

BARNABY RUDGE

By CHARLES DICKENS

"It's unchristian," cried Mrs. Varden, shaking her head.

"Unchristian!" said the locksmith. "Why, what the devil?"

"I was going to say, what on earth do you call it unchristian?"

The picture Gabriel had drawn, indeed, threatened serious consequences and would indubitably have led to them, but luckily at that moment a light footstep crossed the threshold, and Dolly, running in, threw her arms round her old father's neck and hugged him tight.

"Here she is at last!" cried Gabriel. "And how well you look, Doll, and how late you are, my darling!"

How well she looked! Well? Why, if he had exhausted every laudatory adjective in the dictionary, it would not have been praise enough.

And yet here was this same Dolly Varden, so whimsical and hard to please that she was Dolly Varden still, all smiles and dimples, and pleasant looks, and caring no more for the fifty or sixty young fellows who at that very moment were breaking their hearts to marry her, than if so many oysters had been crossed in love and opened afterwards.

Dolly hugged her father as has been already stated, and having hugged both into the little parlor where the cloth was already laid for dinner, and where Miss Miggs—a trifle more rigid and bony than of yore—received her with a sort of hysterical gasp, intended for a smile.

"And how glad we always are, Doll," said her father, putting back the dark hair from her sparkling eyes, "to have you at home. Give me a kiss."

If there had been anybody of the male kind there to see her do it—but there was not—it was a mercy.

"I don't like your being at the Warren," said the locksmith. "I can't bear to have you out of my sight. And what is the news over yonder, Doll?"

"What news there is, I think you know already," replied his daughter.

"I am sure you do, though." "Ay!" cried the locksmith. "What is that?"

"Come, come," said Dolly, "you know very well. I want you to tell me why Mr. Haredale—oh, how grieved he is again! To be sure!—has been away from home for some days past, and why he is travelling about (we know he is travelling, because of his letters) without telling his own niece why or wherefore."

"Miss Emma doesn't want to know, I'll swear," returned the locksmith. "I don't know that," said Dolly; "but I do at any rate. Do tell me. Why is he so secret, and what is this ghost story which nobody is to tell Miss Emma, and which seems to be talked up with his going away? Now I see you know by your coloring so."

"What the story means, or is, or has to do with it, I know no more than you, my dear," returned the locksmith, "except that it's some foolish fear of little Solomon's—which has, indeed, no meaning in it, I suppose. As to Mr. Haredale's journey he goes, as I believe—"

"Yes," said Dolly. "As I believe," resumed the locksmith, pinching her cheek, "on business, Doll. What it may be, is quite another matter. Red Blue Beard, and don't be too curious, pet; it's no business of yours or mine, depend upon that; and here's dinner, which is much more to the purpose."

Dolly might have remonstrated against this summary dismissal of the subject, notwithstanding the appearance of dinner, but at the mention of Blue Beard Mrs. Varden interposed, protesting she could not find it in her conscience to sit tamely by, and hear her child recommended to peruse the adventures of a Turk and Mussulman—far less of a fabulous Turk, which she considered that potent to be. She held that, in such stirring and tremendous times as those in which they lived, it would be much more to the purpose if Dolly became a regular subscriber to the Thunderer, where she would have an opportunity of reading Lord Gordon's speeches word for word, which would be a greater comfort and solace to her, than a hundred and fifty Blue Beards ever could impart.

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Table with columns: DAY OF MONTH, DAY OF WEEK, COLOR OF VESTMENTS, and Rosary text for October 1905. Includes sections for Sixteenth, Seventeenth, Eighteenth, Nineteenth, and Twentieth Sunday After Pentecost.

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replied the locksmith, "or it would not be yours at all. Have you just come back to town, sir?"

"But half an hour ago." "Bringing no news of Barnaby, or his mother?" said the locksmith, dubiously. "Ah! you needn't shake your head, sir. It was a wild-goose chase. I feared that, from the first. You exhausted all reasonable means of discovery when they went away. To begin after so long a time has passed is hopeless, sir—quite hopeless."

"Why, where are they?" he returned impatiently. "Where can they be? Above ground?"

"Good knows," rejoined the locksmith, "many that I knew above it five years ago, have their beds under the grass now. And the world is a wide place. It's a hopeless attempt, sir, believe me. We must leave the discovery of this mystery, like all others, to time, and accident, and Heaven's pleasure."

"Varden, my good fellow," said Mr. Haredale, "I have a deeper meaning in my present anxiety to find them out, than you can fathom. It is not a mere whim; it is not the casual revival of my old wishes and desires; but an earnest, solemn purpose. My thoughts and dreams all tend to it and fix it in my mind. I have no rest by day or night, I have no peace or quiet, I am haunted."

His voice was so altered from its usual tones, and his manner bespoke so much emotion, that Gabriel, in his wonder, could only sit and look towards him in the darkness, and fancy the expression of his face.

"Do not ask me," continued Mr. Haredale, "to explain myself. If I were to do so, you would think me the victim of some hideous fancy. It is enough that this is so, and that I cannot—no, I cannot—lie quietly in my bed, without doing what will seem to you incomprehensible."

"Since when, sir," said the locksmith after a pause, "has this uneasy feeling been upon you?"

Mr. Haredale hesitated for some moments, and then replied: "Since the night of the storm. In short, since the last nineteenth of March."

As though he feared that Varden might express surprise, or reason with him, he hastily went on: "You will think, I know, I labor under some delusion. Perhaps I do. But it is not a morbid one; it is a wholesome action of the mind, reasoning on actual occurrences. You know the furniture remains in Mrs. Rudge's house, and that it has been shut up, by my orders, since she went away, save once a week or so, when an old neighbor visits it to scare away the rats. I am on my way there now."

"Will you walk through the house?" said Mr. Haredale, with a glance towards the window, the crazy shutters of which were closed and fastened. "Speak low."

"For what purpose?" asked the locksmith.

"To pass the night there," he replied; "and not to-night alone, but many nights. This is a secret which I trust to you in case of any unexpected emergency. You will not come, unless in case of strong necessity, to me, from dusk to broad day, I shall be there. Emma, your daughter, and the rest, suppose me out of London, as I have been until within this hour. Do not deceive them. I know I may confide it to you, and rely upon your questioning me no more at this time."

With that, as if to change the theme, he led the astounded locksmith back to the night of the Maypole highwayman, to the robbery of Edward Chester, to the reappearance of the man at Mrs. Rudge's house, and all the strange circumstances which afterwards occurred. He even asked him carelessly about the man's height, his face, his figure, whether he was like any one he had ever seen—like Hugh, for instance, or any man he had known at any time—and put many questions of that sort, which the locksmith, considering them as mere devices to engage his attention, and prevent his expressing the astonishment he felt, answered pretty much at random.

At length they arrived at the corner of the street in which the house stood where Mr. Haredale, alighting, dismissed the coach. "If you desire to see me safely lodged," he said, turning to the locksmith with a gloomy smile, "you can."

Gabriel, to whom all former marvels had been nothing in comparison with this, followed him along the narrow pavement in silence. When they reached the door, Mr. Haredale softly opened it with a key he had about him, and closing it when Varden entered, they were left in thorough darkness.

They groped their way into the ground-floor room. Here Mr. Haredale struck a light, and kindled a pocket taper he had brought with him for the purpose. It was then, when the flame was full upon him, that the locksmith saw for the first time how haggard, pale, and changed he looked; how worn and thin he was; how perfectly his whole appearance coincided with all that he had said so strangely as they rode along. It was not an unnatural impulse in Gabriel, after what he had heard, to note curiously the expression of his eyes. It was perfectly collected and rational;—so much so, indeed, that he felt ashamed of his momentary suspicion, and drooped his own when Mr. Haredale looked towards him, as if he feared they would betray his thoughts.

"Will you walk through the house?" said Mr. Haredale, with a glance towards the window, the crazy shutters of which were closed and fastened. "Speak low."

There was a kind of awe about the place, which would have rendered it difficult to speak in any other manner. Gabriel whispered "Yes," and followed him upstairs.

Everything was just as they had seen it last. There was a sense of closeness from the exclusion of fresh air, and a gloom and heaviness around as though long imprisonment had made the very silence sad. The homely hangings of the beds and windows had begun to droop, the dust lay thick upon their dwindling folds, and damps had made their way through ceiling, wall and floor. The boards creaked beneath their tread, as if resenting the unaccustomed intrusion; nimble spiders, paralyzed by the taper's glare, checked the motion of their hundred legs upon the wall, or dropped like lifeless things upon the ground; the death-watch ticked, and the scurrying feet of rats and mice rattled behind the wainscot.

(To be Continued.)

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