

XVII. THE EVENTS OF ONE DAY

1. MARCH THE THIRTEENTH. THREE TO SIX O'CLOCK A.M.

They entered Anglebury Station in the dead, still time of early morning, the clock over the booking-office pointing to twenty-five minutes to three. Manston lingered on the platform and saw the mail-bags brought out, noticing, as a pertinent pastime, the many shabby blotches of wax from innumerable seals that had been set upon their mouths. The guard took them into a fly, and was driven down the road to the post-office.

It was a raw, damp, uncomfortable morning, though, as yet, little rain was falling. Manston drank a mouthful from his flask and walked at once away from the station, pursuing his way through the gloom till he stood on the side of the town adjoining, at a distance from the last house in the street of about two hundred yards.

The station road was also the turnpike-road into the country, the first part of its course being across a heath. Having surveyed the highway up and down to make sure of its bearing, Manston methodically set himself to walk backwards and forwards a stone's throw in each direction.

Although the spring was temperate, the time of day, and the condition of suspense in which the steward found himself, caused a sensation of chilliness to pervade his frame in spite of the overcoat he wore. The drizzling rain increased, and drops from the trees at the wayside fell noisily upon the hard road beneath them, which reflected from its glassy

surface the faint halo of light hanging over the lamps of the adjacent town.

Here he walked and lingered for two hours, without seeing or hearing a living soul. Then he heard the market-house clock strike five, and soon afterwards, quick hard footsteps smote upon the pavement of the street leading towards him. They were those of the postman for the Tolchurch beat. He reached the bottom of the street, gave his bags a final hitch-up, stepped off the pavement, and struck out for the country with a brisk shuffle.

Manston then turned his back upon the town, and walked slowly on. In two minutes a flickering light shone upon his form, and the postman overtook him.

The new-comer was a short, stooping individual of above five-and-forty, laden on both sides with leather bags large and small, and carrying a little lantern strapped to his breast, which cast a tiny patch of light upon the road ahead.

'A tryen mornen for travellers!' the postman cried, in a cheerful voice, without turning his head or slackening his trot.

'It is, indeed,' said Manston, stepping out abreast of him. 'You have a long walk every day.'

'Yes--a long walk--for though the distance is only sixteen miles on the straight--that is, eight to the furthest place and eight back, what with the ins and outs to the gentlemen's houses, it makes two-and-twenty for my legs. Two-and-twenty miles a day, how many a year? I used to reckon it, but I never do now. I don't care to think o' my wear and tear, now it do begin to tell upon me.'

Thus the conversation was begun, and the postman proceeded to narrate the different strange events that marked his experience. Manston grew very friendly.

'Postman, I don't know what your custom is,' he said, after a while; 'but between you and me, I always carry a drop of something warm in my pocket when I am out on such a morning as this. Try it.' He handed the bottle of brandy.

'If you'll excuse me, please. I haven't took no stimmilents these five years.'

'Tis never too late to mend.'

'Against the regulations, I be afraid.'

'Who'll know it?'

'That's true--nobody will know it. Still, honesty's the best policy.'

'Ah--it is certainly. But, thank God, I've been able to get on without it yet. You'll surely drink with me?'

'Really, 'tis a'most too early for that sort o' thing--however, to oblige a friend, I don't object to the faintest shadder of a drop.' The postman drank, and Manston did the same to a very slight degree. Five minutes later, when they came to a gate, the flask was pulled out again.

'Well done!' said the postman, beginning to feel its effect; 'but guide my soul, I be afraid 'twill hardly do!'

'Not unless 'tis well followed, like any other line you take up,' said Manston. 'Besides, there's a way of liking a drop of liquor, and of being good--even religious--at the same time.'

'Ay, for some thimble-and-button in-an-out fellers; but I could never get into the knack o' it; not I.'

'Well, you needn't be troubled; it isn't necessary for the higher class of mind to be religious--they have so much common-sense that they can risk playing with fire.'

'That hits me exactly.'

'In fact, a man I know, who always had no other god but "Me;" and

devoutly loved his neighbour's wife, says now that believing is a mistake.'

'Well, to be sure! However, believing in God is a mistake made by very few people, after all.'

'A true remark.'

'Not one Christian in our parish would walk half a mile in a rain like this to know whether the Scripture had concluded him under sin or grace.'

'Nor in mine.'

'Ah, you may depend upon it they'll do away wi' Goddymity altogether afore long, although we've had him over us so many years.'

'There's no knowing.'

'And I suppose the Queen 'ill be done away wi' then. A pretty concern that'll be! Nobody's head to put on your letters; and then your honest man who do pay his penny will never be known from your scamp who don't. O, 'tis a nation!'

'Warm the cockles of your heart, however. Here's the bottle waiting.'

'I'll oblige you, my friend.'

The drinking was repeated. The postman grew livelier as he went on, and at length favoured the steward with a song, Manston himself joining in the chorus.

'He flung his mallet against the wall,
Said, "The Lord make churches and chapels to fall,
And there'll be work for tradesmen all!"

When Joan's ale was new,
My boys,
When Joan's ale was new.'

'You understand, friend,' the postman added, 'I was originally a mason by trade: no offence to you if you be a parson?'

'None at all,' said Manston.

The rain now came down heavily, but they pursued their path with alacrity, the produce of the several fields between which the lane wound its way being indicated by the peculiar character of the sound emitted by the falling drops. Sometimes a soaking hiss proclaimed that they were passing by a pasture, then a patter would show that the rain fell upon some large-leaved root crop, then a paddling splash announced the naked

arable, the low sound of the wind in their ears rising and falling with each pace they took.

Besides the small private bags of the county families, which were all locked, the postman bore the large general budget for the remaining inhabitants along his beat. At each village or hamlet they came to, the postman searched for the packet of letters destined for that place, and thrust it into an ordinary letter-hole cut in the door of the receiver's cottage--the village post-offices being mostly kept by old women who had not yet risen, though lights moving in other cottage windows showed that such people as carters, woodmen, and stablemen had long been stirring.

The postman had by this time become markedly unsteady, but he still continued to be too conscious of his duties to suffer the steward to search the bag. Manston was perplexed, and at lonely points in the road cast his eyes keenly upon the short bowed figure of the man trotting through the mud by his side, as if he were half inclined to run a very great risk indeed.

It frequently happened that the houses of farmers, clergymen, etc., lay a short distance up or down a lane or path branching from the direct track of the postman's journey. To save time and distance, at the point of junction of some of these paths with the main road, the gate-post was hollowed out to form a letter-box, in which the postman deposited his missives in the morning, looking in the box again in the evening to collect those placed there for the return post. Tolchurch Vicarage

and Farmstead, lying back from the village street, were served on this principle. This fact the steward now learnt by conversing with the postman, and the discovery relieved Manston greatly, making his intentions much clearer to himself than they had been in the earlier stages of his journey.

They had reached the outskirts of the village. Manston insisted upon the flask being emptied before they proceeded further. This was done, and they approached the church, the vicarage, and the farmhouse in which Owen and Cytherea were living.

The postman paused, fumbled in his bag, took out by the light of his lantern some half-dozen letters, and tried to sort them. He could not perform the task.

'We be crippled disciples a b'lieve,' he said, with a sigh and a stagger.

'Not drunk, but market-merry,' said Manston cheerfully.

'Well done! If I baint so weak that I can't see the clouds--much less letters. Guide my soul, if so be anybody should tell the Queen's postmaster-general of me! The whole story will have to go through Parliament House, and I shall be high-treasoned--as safe as houses--and be fined, and who'll pay for a poor martel! O, 'tis a world!'

'Trust in the Lord--he'll pay.'

'He pay a b'lieve! why should he when he didn't drink the drink? He pay a b'lieve! D'ye think the man's a fool?'

'Well, well, I had no intention of hurting your feelings--but how was I to know you were so sensitive?'

'True--you were not to know I was so sensitive. Here's a caddle wi' these letters! Guide my soul, what will Billy do!'

Manston offered his services.

'They are to be divided,' the man said.

'How?' said Manston.

'These, for the village, to be carried on into it: any for the vicarage or vicarage farm must be left in the box of the gate-post just here. There's none for the vicarage-house this mornen, but I saw when I started there was one for the clerk o' works at the new church. This is it, isn't it?'

He held up a large envelope, directed in Edward Springrove's handwriting:--

'MR. O. GRAYE,
CLERK OF WORKS,
TOLCHURCH,
NEAR ANGLEBURY.'

The letter-box was scooped in an oak gate-post about a foot square. There was no slit for inserting the letters, by reason of the opportunity such a lonely spot would have afforded mischievous peasant-boys of doing damage had such been the case; but at the side was a small iron door, kept close by an iron reversible strap locked across it. One side of this strap was painted black, the other white, and white or black outwards implied respectively that there were letters inside, or none.

The postman had taken the key from his pocket and was attempting to insert it in the keyhole of the box. He touched one side, the other, above, below, but never made a straight hit.

'Let me unlock it,' said Manston, taking the key from the postman. He opened the box and reached out with his other hand for Owen's letter.

'No, no. O no--no,' the postman said. 'As one of--Majesty's servants--care--Majesty's mails--duty--put letters--own hands.' He slowly and solemnly placed the letter in the small cavity.

'Now lock it,' he said, closing the door.

The steward placed the bar across, with the black side outwards, signifying 'empty,' and turned the key.

'You've put the wrong side outwards!' said the postman. "'Tisn't empty.'

'And dropped the key in the mud, so that I can't alter it,' said the steward, letting something fall.

'What an awkward thing!'

'It is an awkward thing.'

They both went searching in the mud, which their own trampling had reduced to the consistency of pap, the postman unstrapping his little lantern from his breast, and thrusting it about, close to the ground, the rain still drizzling down, and the dawn so tardy on account of the heavy clouds that daylight seemed delayed indefinitely. The rays of the lantern were rendered individually visible upon the thick mist, and seemed almost tangible as they passed off into it, after illuminating the faces and knees of the two stooping figures dripping with wet; the postman's cape and private bags, and the steward's valise, glistening as if they had been varnished.

'It fell on the grass,' said the postman.

'No; it fell in the mud,' said Manston. They searched again.

'I'm afraid we shan't find it by this light,' said the steward at length, washing his muddy fingers in the wet grass of the bank.

'I'm afraid we shan't,' said the other, standing up.

'I'll tell you what we had better do,' said Manston. 'I shall be back this way in an hour or so, and since it was all my fault, I'll look again, and shall be sure to find it in the daylight. And I'll hide the key here for you.' He pointed to a spot behind the post. 'It will be too late to turn the index then, as the people will have been here, so that the box had better stay as it is. The letter will only be delayed a day, and that will not be noticed; if it is, you can say you placed the iron the wrong way without knowing it, and all will be well.'

This was agreed to by the postman as the best thing to be done under the circumstances, and the pair went on. They had passed the village and come to a crossroad, when the steward, telling his companion that their paths now diverged, turned off to the left towards Carriford.

No sooner was the postman out of sight and hearing than Manston stalked back to the vicarage letter-box by keeping inside a fence, and thus avoiding the village; arrived here, he took the key from his pocket, where it had been concealed all the time, and abstracted Owen's letter. This done, he turned towards home, by the help of what he carried in

his valise adjusting himself to his ordinary appearance as he neared the quarter in which he was known.

An hour and half's sharp walking brought him to his own door in Knapwater Park.

2. EIGHT O'CLOCK A.M.

Seated in his private office he wetted the flap of the stolen letter, and waited patiently till the adhesive gum could be loosened. He took out Edward's note, the accounts, the rosebud, and the photographs, regarding them with the keenest interest and anxiety.

The note, the accounts, the rosebud, and his own photograph, he restored to their places again. The other photograph he took between his finger and thumb, and held it towards the bars of the grate. There he held it for half-a-minute or more, meditating.

'It is a great risk to run, even for such an end,' he muttered.

Suddenly, impregnated with a bright idea, he jumped up and left the office for the front parlour. Taking up an album of portraits, which lay on the table, he searched for three or four likenesses of the lady who had so lately displaced Cytherea, which were interspersed among the rest of the collection, and carefully regarded them. They were taken in different attitudes and styles, and he compared each singly with that he

held in his hand. One of them, the one most resembling that abstracted from the letter in general tone, size, and attitude, he selected from the rest, and returned with it to his office.

Pouring some water into a plate, he set the two portraits afloat upon it, and sitting down tried to read.

At the end of a quarter of an hour, after several ineffectual attempts, he found that each photograph would peel from the card on which it was mounted. This done, he threw into the fire the original likeness and the recent card, stuck upon the original card the recent likeness from the album, dried it before the fire, and placed it in the envelope with the other scraps.

The result he had obtained, then, was this: in the envelope were now two photographs, both having the same photographer's name on the back and consecutive numbers attached. At the bottom of the one which showed his own likeness, his own name was written down; on the other his wife's name was written; whilst the central feature, and whole matter to which this latter card and writing referred, the likeness of a lady mounted upon it, had been changed.

Mrs. Manston entered the room, and begged him to come to breakfast. He followed her and they sat down. During the meal he told her what he had done, with scrupulous regard to every detail, and showed her the result.

'It is indeed a great risk to run,' she said, sipping her tea.

'But it would be a greater not to do it.'

'Yes.'

The envelope was again fastened up as before, and Manston put it in his pocket and went out. Shortly afterwards he was seen, on horseback, riding in a direction towards Tolchurch. Keeping to the fields, as well as he could, for the greater part of the way, he dropped into the road by the vicarage letter-box, and looking carefully about, to ascertain that no person was near, he restored the letter to its nook, placed the key in its hiding-place, as he had promised the postman, and again rode homewards by a roundabout way.

3. AFTERNOON

The letter was brought to Owen Graye, the same afternoon, by one of the vicar's servants who had been to the box with a duplicate key, as usual, to leave letters for the evening post. The man found that the index had told falsely that morning for the first time within his recollection; but no particular attention was paid to the mistake, as it was considered. The contents of the envelope were scrutinized by Owen and flung aside as useless.

The next morning brought Springrove's second letter, the existence of

which was unknown to Manston. The sight of Edward's handwriting again raised the expectations of brother and sister, till Owen had opened the envelope and pulled out the twig and verse.

'Nothing that's of the slightest use, after all,' he said to her; 'we are as far as ever from the merest shadow of legal proof that would convict him of what I am morally certain he did, marry you, suspecting, if not knowing, her to be alive all the time.'

'What has Edward sent?' said Cytherea.

'An old amatory verse in Manston's writing. Fancy,' he said bitterly, 'this is the strain he addressed her in when they were courting--as he did you, I suppose.'

He handed her the verse and she read--

'EUNICE.

'Whoso for hours or lengthy days
Shall catch her aspect's changeful rays,
Then turn away, can none recall
Beyond a galaxy of all
In hazy portraiture;
Lit by the light of azure eyes

Like summer days by summer skies:

Her sweet transitions seem to be

A kind of pictured melody,

And not a set contour.

'AE. M.'

A strange expression had overspread Cytherea's countenance. It rapidly increased to the most death-like anguish. She flung down the paper, seized Owen's hand tremblingly, and covered her face.

'Cytherea! What is it, for Heaven's sake?'

'Owen--suppose--O, you don't know what I think.'

'What?'

"The light of azure eyes," she repeated with ashy lips.

'Well, "the light of azure eyes"?' he said, astounded at her manner.

'Mrs. Morris said in her letter to me that her eyes are black!'

'H'm. Mrs. Morris must have made a mistake--nothing likelier.'

'She didn't.'

'They might be either in this photograph,' said Owen, looking at the card bearing Mrs. Manston's name.

'Blue eyes would scarcely photograph so deep in tone as that,' said Cytherea. 'No, they seem black here, certainly.'

'Well, then, Manston must have blundered in writing his verses.'

'But could he? Say a man in love may forget his own name, but not that he forgets the colour of his mistress's eyes. Besides she would have seen the mistake when she read them, and have had it corrected.'

'That's true, she would,' mused Owen. 'Then, Cytherea, it comes to this--you must have been misinformed by Mrs. Morris, since there is no other alternative.'

'I suppose I must.'

Her looks belied her words.

'What makes you so strange--ill?' said Owen again.

'I can't believe Mrs. Morris wrong.'

'But look at this, Cytherea. If it is clear to us that the woman had

blue eyes two years ago, she must have blue eyes now, whatever Mrs. Morris or anybody else may fancy. Any one would think that Manston could change the colour of a woman's eyes to hear you.'

'Yes,' she said, and paused.

'You say yes, as if he could,' said Owen impatiently.

'By changing the woman herself,' she exclaimed. 'Owen, don't you see the horrid--what I dread?--that the woman he lives with is not Mrs. Manston--that she was burnt after all--and that I am his wife!'

She tried to support a stoicism under the weight of this new trouble, but no! The unexpected revulsion of ideas was so overwhelming that she crept to him and leant against his breast.

Before reflecting any further upon the subject Graye led her upstairs and got her to lie down. Then he went to the window and stared out of it up the lane, vainly endeavouring to come to some conclusion upon the fantastic enigma that confronted him. Cytherea's new view seemed incredible, yet it had such a hold upon her that it would be necessary to clear it away by positive proof before contemplation of her fear should have preyed too deeply upon her.

'Cytherea,' he said, 'this will not do. You must stay here alone all the afternoon whilst I go to Carriford. I shall know all when I return.'

'No, no, don't go!' she implored.

'Soon, then, not directly.' He saw her subtle reasoning--that it was folly to be wise.

Reflection still convinced him that good would come of persevering in his intention and dispelling his sister's idle fears. Anything was better than this absurd doubt in her mind. But he resolved to wait till Sunday, the first day on which he might reckon upon seeing Mrs. Manston without suspicion. In the meantime he wrote to Edward Springrove, requesting him to go again to Mrs. Manston's former lodgings.