CHAPTER LXVI - Down in Lincolnshire

There is a hush upon Chesney Wold in these altered days, as there is upon a portion of the family history. The story goes that Sir Leicester paid some who could have spoken out to hold their peace; but it is a lame story, feebly whispering and creeping about, and any brighter spark of life it shows soon dies away. It is known for certain that the handsome Lady Dedlock lies in the mausoleum in the park, where the trees arch darkly overhead, and the owl is heard at night making the woods ring; but whence she was brought home to be laid among the echoes of that solitary place, or how she died, is all mystery. Some of her old friends, principally to be found among the peachy-cheeked charmers with the skeleton throats, did once occasionally say, as they toyed in a ghastly manner with large fans--like charmers reduced to flirting with grim death, after losing all their other beaux--did once occasionally say, when the world assembled together, that they wondered the ashes of the Dedlocks, entombed in the mausoleum, never rose against the profanation of her company. But the dead-and-gone Dedlocks take it very calmly and have never been known to object.

Up from among the fern in the hollow, and winding by the bridle- road among the trees, comes sometimes to this lonely spot the sound of horses' hoofs. Then may be seen Sir Leicester--invalided, bent, and almost blind, but of worthy presence yet--riding with a stalwart man beside him, constant to his bridle-rein. When they come to a certain spot before the mausoleum-door, Sir Leicester's accustomed horse stops of his own accord, and Sir Leicester, pulling off his hat, is still for a few moments before they ride away.

War rages yet with the audacious Boythorn, though at uncertain intervals, and now hotly, and now coolly, flickering like an unsteady fire. The truth is said to be that when Sir Leicester came down to Lincolnshire for good, Mr Boythorn showed a manifest desire to abandon his right of way and do whatever Sir Leicester would, which Sir Leicester, conceiving to be a condescension to his illness or misfortune, took in such high dudgeon, and was so magnificently aggrieved by, that Mr Boythorn found himself under the necessity of committing a flagrant trespass to restore his neighbour to himself. Similarly, Mr Boythorn continues to post tremendous placards on the disputed thoroughfare and (with his bird upon his head) to hold forth vehemently against Sir Leicester in the sanctuary of his own home; similarly, also, he defies him as of old in the little church by testifying a bland unconsciousness of his existence. But it is whispered that when he is most ferocious towards his old foe, he is really most considerate, and that Sir Leicester, in the dignity of being implacable, little supposes how much he is humoured. As little does he think how near together he and his antagonist have suffered in the fortunes of

two sisters, and his antagonist, who knows it now, is not the man to tell him. So the quarrel goes on to the satisfaction of both.

In one of the lodges of the park--that lodge within sight of the house where, once upon a time, when the waters were out down in Lincolnshire, my Lady used to see the keeper's child--the stalwart man, the trooper formerly, is housed. Some relics of his old calling hang upon the walls, and these it is the chosen recreation of a little lame man about the stable-yard to keep gleaming bright. A busy little man he always is, in the polishing at harness-house doors, of stirrup-irons, bits, curb-chains, harness bosses, anything in the way of a stable-yard that will take a polish, leading a life of friction. A shaggy little damaged man, withal, not unlike an old dog of some mongrel breed, who has been considerably knocked about. He answers to the name of Phil.

A goodly sight it is to see the grand old housekeeper (harder of hearing now) going to church on the arm of her son and to observe-- which few do, for the house is scant of company in these times--the relations of both towards Sir Leicester, and his towards them. They have visitors in the high summer weather, when a grey cloak and umbrella, unknown to Chesney Wold at other periods, are seen among the leaves; when two young ladies are occasionally found gambolling in sequestered saw-pits and such nooks of the park; and when the smoke of two pipes wreathes away into the fragrant evening air from the trooper's door. Then is a fife heard trolling within the lodge on the inspiring topic of the 'British Grenadiers'; and as the evening closes in, a gruff inflexible voice is heard to say, while two men pace together up and down, 'But I never own to it before the old girl. Discipline must be maintained.'

The greater part of the house is shut up, and it is a show-house no longer; yet Sir Leicester holds his shrunken state in the long drawing-room for all that, and reposes in his old place before my Lady's picture. Closed in by night with broad screens, and illumined only in that part, the light of the drawing-room seems gradually contracting and dwindling until it shall be no more. A little more, in truth, and it will be all extinguished for Sir Leicester; and the damp door in the mausoleum which shuts so tight, and looks so obdurate, will have opened and received him.

Volumnia, growing with the flight of time pinker as to the red in her face, and yellower as to the white, reads to Sir Leicester in the long evenings and is driven to various artifices to conceal her yawns, of which the chief and most efficacious is the insertion of the pearl necklace between her rosy lips. Long-winded treatises on the Buffy and Boodle question, showing how Buffy is immaculate and Boodle villainous, and how the country is lost by being all Boodle and no

Buffy, or saved by being all Buffy and no Boodle (it must be one of the two, and cannot be anything else), are the staple of her reading. Sir Leicester is not particular what it is and does not appear to follow it very closely, further than that he always comes broad awake the moment Volumnia ventures to leave off, and sonorously repeating her last words, begs with some displeasure to know if she finds herself fatigued. However, Volumnia, in the course of her bird-like hopping about and pecking at papers, has alighted on a memorandum concerning herself in the event of 'anything happening' to her kinsman, which is handsome compensation for an extensive course of reading and holds even the dragon Boredom at bay.

The cousins generally are rather shy of Chesney Wold in its dullness, but take to it a little in the shooting season, when guns are heard in the plantations, and a few scattered beaters and keepers wait at the old places of appointment for low-spirited twos and threes of cousins. The debilitated cousin, more debilitated by the dreariness of the place, gets into a fearful state of depression, groaning under penitential sofa-pillows in his gunless hours and protesting that such fernal old jail's--nough t'sew fler up--frever.

The only great occasions for Volumnia in this changed aspect of the place in Lincolnshire are those occasions, rare and widely separated, when something is to be done for the county or the country in the way of gracing a public ball. Then, indeed, does the tuckered sylph come out in fairy form and proceed with joy under cousinly escort to the exhausted old assembly-room, fourteen heavy miles off, which, during three hundred and sixty-four days and nights of every ordinary year, is a kind of antipodean lumber- room full of old chairs and tables upside down. Then, indeed, does she captivate all hearts by her condescension, by her girlish vivacity, and by her skipping about as in the days when the hideous old general with the mouth too full of teeth had not cut one of them at two guineas each. Then does she twirl and twine, a pastoral nymph of good family, through the mazes of the dance. Then do the swains appear with tea, with lemonade, with sandwiches, with homage. Then is she kind and cruel, stately and unassuming, various, beautifully wilful. Then is there a singular kind of parallel between her and the little glass chandeliers of another age embellishing that assembly-room, which, with their meagre stems, their spare little drops, their disappointing knobs where no drops are, their bare little stalks from which knobs and drops have both departed, and their little feeble prismatic twinkling, all seem Volumnias.

For the rest, Lincolnshire life to Volumnia is a vast blank of overgrown house looking out upon trees, sighing, wringing their hands, bowing their heads, and casting their tears upon the window- panes in monotonous depressions. A labyrinth of grandeur, less the property of

an old family of human beings and their ghostly likenesses than of an old family of echoings and thunderings which start out of their hundred graves at every sound and go resounding through the building. A waste of unused passages and staircases in which to drop a comb upon a bedroom floor at night is to send a stealthy footfall on an errand through the house. A place where few people care to go about alone, where a maid screams if an ash drops from the fire, takes to crying at all times and seasons, becomes the victim of a low disorder of the spirits, and gives warning and departs.

Thus Chesney Wold. With so much of itself abandoned to darkness and vacancy; with so little change under the summer shining or the wintry lowering; so sombre and motionless always--no flag flying now by day, no rows of lights sparkling by night; with no family to come and go, no visitors to be the souls of pale cold shapes of rooms, no stir of life about it--passion and pride, even to the stranger's eye, have died away from the place in Lincolnshire and yielded it to dull repose.