Chapter XLI

In vain should I attempt to describe the astonishment and disquiet of Herbert, when he and I and Provis sat down before the fire, and I recounted the whole of the secret. Enough, that I saw my own feelings reflected in Herbert's face, and, not least among them, my repugnance towards the man who had done so much for me.

What would alone have set a division between that man and us, if there had been no other dividing circumstance, was his triumph in my story. Saving his troublesome sense of having been 'low' on one occasion since his return - on which point he began to hold forth to Herbert, the moment my revelation was finished - he had no perception of the possibility of my finding any fault with my good fortune. His boast that he had made me a gentleman, and that he had come to see me support the character on his ample resources, was made for me quite as much as for himself; and that it was a highly agreeable boast to both of us, and that we must both be very proud of it, was a conclusion quite established in his own mind.

'Though, look'ee here, Pip's comrade,' he said to Herbert, after having discoursed for some time, 'I know very well that once since I come back - for half a minute - I've been low. I said to Pip, I knowed as I had been low. But don't you fret yourself on that score. I ain't made Pip a gentleman, and Pip ain't a-going to make you a gentleman, not fur me not to know what's due to ye both. Dear boy, and Pip's comrade, you two may count upon me always having a gen-teel muzzle on. Muzzled I have been since that half a minute when I was betrayed into lowness, muzzled I am at the present time, muzzled I ever will be.'

Herbert said, 'Certainly,' but looked as if there were no specific consolation in this, and remained perplexed and dismayed. We were anxious for the time when he would go to his lodging, and leave us together, but he was evidently jealous of leaving us together, and sat late. It was midnight before I took him round to Essex-street, and saw him safely in at his own dark door. When it closed upon him, I experienced the first moment of relief I had known since the night of his arrival.

Never quite free from an uneasy remembrance of the man on the stairs, I had always looked about me in taking my guest out after dark, and in bringing him back; and I looked about me now. Difficult as it is in a large city to avoid the suspicion of being watched, when the mind is conscious of danger in that regard, I could not persuade myself that any of the people within sight cared about my movements. The few who were passing, passed on their several ways, and the street was empty when I turned back into the Temple. Nobody had come out at the gate with us, nobody went in at the gate with me. As I

crossed by the fountain, I saw his lighted back windows looking bright and quiet, and, when I stood for a few moments in the doorway of the building where I lived, before going up the stairs, Garden-court was as still and lifeless as the staircase was when I ascended it.

Herbert received me with open arms, and I had never felt before, so blessedly, what it is to have a friend. When he had spoken some sound words of sympathy and encouragement, we sat down to consider the question, What was to be done?

The chair that Provis had occupied still remaining where it had stood - for he had a barrack way with him of hanging about one spot, in one unsettled manner, and going through one round of observances with his pipe and his negro-head and his jack-knife and his pack of cards, and what not, as if it were all put down for him on a slate - I say, his chair remaining where it had stood, Herbert unconsciously took it, but next moment started out of it, pushed it away, and took another. He had no occasion to say, after that, that he had conceived an aversion for my patron, neither had I occasion to confess my own. We interchanged that confidence without shaping a syllable.

'What,' said I to Herbert, when he was safe in another chair, 'what is to be done?'

'My poor dear Handel,' he replied, holding his head, 'I am too stunned to think.'

'So was I, Herbert, when the blow first fell. Still, something must be done. He is intent upon various new expenses - horses, and carriages, and lavish appearances of all kinds. He must be stopped somehow.'

'You mean that you can't accept - '

'How can I?' I interposed, as Herbert paused. 'Think of him! Look at him!'

An involuntary shudder passed over both of us.

'Yet I am afraid the dreadful truth is, Herbert, that he is attached to me, strongly attached to me. Was there ever such a fate!'

'My poor dear Handel,' Herbert repeated.

'Then,' said I, 'after all, stopping short here, never taking another penny from him, think what I owe him already! Then again: I am heavily in debt - very heavily for me, who have now no expectations - and I have been bred to no calling, and I am fit for nothing.'

‘Well, well, well!’ Herbert remonstrated. ‘Don't say fit for nothing.’

‘What am I fit for? I know only one thing that I am fit for, and that is, to go for a soldier. And I might have gone, my dear Herbert, but for the prospect of taking counsel with your friendship and affection.’

Of course I broke down there: and of course Herbert, beyond seizing a warm grip of my hand, pretended not to know it.

‘Anyhow, my dear Handel,’ said he presently, ‘soldiering won't do. If you were to renounce this patronage and these favours, I suppose you would do so with some faint hope of one day repaying what you have already had. Not very strong, that hope, if you went soldiering! Besides, it's absurd. You would be infinitely better in Clarriker's house, small as it is. I am working up towards a partnership, you know.’

Poor fellow! He little suspected with whose money.

‘But there is another question,’ said Herbert. ‘This is an ignorant determined man, who has long had one fixed idea. More than that, he seems to me (I may misjudge him) to be a man of a desperate and fierce character.’

‘I know he is,’ I returned. ‘Let me tell you what evidence I have seen of it.’ And I told him what I had not mentioned in my narrative; of that encounter with the other convict.

‘See, then,’ said Herbert; ‘think of this! He comes here at the peril of his life, for the realization of his fixed idea. In the moment of realization, after all his toil and waiting, you cut the ground from under his feet, destroy his idea, and make his gains worthless to him. Do you see nothing that he might do, under the disappointment?’

‘I have seen it, Herbert, and dreamed of it, ever since the fatal night of his arrival. Nothing has been in my thoughts so distinctly, as his putting himself in the way of being taken.’

‘Then you may rely upon it,’ said Herbert, ‘that there would be great danger of his doing it. That is his power over you as long as he remains in England, and that would be his reckless course if you forsook him.’

I was so struck by the horror of this idea, which had weighed upon me from the first, and the working out of which would make me regard myself, in some sort, as his murderer, that I could not rest in my chair but began pacing to and fro. I said to Herbert, meanwhile, that even if Provis were recognized and taken, in spite of himself, I should be

wretched as the cause, however innocently. Yes; even though I was so wretched in having him at large and near me, and even though I would far far rather have worked at the forge all the days of my life than I would ever have come to this!

But there was no staving off the question, What was to be done?

'The first and the main thing to be done,' said Herbert, 'is to get him out of England. You will have to go with him, and then he may be induced to go.'

'But get him where I will, could I prevent his coming back?'

'My good Handel, is it not obvious that with Newgate in the next street, there must be far greater hazard in your breaking your mind to him and making him reckless, here, than elsewhere. If a pretext to get him away could be made out of that other convict, or out of anything else in his life, now.'

'There, again!' said I, stopping before Herbert, with my open hands held out, as if they contained the desperation of the case. 'I know nothing of his life. It has almost made me mad to sit here of a night and see him before me, so bound up with my fortunes and misfortunes, and yet so unknown to me, except as the miserable wretch who terrified me two days in my childhood!'

Herbert got up, and linked his arm in mine, and we slowly walked to and fro together, studying the carpet.

'Handel,' said Herbert, stopping, 'you feel convinced that you can take no further benefits from him; do you?'

'Fully. Surely you would, too, if you were in my place?'

'And you feel convinced that you must break with him?'

'Herbert, can you ask me?'

'And you have, and are bound to have, that tenderness for the life he has risked on your account, that you must save him, if possible, from throwing it away. Then you must get him out of England before you stir a finger to extricate yourself. That done, extricate yourself, in Heaven's name, and we'll see it out together, dear old boy.'

It was a comfort to shake hands upon it, and walk up and down again, with only that done.

‘Now, Herbert,’ said I, ‘with reference to gaining some knowledge of his history. There is but one way that I know of. I must ask him point-blank.’

‘Yes. Ask him,’ said Herbert, ‘when we sit at breakfast in the morning.’ For, he had said, on taking leave of Herbert, that he would come to breakfast with us.

With this project formed, we went to bed. I had the wildest dreams concerning him, and woke unrefreshed; I woke, too, to recover the fear which I had lost in the night, of his being found out as a returned transport. Waking, I never lost that fear.

He came round at the appointed time, took out his jack-knife, and sat down to his meal. He was full of plans ‘for his gentleman's coming out strong, and like a gentleman,’ and urged me to begin speedily upon the pocket-book, which he had left in my possession. He considered the chambers and his own lodging as temporary residences, and advised me to look out at once for a ‘fashionable crib’ near Hyde Park, in which he could have ‘a shake-down’. When he had made an end of his breakfast, and was wiping his knife on his leg, I said to him, without a word of preface:

‘After you were gone last night, I told my friend of the struggle that the soldiers found you engaged in on the marshes, when we came up. You remember?’

‘Remember!’ said he. ‘I think so!’

‘We want to know something about that man - and about you. It is strange to know no more about either, and particularly you, than I was able to tell last night. Is not this as good a time as another for our knowing more?’

‘Well!’ he said, after consideration. ‘You're on your oath, you know, Pip's comrade?’

‘Assuredly,’ replied Herbert.

‘As to anything I say, you know,’ he insisted. ‘The oath applies to all.’

‘I understand it to do so.’

‘And look'ee here! Wotever I done, is worked out and paid for,’ he insisted again.

‘So be it.’

He took out his black pipe and was going to fill it with negrohead, when, looking at the tangle of tobacco in his hand, he seemed to think it might perplex the thread of his narrative. He put it back again, stuck his pipe in a button-hole of his coat, spread a hand on each knee, and, after turning an angry eye on the fire for a few silent moments, looked round at us and said what follows.