriage, while the driver walked up and down by his horses to warm himself. The tide was coming in, as I judged from the sound it made, and I could hear it break at the end of the alley with a little rush towards me. It never did so--and I thought it did so, hundreds of times, in what can have been at the most a quarter of an hour, and probably was less--but the thought shuddered through me that it would cast my mother at the horses' feet.

Mr Bucket came out again, exhorting the others to be vigilant, darkened his lantern, and once more took his seat. 'Don't you be alarmed, Miss Summerson, on account of our coming down here,' he said, turning to me. 'I only want to have everything in train and to know that it is in train by looking after it myself. Get on, my lad!'

We appeared to retrace the way we had come. Not that I had taken note of any particular objects in my perturbed state of mind, but judging from the general character of the streets. We called at another office or station for a minute and crossed the river again. During the whole of this time, and during the whole search, my companion, wrapped up on the box, never relaxed in his vigilance a single moment; but when we crossed the bridge he seemed, if possible, to be more on the alert than before. He stood up to look over the parapet, he alighted and went back after a shadowy female figure that flitted past us, and he gazed into the profound black pit of water with a face that made my heart die within me. The river had a fearful look, so overcast and secret, creeping away so fast between the low flat lines of shore--so heavy with indistinct and awful shapes, both of substance and shadow; so death-like and mysterious. I have seen it many times since then, by sunlight and by moonlight, but never free from the impressions of that journey. In my memory the lights upon the bridge are always burning dim, the cutting wind is eddying round the homeless woman whom we pass, the monotonous wheels are whirling on, and the light of the carriage-lamps reflected back looks palely in upon me--a face rising out of the dreaded water.

Clattering and clattering through the empty streets, we came at length from the pavement on to dark smooth roads and began to leave the houses behind us. After a while I recognized the familiar way to Saint Albans. At Barnet fresh horses were ready for us, and we changed and went on. It was very cold indeed, and the open country was white with snow, though none was falling then.

'An old acquaintance of yours, this road, Miss Summerson,' said Mr Bucket cheerfully.

'Yes,' I returned. 'Have you gathered any intelligence?'

'None that can be quite depended on as yet,' he answered, 'but it's early times as yet.'

He had gone into every late or early public-house where there was a light (they were not a few at that time, the road being then much frequented by drovers) and had got down to talk to the turnpike-keepers. I had heard him ordering drink, and chinking money, and making himself agreeable and merry everywhere; but whenever he took his seat upon the box again, his face resumed its watchful steady look, and he always said to the driver in the same business tone, 'Get on, my lad!'

With all these stoppages, it was between five and six o'clock and we were yet a few miles short of Saint Albans when he came out of one of these houses and handed me in a cup of tea.

'Drink it, Miss Summerson, it'll do you good. You're beginning to get more yourself now, ain't you?'

I thanked him and said I hoped so.

'You was what you may call stunned at first,' he returned; 'and Lord, no wonder! Don't speak loud, my dear. It's all right. She's on ahead.'

I don't know what joyful exclamation I made or was going to make, but he put up his finger and I stopped myself.

'Passed through here on foot this evening about eight or nine. I heard of her first at the archway toll, over at Highgate, but couldn't make quite sure. Traced her all along, on and off. Picked her up at one place, and dropped her at another; but she's before us now, safe. Take hold of this cup and saucer, ostler. Now, if you wasn't brought up to the butter trade, look out and see if you can catch half a crown in your t'other hand. One, two, three, and there you are! Now, my lad, try a gallop!'

We were soon in Saint Albans and alighted a little before day, when I was just beginning to arrange and comprehend the occurrences of the night and really to believe that they were not a dream. Leaving the carriage at the posting-house and ordering fresh horses to be ready, my companion gave me his arm, and we went towards home.

'As this is your regular abode, Miss Summerson, you see,' he observed, 'I should like to know whether you've been asked for by any stranger answering the description, or whether Mr Jarndyce has. I don't much expect it, but it might be.'

As we ascended the hill, he looked about him with a sharp eye--the day was now breaking--and reminded me that I had come down it one night, as I had reason for remembering, with my little servant and poor Jo, whom he called Toughey.

I wondered how he knew that.

'When you passed a man upon the road, just yonder, you know,' said Mr Bucket.

Yes, I remembered that too, very well.

'That was me,' said Mr Bucket.

Seeing my surprise, he went on, 'I drove down in a gig that afternoon to look after that boy. You might have heard my wheels when you came out to look after him yourself, for I was aware of you and your

little maid going up when I was walking the horse down. Making an inquiry or two about him in the town, I soon heard what company he was in and was coming among the brick-fields to look for him when I observed you bringing him home here.'

'Had he committed any crime?' I asked.

'None was charged against him,' said Mr Bucket, coolly lifting off his hat, 'but I suppose he wasn't over-particular. No. What I wanted him for was in connexion with keeping this very matter of Lady Dedlock quiet. He had been making his tongue more free than welcome as to a small accidental service he had been paid for by the deceased Mr Tulkinghorn; and it wouldn't do, at any sort of price, to have him playing those games. So having warned him out of London, I made an afternoon of it to warn him to keep out of it now he WAS away, and go farther from it, and maintain a bright look-out that I didn't catch him coming back again.'

'Poor creature!' said I.

'Poor enough,' assented Mr Bucket, 'and trouble enough, and well enough away from London, or anywhere else. I was regularly turned on my back when I found him taken up by your establishment, I do assure you.'

I asked him why. 'Why, my dear?' said Mr Bucket. 'Naturally there was no end to his tongue then. He might as well have been born with a yard and a half of it, and a remnant over.'

Although I remember this conversation now, my head was in confusion at the time, and my power of attention hardly did more than enable me to understand that he entered into these particulars to divert me. With the same kind intention, manifestly, he often spoke to me of indifferent things, while his face was busy with the one object that we had in view. He still pursued this subject as we turned in at the garden-gate.

'Ah!' said Mr Bucket. 'Here we are, and a nice retired place it is. Puts a man in mind of the country house in the Woodpecker- tapping, that was known by the smoke which so gracefully curled. They're early with the kitchen fire, and that denotes good servants. But what you've always got to be careful of with servants is who comes to see 'em; you never know what they're up to if you don't know that. And another thing, my dear. Whenever you find a young man behind the kitchen-door, you give that young man in charge on suspicion of being secreted in a dwelling-house with an unlawful purpose.'

We were now in front of the house; he looked attentively and closely at the gravel for footprints before he raised his eyes to the windows.

'Do you generally put that elderly young gentleman in the same room when he's on a visit here, Miss Summerson?' he inquired, glancing at Mr Skimpole's usual chamber.

'You know Mr Skimpole!' said I.

'What do you call him again?' returned Mr Bucket, bending down his ear. 'Skimpole, is it? I've often wondered what his name might be. Skimpole. Not John, I should say, nor yet Jacob?'

'Harold,' I told him.

'Harold. Yes. He's a queer bird is Harold,' said Mr Bucket, eyeing me with great expression.

'He is a singular character,' said I.

'No idea of money,' observed Mr Bucket. 'He takes it, though!'

I involuntarily returned for answer that I perceived Mr Bucket knew him.

'Why, now I'll tell you, Miss Summerson,' he replied. 'Your mind will be all the better for not running on one point too continually, and I'll tell you for a change. It was him as pointed out to me where Toughey was. I made up my mind that night to come to the door and ask for Toughey, if that was all; but willing to try a move or so first, if any such was on the board, I just pitched up a morsel of gravel at that window where I saw a shadow. As soon as Harold opens it and I have had a look at him, thinks I, you're the man for me. So I smoothed him down a bit about not wanting to disturb the family after they was gone to bed and about its being a thing to be regretted that charitable young ladies should harbour vagrants; and then, when I pretty well understood his ways, I said I should consider a fypunnote well bestowed if I could relieve the premises of Toughey without causing any noise or trouble. Then says he, lifting up his eyebrows in the gayest way, 'It's no use mentioning a fypunnote to me, my friend, because I'm a mere child in such matters and have no idea of money.' Of course I understood what his taking it so easy meant; and being now quite sure he was the man for me, I wrapped the note round a little stone and threw it up to him. Well! He laughs and beams, and looks as innocent as you like, and says, 'But I don't know the value of these things. What am I to DO with this?' 'Spend it, sir,' says I. 'But I shall be taken in,' he says, 'they won't give me the right change, I shall lose it, it's no use to me.' Lord, you never saw such a face as he

carried it with! Of course he told me where to find Toughy, and I found him.'

I regarded this as very treacherous on the part of Mr Skimpole towards my guardian and as passing the usual bounds of his childish innocence.

'Bounds, my dear?' returned Mr Bucket. 'Bounds? Now, Miss Summerson, I'll give you a piece of advice that your husband will find useful when you are happily married and have got a family about you. Whenever a person says to you that they are as innocent as can be in all concerning money, look well after your own money, for they are dead certain to collar it if they can. Whenever a person proclaims to you 'In worldly matters I'm a child,' you consider that that person is only a-crying off from being held accountable and that you have got that person's number, and it's Number One. Now, I am not a poetical man myself, except in a vocal way when it goes round a company, but I'm a practical one, and that's my experience. So's this rule. Fast and loose in one thing, fast and loose in everything. I never knew it fail. No more will you. Nor no one. With which caution to the unwary, my dear, I take the liberty of pulling this here bell, and so go back to our business.'

I believe it had not been for a moment out of his mind, any more than it had been out of my mind, or out of his face. The whole household were amazed to see me, without any notice, at that time in the morning, and so accompanied; and their surprise was not diminished by my inquiries. No one, however, had been there. It could not be doubted that this was the truth.

'Then, Miss Summerson,' said my companion, 'we can't be too soon at the cottage where those brickmakers are to be found. Most inquiries there I leave to you, if you'll be so good as to make 'em. The naturalest way is the best way, and the naturalest way is your own way.'

We set off again immediately. On arriving at the cottage, we found it shut up and apparently deserted, but one of the neighbours who knew me and who came out when I was trying to make some one hear informed me that the two women and their husbands now lived together in another house, made of loose rough bricks, which stood on the margin of the piece of ground where the kilns were and where the long rows of bricks were drying. We lost no time in repairing to this place, which was within a few hundred yards; and as the door stood ajar, I pushed it open.

There were only three of them sitting at breakfast, the child lying asleep on a bed in the corner. It was Jenny, the mother of the dead child, who was absent. The other woman rose on seeing me; and the

men, though they were, as usual, sulky and silent, each gave me a morose nod of recognition. A look passed between them when Mr Bucket followed me in, and I was surprised to see that the woman evidently knew him.

I had asked leave to enter of course. Liz (the only name by which I knew her) rose to give me her own chair, but I sat down on a stool near the fire, and Mr Bucket took a corner of the bedstead. Now that I had to speak and was among people with whom I was not familiar, I became conscious of being hurried and giddy. It was very difficult to begin, and I could not help bursting into tears.

'Liz,' said I, 'I have come a long way in the night and through the snow to inquire after a lady--'

'Who has been here, you know,' Mr Bucket struck in, addressing the whole group with a composed propitiatory face; 'that's the lady the young lady means. The lady that was here last night, you know.'

'And who told YOU as there was anybody here?' inquired Jenny's husband, who had made a surly stop in his eating to listen and now measured him with his eye.

'A person of the name of Michael Jackson, with a blue welveteen waistcoat with a double row of mother of pearl buttons,' Mr Bucket immediately answered.

'He had as good mind his own business, whoever he is,' growled the man.

'He's out of employment, I believe,' said Mr Bucket apologetically for Michael Jackson, 'and so gets talking.'

The woman had not resumed her chair, but stood faltering with her hand upon its broken back, looking at me. I thought she would have spoken to me privately if she had dared. She was still in this attitude of uncertainty when her husband, who was eating with a lump of bread and fat in one hand and his clasp-knife in the other, struck the handle of his knife violently on the table and told her with an oath to mind HER own business at any rate and sit down.

'I should like to have seen Jenny very much,' said I, 'for I am sure she would have told me all she could about this lady, whom I am very anxious indeed--you cannot think how anxious--to overtake. Will Jenny be here soon? Where is she?'

The woman had a great desire to answer, but the man, with another oath, openly kicked at her foot with his heavy boot. He left it to

Jenny's husband to say what he chose, and after a dogged silence the latter turned his shaggy head towards me.

'I'm not partial to gentlefolks coming into my place, as you've heerd me say afore now, I think, miss. I let their places be, and it's curious they can't let my place be. There'd be a pretty shine made if I was to go a-wisit in THEM, I think. Howsoever, I don't so much complain of you as of some others, and I'm agreeable to make you a civil answer, though I give notice that I'm not a-going to be drawed like a badger. Will Jenny be here soon? No she won't. Where is she? She's gone up to Lunnun.' 'Did she go last night?' I asked.

'Did she go last night? Ah! She went last night,' he answered with a sulky jerk of his head.

'But was she here when the lady came? And what did the lady say to her? And where is the lady gone? I beg and pray you to be so kind as to tell me,' said I, 'for I am in great distress to know.'

'If my master would let me speak, and not say a word of harm--' the woman timidly began.

'Your master,' said her husband, muttering an imprecation with slow emphasis, 'will break your neck if you meddle with wot don't concern you.'

After another silence, the husband of the absent woman, turning to me again, answered me with his usual grumbling unwillingness.

'Wos Jenny here when the lady come? Yes, she wos here when the lady come. Wot did the lady say to her? Well, I'll tell you wot the lady said to her. She said, 'You remember me as come one time to talk to you about the young lady as had been a-wisiting of you? You remember me as give you somethink handsome for a handkercher wot she had left?' Ah, she remembered. So we all did. Well, then, wos that young lady up at the house now? No, she warn't up at the house now. Well, then, lookee here. The lady was upon a journey all alone, strange as we might think it, and could she rest herself where you're a setten for a hour or so. Yes she could, and so she did. Then she went--it might be at twenty minutes past eleven, and it might be at twenty minutes past twelve; we ain't got no watches here to know the time by, nor yet clocks. Where did she go? I don't know where she go'd. She went one way, and Jenny went another; one went right to Lunnun, and t'other went right from it. That's all about it. Ask this man. He heerd it all, and see it all. He knows.'

The other man repeated, 'That's all about it.'

'Was the lady crying?' I inquired.

'Devil a bit,' returned the first man. 'Her shoes was the worse, and her clothes was the worse, but she warn't--not as I see.'

The woman sat with her arms crossed and her eyes upon the ground. Her husband had turned his seat a little so as to face her and kept his hammer-like hand upon the table as if it were in readiness to execute his threat if she disobeyed him.

'I hope you will not object to my asking your wife,' said I, 'how the lady looked.'

'Come, then!' he gruffly cried to her. 'You hear what she says. Cut it short and tell her.'

'Bad,' replied the woman. 'Pale and exhausted. Very bad.'

'Did she speak much?'

'Not much, but her voice was hoarse.'

She answered, looking all the while at her husband for leave.

'Was she faint?' said I. 'Did she eat or drink here?'

'Go on!' said the husband in answer to her look. 'Tell her and cut it short.'

'She had a little water, miss, and Jenny fetched her some bread and tea. But she hardly touched it.'

'And when she went from here,' I was proceeding, when Jenny's husband impatiently took me up.

'When she went from here, she went right away nor'ard by the high road. Ask on the road if you doubt me, and see if it warn't so. Now, there's the end. That's all about it.'

I glanced at my companion, and finding that he had already risen and was ready to depart, thanked them for what they had told me, and took my leave. The woman looked full at Mr Bucket as he went out, and he looked full at her.

'Now, Miss Summerson,' he said to me as we walked quickly away. 'They've got her ladyship's watch among 'em. That's a positive fact.'

'You saw it?' I exclaimed.

'Just as good as saw it,' he returned. 'Else why should he talk about his 'twenty minutes past' and about his having no watch to tell the time by? Twenty minutes! He don't usually cut his time so fine as that. If he comes to half-hours, it's as much as HE does. Now, you see, either her ladyship gave him that watch or he took it. I think she gave it him. Now, what should she give it him for? What should she give it him for?'

He repeated this question to himself several times as we hurried on, appearing to balance between a variety of answers that arose in his mind.

'If time could be spared,' said Mr Bucket, 'which is the only thing that can't be spared in this case, I might get it out of that woman; but it's too doubtful a chance to trust to under present circumstances. They are up to keeping a close eye upon her, and any fool knows that a poor creetur like her, beaten and kicked and scarred and bruised from head to foot, will stand by the husband that ill uses her through thick and thin. There's something kept back. It's a pity but what we had seen the other woman.'

I regretted it exceedingly, for she was very grateful, and I felt sure would have resisted no entreaty of mine.

'It's possible, Miss Summerson,' said Mr Bucket, pondering on it, 'that her ladyship sent her up to London with some word for you, and it's possible that her husband got the watch to let her go. It don't come out altogether so plain as to please me, but it's on the cards. Now, I don't take kindly to laying out the money of Sir Leicester Dedlock, Baronet, on these roughs, and I don't see my way to the usefulness of it at present. No! So far our road, Miss Summerson, is for'ard--straight ahead--and keeping everything quiet!'

We called at home once more that I might send a hasty note to my guardian, and then we hurried back to where we had left the carriage. The horses were brought out as soon as we were seen coming, and we were on the road again in a few minutes.

It had set in snowing at daybreak, and it now snowed hard. The air was so thick with the darkness of the day and the density of the fall that we could see but a very little way in any direction. Although it was extremely cold, the snow was but partially frozen, and it churned--with a sound as if it were a beach of small shells --under the hoofs of the horses into mire and water. They sometimes slipped and floundered for a mile together, and we were obliged to come to a standstill to rest them. One horse fell three times in this first stage, and trembled so and was so shaken that the driver had to dismount from his saddle and lead him at last.

I could eat nothing and could not sleep, and I grew so nervous under those delays and the slow pace at which we travelled that I had an unreasonable desire upon me to get out and walk. Yielding to my companion's better sense, however, I remained where I was. All this time, kept fresh by a certain enjoyment of the work in which he was engaged, he was up and down at every house we came to, addressing people whom he had never beheld before as old acquaintances, running in to warm himself at every fire he saw, talking and drinking and shaking hands at every bar and tap, friendly with every waggoner, wheelwright, blacksmith, and toll-taker, yet never seeming to lose time, and always mounting to the box again with his watchful, steady face and his business-like 'Get on, my lad!'

When we were changing horses the next time, he came from the stable-yard, with the wet snow encrusted upon him and dropping off him--plashing and crashing through it to his wet knees as he had been doing frequently since we left Saint Albans--and spoke to me at the carriage side.

'Keep up your spirits. It's certainly true that she came on here, Miss Summerson. There's not a doubt of the dress by this time, and the dress has been seen here.'

'Still on foot?' said I.

'Still on foot. I think the gentleman you mentioned must be the point she's aiming at, and yet I don't like his living down in her own part of the country neither.'

'I know so little,' said I. 'There may be some one else nearer here, of whom I never heard.'

'That's true. But whatever you do, don't you fall a-crying, my dear; and don't you worry yourself no more than you can help. Get on, my lad!'

The sleet fell all that day unceasingly, a thick mist came on early, and it never rose or lightened for a moment. Such roads I had never seen. I sometimes feared we had missed the way and got into the ploughed grounds or the marshes. If I ever thought of the time I had been out, it presented itself as an indefinite period of great duration, and I seemed, in a strange way, never to have been free from the anxiety under which I then laboured.

As we advanced, I began to feel misgivings that my companion lost confidence. He was the same as before with all the roadside people, but he looked graver when he sat by himself on the box. I saw his finger uneasily going across and across his mouth during the whole of

one long weary stage. I overheard that he began to ask the drivers of coaches and other vehicles coming towards us what passengers they had seen in other coaches and vehicles that were in advance. Their replies did not encourage him. He always gave me a reassuring beck of his finger and lift of his eyelid as he got upon the box again, but he seemed perplexed now when he said, 'Get on, my lad!'

At last, when we were changing, he told me that he had lost the track of the dress so long that he began to be surprised. It was nothing, he said, to lose such a track for one while, and to take it up for another while, and so on; but it had disappeared here in an unaccountable manner, and we had not come upon it since. This corroborated the apprehensions I had formed, when he began to look at direction-posts, and to leave the carriage at cross roads for a quarter of an hour at a time while he explored them. But I was not to be down-hearted, he told me, for it was as likely as not that the next stage might set us right again.

The next stage, however, ended as that one ended; we had no new clue. There was a spacious inn here, solitary, but a comfortable substantial building, and as we drove in under a large gateway before I knew it, where a landlady and her pretty daughters came to the carriage-door, entreating me to alight and refresh myself while the horses were making ready, I thought it would be uncharitable to refuse. They took me upstairs to a warm room and left me there.

It was at the corner of the house, I remember, looking two ways. On one side to a stable-yard open to a by-road, where the ostlers were unharnessing the splashed and tired horses from the muddy carriage, and beyond that to the by-road itself, across which the sign was heavily swinging; on the other side to a wood of dark pine-trees. Their branches were encumbered with snow, and it silently dropped off in wet heaps while I stood at the window. Night was setting in, and its bleakness was enhanced by the contrast of the pictured fire glowing and gleaming in the window-pane. As I looked among the stems of the trees and followed the discoloured marks in the snow where the thaw was sinking into it and undermining it, I thought of the motherly face brightly set off by daughters that had just now welcomed me and of MY mother lying down in such a wood to die.

I was frightened when I found them all about me, but I remembered that before I fainted I tried very hard not to do it; and that was some little comfort. They cushioned me up on a large sofa by the fire, and then the comely landlady told me that I must travel no further tonight, but must go to bed. But this put me into such a tremble lest they should detain me there that she soon recalled her words and compromised for a rest of half an hour.

A good endearing creature she was. She and her three fair girls, all so busy about me. I was to take hot soup and broiled fowl, while Mr Bucket dried himself and dined elsewhere; but I could not do it when a snug round table was presently spread by the fireside, though I was very unwilling to disappoint them. However, I could take some toast and some hot negus, and as I really enjoyed that refreshment, it made some recompense.

Punctual to the time, at the half-hour's end the carriage came rumbling under the gateway, and they took me down, warmed, refreshed, comforted by kindness, and safe (I assured them) not to faint any more. After I had got in and had taken a grateful leave of them all, the youngest daughter--a blooming girl of nineteen, who was to be the first married, they had told me--got upon the carriage step, reached in, and kissed me. I have never seen her, from that hour, but I think of her to this hour as my friend.

The transparent windows with the fire and light, looking so bright and warm from the cold darkness out of doors, were soon gone, and again we were crushing and churning the loose snow. We went on with toil enough, but the dismal roads were not much worse than they had been, and the stage was only nine miles. My companion smoking on the box--I had thought at the last inn of begging him to do so when I saw him standing at a great fire in a comfortable cloud of tobacco--was as vigilant as ever and as quickly down and up again when we came to any human abode or any human creature. He had lighted his little dark lantern, which seemed to be a favourite with him, for we had lamps to the carriage; and every now and then he turned it upon me to see that I was doing well. There was a folding-window to the carriage-head, but I never closed it, for it seemed like shutting out hope.

We came to the end of the stage, and still the lost trace was not recovered. I looked at him anxiously when we stopped to change, but I knew by his yet graver face as he stood watching the ostlers that he had heard nothing. Almost in an instant afterwards, as I leaned back in my seat, he looked in, with his lighted lantern in his hand, an excited and quite different man.

'What is it?' said I, starting. 'Is she here?'

'No, no. Don't deceive yourself, my dear. Nobody's here. But I've got it!'

The crystallized snow was in his eyelashes, in his hair, lying in ridges on his dress. He had to shake it from his face and get his breath before he spoke to me.

'Now, Miss Summerson,' said he, beating his finger on the apron, 'don't you be disappointed at what I'm a-going to do. You know me. I'm Inspector Bucket, and you can trust me. We've come a long way; never mind. Four horses out there for the next stage up! Quick!'

There was a commotion in the yard, and a man came running out of the stables to know if he meant up or down.

'Up, I tell you! Up! Ain't it English? Up!'

'Up?' said I, astonished. 'To London! Are we going back?'

'Miss Summerson,' he answered, 'back. Straight back as a die. You know me. Don't be afraid. I'll follow the other, by G--'

'The other?' I repeated. 'Who?'

'You called her Jenny, didn't you? I'll follow her. Bring those two pair out here for a crown a man. Wake up, some of you!'

'You will not desert this lady we are in search of; you will not abandon her on such a night and in such a state of mind as I know her to be in!' said I, in an agony, and grasping his hand.

'You are right, my dear, I won't. But I'll follow the other. Look alive here with them horses. Send a man for'ard in the saddle to the next stage, and let him send another for'ard again, and order four on, up, right through. My darling, don't you be afraid!'

These orders and the way in which he ran about the yard urging them caused a general excitement that was scarcely less bewildering to me than the sudden change. But in the height of the confusion, a mounted man galloped away to order the relays, and our horses were put to with great speed.

'My dear,' said Mr Bucket, jumping to his seat and looking in again, '--you'll excuse me if I'm too familiar--don't you fret and worry yourself no more than you can help. I say nothing else at present; but you know me, my dear; now, don't you?'

I endeavoured to say that I knew he was far more capable than I of deciding what we ought to do, but was he sure that this was right? Could I not go forward by myself in search of--I grasped his hand again in my distress and whispered it to him--of my own mother.

'My dear,' he answered, 'I know, I know, and would I put you wrong, do you think? Inspector Bucket. Now you know me, don't you?'

What could I say but yes!

‘Then you keep up as good a heart as you can, and you rely upon me for standing by you, no less than by Sir Leicester Dedlock, Baronet. Now, are you right there?’

‘All right, sir!’

‘Off she goes, then. And get on, my lads!’

We were again upon the melancholy road by which we had come, tearing up the miry sleet and thawing snow as if they were torn up by a waterwheel.