CHAPTER LXIII - Steel and Iron

George's Shooting Gallery is to let, and the stock is sold off, and George himself is at Chesney Wold attending on Sir Leicester in his rides and riding very near his bridle-rein because of the uncertain hand with which he guides his horse. But not to-day is George so occupied. He is journeying to-day into the iron country farther north to look about him.

As he comes into the iron country farther north, such fresh green woods as those of Chesney Wold are left behind; and coal pits and ashes, high chimneys and red bricks, blighted verdure, scorching fires, and a heavy never-lightening cloud of smoke become the features of the scenery. Among such objects rides the trooper, looking about him and always looking for something he has come to find.

At last, on the black canal bridge of a busy town, with a clang of iron in it, and more fires and more smoke than he has seen yet, the trooper, swart with the dust of the coal roads, checks his horse and asks a workman does he know the name of Rouncewell thereabouts.

'Why, master,' quoth the workman, 'do I know my own name?'

''Tis so well known here, is it, comrade?' asks the trooper.

'Rouncewell's? Ah! You're right.'

'And where might it be now?' asks the trooper with a glance before him.

'The bank, the factory, or the house?' the workman wants to know.

'Hum! Rouncewell's is so great apparently,' mutters the trooper, stroking his chin, 'that I have as good as half a mind to go back again. Why, I don't know which I want. Should I find Mr Rouncewell at the factory, do you think?'

''Tain't easy to say where you'd find him--at this time of the day you might find either him or his son there, if he's in town; but his contracts take him away.'

And which is the factory? Why, he sees those chimneys--the tallest ones! Yes, he sees THEM. Well! Let him keep his eye on those chimneys, going on as straight as ever he can, and presently he'll see 'em down a turning on the left, shut in by a great brick wall which forms one side of the street. That's Rouncewell's.

The trooper thanks his informant and rides slowly on, looking about him. He does not turn back, but puts up his horse (and is much disposed to groom him too) at a public-house where some of Rouncewell's hands are dining, as the ostler tells him. Some of Rouncewell's hands have just knocked off for dinner-time and seem to be invading the whole town. They are very sinewy and strong, are Rouncewell's hands--a little sooty too.

He comes to a gateway in the brick wall, looks in, and sees a great perplexity of iron lying about in every stage and in a vast variety of shapes--in bars, in wedges, in sheets; in tanks, in boilers, in axles, in wheels, in cogs, in cranks, in rails; twisted and wrenched into eccentric and perverse forms as separate parts of machinery; mountains of it broken up, and rusty in its age; distant furnaces of it glowing and bubbling in its youth; bright fireworks of it showering about under the blows of the steam-hammer; red-hot iron, white-hot iron, cold-black iron; an iron taste, an iron smell, and a Babel of iron sounds.

'This is a place to make a man's head ache too!' says the trooper, looking about him for a counting-house. 'Who comes here? This is very like me before I was set up. This ought to be my nephew, if likenesses run in families. Your servant, sir.'

'Yours, sir. Are you looking for any one?'

'Excuse me. Young Mr Rouncewell, I believe?'

'Yes.'

'I was looking for your father, sir. I wish to have a word with him.'

The young man, telling him he is fortunate in his choice of a time, for his father is there, leads the way to the office where he is to be found. 'Very like me before I was set up--devilish like me!' thinks the trooper as he follows. They come to a building in the yard with an office on an upper floor. At sight of the gentleman in the office, Mr George turns very red.

'What name shall I say to my father?' asks the young man.

George, full of the idea of iron, in desperation answers 'Steel,' and is so presented. He is left alone with the gentleman in the office, who sits at a table with account-books before him and some sheets of paper blotted with hosts of figures and drawings of cunning shapes. It is a bare office, with bare windows, looking on the iron view below. Tumbled together on the table are some pieces of iron, purposely broken to be tested at various periods of their service, in various

capacities. There is iron-dust on everything; and the smoke is seen through the windows rolling heavily out of the tall chimneys to mingle with the smoke from a vaporous Babylon of other chimneys.

'I am at your service, Mr Steel,' says the gentleman when his visitor has taken a rusty chair.

'Well, Mr Rouncewell,' George replies, leaning forward with his left arm on his knee and his hat in his hand, and very chary of meeting his brother's eye, 'I am not without my expectations that in the present visit I may prove to be more free than welcome. I have served as a dragoon in my day, and a comrade of mine that I was once rather partial to was, if I don't deceive myself, a brother of yours. I believe you had a brother who gave his family some trouble, and ran away, and never did any good but in keeping away?'

'Are you quite sure,' returns the ironmaster in an altered voice, 'that your name is Steel?'

The trooper falters and looks at him. His brother starts up, calls him by his name, and grasps him by both hands.

'You are too quick for me!' cries the trooper with the tears springing out of his eyes. 'How do you do, my dear old fellow? I never could have thought you would have been half so glad to see me as all this. How do you do, my dear old fellow, how do you do!'

They shake hands and embrace each other over and over again, the trooper still coupling his 'How do you do, my dear old fellow!' with his protestation that he never thought his brother would have been half so glad to see him as all this!

'So far from it,' he declares at the end of a full account of what has preceded his arrival there, 'I had very little idea of making myself known. I thought if you took by any means forgivingly to my name I might gradually get myself up to the point of writing a letter. But I should not have been surprised, brother, if you had considered it anything but welcome news to hear of me.'

'We will show you at home what kind of news we think it, George,' returns his brother. 'This is a great day at home, and you could not have arrived, you bronzed old soldier, on a better. I make an agreement with my son Watt to-day that on this day twelvemonth he shall marry as pretty and as good a girl as you have seen in all your travels. She goes to Germany to-morrow with one of your nieces for a little polishing up in her education. We make a feast of the event, and you will be made the hero of it.'

Mr George is so entirely overcome at first by this prospect that he resists the proposed honour with great earnestness. Being overborne, however, by his brother and his nephew--concerning whom he renews his protestations that he never could have thought they would have been half so glad to see him--he is taken home to an elegant house in all the arrangements of which there is to be observed a pleasant mixture of the originally simple habits of the father and mother with such as are suited to their altered station and the higher fortunes of their children. Here Mr George is much dismayed by the graces and accomplishments of his nieces that are and by the beauty of Rosa, his niece that is to be, and by the affectionate salutations of these young ladies, which he receives in a sort of dream. He is sorely taken aback, too, by the dutiful behaviour of his nephew and has a woeful consciousness upon him of being a scapegrace. However, there is great rejoicing and a very hearty company and infinite enjoyment, and Mr George comes bluff and martial through it all, and his pledge to be present at the marriage and give away the bride is received with universal favour. A whirling head has Mr George that night when he lies down in the state-bed of his brother's house to think of all these things and to see the images of his nieces (awful all the evening in their floating muslins) waltzing, after the German manner, over his counterpane.

The brothers are closeted next morning in the ironmaster's room, where the elder is proceeding, in his clear sensible way, to show how he thinks he may best dispose of George in his business, when George squeezes his hand and stops him.

'Brother, I thank you a million times for your more than brotherly welcome, and a million times more to that for your more than brotherly intentions. But my plans are made. Before I say a word as to them, I wish to consult you upon one family point. How,' says the trooper, folding his arms and looking with indomitable firmness at his brother, 'how is my mother to be got to scratch me?'

'I am not sure that I understand you, George,' replies the ironmaster.

'I say, brother, how is my mother to be got to scratch me? She must be got to do it somehow.'

'Scratch you out of her will, I think you mean?'

'Of course I do. In short,' says the trooper, folding his arms more resolutely yet, 'I mean--TO--scratch me!'

'My dear George,' returns his brother, 'is it so indispensable that you should undergo that process?'

‘Quite! Absolutely! I couldn't be guilty of the meanness of coming back without it. I should never be safe not to be off again. I have not sneaked home to rob your children, if not yourself, brother, of your rights. I, who forfeited mine long ago! If I am to remain and hold up my head, I must be scratched. Come. You are a man of celebrated penetration and intelligence, and you can tell me how it's to be brought about.’

‘I can tell you, George,’ replies the ironmaster deliberately, ‘how it is not to be brought about, which I hope may answer the purpose as well. Look at our mother, think of her, recall her emotion when she recovered you. Do you believe there is a consideration in the world that would induce her to take such a step against her favourite son? Do you believe there is any chance of her consent, to balance against the outrage it would be to her (loving dear old lady!) to propose it? If you do, you are wrong. No, George! You must make up your mind to remain UNscratched, I think.’ There is an amused smile on the ironmaster's face as he watches his brother, who is pondering, deeply disappointed. ‘I think you may manage almost as well as if the thing were done, though.’

‘How, brother?’

‘Being bent upon it, you can dispose by will of anything you have the misfortune to inherit in any way you like, you know.’

‘That's true!’ says the trooper, pondering again. Then he wistfully asks, with his hand on his brother's, ‘Would you mind mentioning that, brother, to your wife and family?’

‘Not at all.’

‘Thank you. You wouldn't object to say, perhaps, that although an undoubted vagabond, I am a vagabond of the harum-scarum order, and not of the mean sort?’

The ironmaster, repressing his amused smile, assents.

‘Thank you. Thank you. It's a weight off my mind,’ says the trooper with a heave of his chest as he unfolds his arms and puts a hand on each leg, ‘though I had set my heart on being scratched, too!’

The brothers are very like each other, sitting face to face; but a certain massive simplicity and absence of usage in the ways of the world is all on the trooper's side.

‘Well,’ he proceeds, throwing off his disappointment, ‘next and last, those plans of mine. You have been so brotherly as to propose to me

to fall in here and take my place among the products of your perseverance and sense. I thank you heartily. It's more than brotherly, as I said before, and I thank you heartily for it,' shaking him a long time by the hand. 'But the truth is, brother, I am a--I am a kind of a weed, and it's too late to plant me in a regular garden.'

'My dear George,' returns the elder, concentrating his strong steady brow upon him and smiling confidently, 'leave that to me, and let me try.'

George shakes his head. 'You could do it, I have not a doubt, if anybody could; but it's not to be done. Not to be done, sir! Whereas it so falls out, on the other hand, that I am able to be of some trifle of use to Sir Leicester Dedlock since his illness-- brought on by family sorrows--and that he would rather have that help from our mother's son than from anybody else.'

'Well, my dear George,' returns the other with a very slight shade upon his open face, 'if you prefer to serve in Sir Leicester Dedlock's household brigade--'

'There it is, brother,' cries the trooper, checking him, with his hand upon his knee again; 'there it is! You don't take kindly to that idea; I don't mind it. You are not used to being officered; I am. Everything about you is in perfect order and discipline; everything about me requires to be kept so. We are not accustomed to carry things with the same hand or to look at 'em from the same point. I don't say much about my garrison manners because I found myself pretty well at my ease last night, and they wouldn't be noticed here, I dare say, once and away. But I shall get on best at Chesney Wold, where there's more room for a weed than there is here; and the dear old lady will be made happy besides. Therefore I accept of Sir Leicester Dedlock's proposals. When I come over next year to give away the bride, or whenever I come, I shall have the sense to keep the household brigade in ambuscade and not to manoeuvre it on your ground. I thank you heartily again and am proud to think of the Rouncewells as they'll be founded by you.'

'You know yourself, George,' says the elder brother, returning the grip of his hand, 'and perhaps you know me better than I know myself. Take your way. So that we don't quite lose one another again, take your way.'

'No fear of that!' returns the trooper. 'Now, before I turn my horse's head homewards, brother, I will ask you--if you'll be so good--to look over a letter for me. I brought it with me to send from these parts, as Chesney Wold might be a painful name just now to the person it's written to. I am not much accustomed to correspondence myself, and

I am particular respecting this present letter because I want it to be both straightforward and delicate.'

Herewith he hands a letter, closely written in somewhat pale ink but in a neat round hand, to the ironmaster, who reads as follows:

Miss Esther Summerson,

A communication having been made to me by Inspector Bucket of a letter to myself being found among the papers of a certain person, I take the liberty to make known to you that it was but a few lines of instruction from abroad, when, where, and how to deliver an enclosed letter to a young and beautiful lady, then unmarried, in England. I duly observed the same.

I further take the liberty to make known to you that it was got from me as a proof of handwriting only and that otherwise I would not have given it up, as appearing to be the most harmless in my possession, without being previously shot through the heart.

I further take the liberty to mention that if I could have supposed a certain unfortunate gentleman to have been in existence, I never could and never would have rested until I had discovered his retreat and shared my last farthing with him, as my duty and my inclination would have equally been. But he was (officially) reported drowned, and assuredly went over the side of a transport- ship at night in an Irish harbour within a few hours of her arrival from the West Indies, as I have myself heard both from officers and men on board, and know to have been (officially) confirmed.

I further take the liberty to state that in my humble quality as one of the rank and file, I am, and shall ever continue to be, your thoroughly devoted and admiring servant and that I esteem the qualities you possess above all others far beyond the limits of the present dispatch.

I have the honour to be,

GEORGE

'A little formal,' observes the elder brother, refolding it with a puzzled face.

'But nothing that might not be sent to a pattern young lady?' asks the younger.

'Nothing at all.'

Therefore it is sealed and deposited for posting among the iron correspondence of the day. This done, Mr George takes a hearty farewell of the family party and prepares to saddle and mount. His brother, however, unwilling to part with him so soon, proposes to ride with him in a light open carriage to the place where he will bait for the night, and there remain with him until morning, a servant riding for so much of the journey on the thoroughbred old grey from Chesney Wold. The offer, being gladly accepted, is followed by a pleasant ride, a pleasant dinner, and a pleasant breakfast, all in brotherly communion. Then they once more shake hands long and heartily and part, the ironmaster turning his face to the smoke and fires, and the trooper to the green country. Early in the afternoon the subdued sound of his heavy military trot is heard on the turf in the avenue as he rides on with imaginary clank and jingle of accoutrements under the old elm-trees.