

CHAPTER II.

ADJOINING Mr. Block's wharf stood the, well-known, old-established, river side tavern, The Traveller's Joy, kept by one Mrs. Barford, a widow woman, much respected in the neighbourhood. It was a well-conducted, house; its tap-room much frequented by Thames watermen, sailors, and colliers, and its parlour the resort of such sensible, sociable tradesmen of the district as liked a genial glass, a friendly talk, and a peaceful pipe before they went to bed. The Traveller's Joy bore a good name. Its liquors were excellent, and its patrons were, for the most part, peaceful, orderly people. It was oftentimes said thereabouts that Mrs. Barford managed her hostelry as well as any man could—better, if anything. There had hardly ever been anything like disturbance or discomfort known in the house.

Some days had passed since Mr. Block's departure for Margate. It was an autumn night, cold for the time of year. A thick, unwholesome mist hung about the river and its banks. Mrs. Barford was very busy in her bar, for her customers made frequent demands upon her for warm and cordial glasses which counteract the unpleasantness of the weather. In the tap-room it was unanimously agreed that it was "an uncommon nasty night, to be sure." The parlour was of opinion "that we should have Christmas upon us now before we knew where we were." Mrs. Barford, a stately woman with a glowing face, tall as a grenadier, and almost as muscular, was equal to the occasion. In truth, she was equal to most occasions. She stirred the bar fire till the kettle sang again, she replenished glasses, she squeezed lemons; her punch had seldom been so hot or so strong, or so thoroughly admirable altogether, as on that disagreeable and unseasonable autumn night.

A man entered hurriedly, and stood for a moment irresolute in the passage of the Traveller's Joy.

"Why, mercy on me, Mr. Starkie, how white you look!" exclaimed Mrs. Barford. "He's white at most times you know," she said afterwards to Betsy, her assistant handmaid in the bar, "but I never saw him look so white as he looked then."

The new-comer was tall and well-proportioned. He was said generally to be "a fine figure of a man." His features were very regular, handsome, and clean cut, and from his complexion being so colourless there was a look as of an ivory carving about his head. As he lifted his broad-brimmed hat (the hat was then in a transitional state; having abandoned its old three-cornered form, it was on its way to the chimney-pot pattern of our own times, but its crown was as yet low and undeveloped), his hair was seen to be carefully combed and crested on his forehead, after the fashion then prevalent. His dress was of a sober kind, yet it was worn with a certain air of pretence. His coat was of snuff-coloured cloth, double-breasted, high in the collar, and adorned with close rows of bright pewter buttons. His waistcoat was of a broad striped taffeta. His ribbed cotton stockings were spotless and white as his cambric neckcloth. His shoes were brilliantly polished. It seemed as though he were proud, as he had some reason to be, of his shapely legs and small feet. A broad green silk watch ribbon, with a cluster of seals and keys attached, depended from his fob. Altogether he looked somewhat superior to his real position, which was simply that of junior partner in the firm of Block & Co., Ship-breakers.

"Did you not hear the report of firearms?" he inquired anxiously of the landlady of the Traveller's Joy. His voice trembled somewhat as he spoke.

"When? Just now? Two minutes ago? Well, I did hear something. But I was so busy, I'd hardly time to give it a thought. Yes, I remember now, I heard a gun go off. I thought it must have been fired from some police-boat on the river, in chase of smugglers. But then the parlour-bell rang—"

"It was fired at me," said Mr. Starkie, gravely.

"You never mean it, Mr. Starkie! that you don't."

"It was fired at me as I sat alone in Mr. Block's parlour facing the river. The bullet passed close over my head and lodged in the wall behind me. It was well aimed. An inch or two lower, and I had been a dead man."

Whom did he suspect? He did not know whom to suspect. He could not think that the shot had been intended for him. He had no enemies that he knew of. He was inclined to think that the shot must have been intended for Mr. Block.

"But why for Mr. Block?" asked the landlady. "Surely Mr. Block had no enemies either. No one could dream of attempting the life of good old Mr. Block."

That was so, certainly—Mr. Starkie confessed himself wholly at a loss to understand the matter. But Mr. Block was in the habit, it was well known, of sitting at night in the parlour facing the river. If any one had fancied himself aggrieved by the firm—it could but be fancy, yet who could account for fancy?—he would surely seek to avenge himself upon the senior member of the firm rather than the junior—who had until quite recently been Mr. Block's clerk and servant. It was by the merest chance that he, Mr. Starkie, had been in the parlour at all. He had been taking care of the house and managing the business in the absence of Mr. Block at Margate. He was quite alone in the house at the time.

"Quite alone?" repeated Mrs. Barford. "Where then was the lad Davy Jones?"

"Was he not at the Traveller's Joy?" Mr. Starkie asked in some surprise. He had sent the boy out some twenty minutes before, to get two dozen oysters and some ale, for his (Mr. Starkie's) supper. He admitted that he had some words with the boy—who was a very idle and ill-behaved boy. Mr. Starkie had frequently had occasion to reprimand him for his carelessness and inattention and neglect of duty; and Mr. Block was constantly complaining of him.

"A young limb, if ever there was one, it well known," Mrs. Barford commented.

Yet still Mr. Starkie couldn't believe that the boy had any hand in the attempt upon his life. It was curious, however, Mr. Starkie was compelled to admit. The boy had been a long time gone upon a very simple errand. He could have done all that he was required to do in less than five minutes. Mr. Starkie had fully expected to find Davy Jones at Mrs. Barford's house.

A little group had by this time assembled in the passage of the Traveller's Joy. There had been a suspension in the supply of drinks, and the thirsty had emerged from both the parlour and the tap-room, to make personal inquiry why their necessities were not heeded. But they forgot the object with which they had approached the bar, as they found themselves auditors of the interesting converse between Mr. Starkie and the landlady. Presently they were agreeing that things looked very black indeed as against Davy Jones; and Mrs. Barford's solemn denunciation—"depend upon it that young limb's at the bottom of all the mischief," met with general support. It was the universal opinion that the boy had not been called "Davy Jones," for nothing.

Just then the door opened. The boy himself entered, carrying a dish of oysters. He walked to the bar as coolly and unconcerned as might be, and ordered a jug of strong ale for Mr. Starkie.

He was questioned as to what he had been doing? where he had been? why he had loitered? He answered with prompt impudence, "that that was his business; and that he had seen no reason to hurry over Mr. Starkie's errands, who was no master of his." Being pressed and threatened, he was a little disconcerted. Finally he admitted "that if they must know, he had been playing 'pitch-and-toss,' with Tom the pot-boy,—of whom they might make inquiry on the subject, if they listed.

Tom the pot-boy was discovered, and confirmed the story. He said "they had been playing 'pitch-and-toss' for a matter of ten minutes—or, it might be, a quarter of an hour. And if they had been playing pitch-and-toss," both boys demanded, with one consent, where was the harm, and what need all that to-do about it?"

"We know what pitch and toss leads to, my fine fellows," said a bystander, severely. But, upon the whole, Davy's judges were somewhat shaken. He was, they held, either altogether innocent, or else a hardened criminal; the latter for choice. Suddenly Mrs. Barford placed a lighted candle on the ground.

"If he's been out in Block's wharf this night," she said, "his shoes will be covered with wet clay."

But submitted to this test Davy came out triumphant. His shoes were as clean as were Mr. Starkie's. Indeed his appearance generally was distinguished by an order and a neatness altogether new to him. There was even some evidence to the effect that his hands and face had been washed recently in soap and water, and that his hair had received the unaccustomed benefits of brushing and combing.

"It doesn't prove very much," said Mrs. Barford, thoughtfully, as she took up her candle; "for he had time to change his shoes."

"It would be difficult," Davy remarked, quietly, "seeing that I've only got one pair of them."

"I'll see to the bottom of this, if I die for it. I can't have such a scandal as this going on in the neighbourhood of the Traveller's Joy. Who's man enough to go round with me and search the wharf?" demanded Mrs. Barford, resolutely.

This inquiry had rather the effect of thinning the group that had collected about the bar. Many went quietly back to their seats in the tap-room and parlour. They were men of peace. It was not their vocation to go in quest of murderers and such like. Least of all on such a night as that. Besides, who knew but that the man who fired the shot had other shots in store for those seeking his arrest?

Still two or three proclaimed themselves men enough for Mrs. Barford's purpose. Thereupon the landlady lighted a stable lantern which she gave to Mr. Starkie to carry, took down a blunderbuss from over the mantelshelf in the bar, put out the old-fashioned head-gear known as "a calash," prudently removed the massive silver watch which swung from her girdle, (worn very high up—short waists were the vogue,) and proceeded upon the proposed reconnaissance of Mr. Block's premises.

"Hold up the lantern, Mr. Starkie," said Mrs. Barford. "Be very careful where you tread, all of you. The shot was fired level with the window. The man who fired it must have stood on this part of the wharf. The shot couldn't have come from the river. It wouldn't in that case have struck the parlour wall where it did. We shall find foot-prints in the clay, depend upon it—close under the window."

They found none, however. The night was very dark—all was quiet, save only the distant sound of the Thames licking its mud banks. A man could hardly have escaped from the premises by means of the river, for it was quite low water, and if he had attempted to leap from the raised platform of the wharf, he must have broken his neck by the fall, or have been smothered in the dense, deep mud below. On either side were wooden palisades of frail make, which must have given way had any one climbed them endeavouring to seek refuge in the adjoining premises. They had been lightly constructed, especially with that object. Yet the palisades remained whole; there had apparently been no escape over them.

It was very strange.

Was the man still hidden in the wharf? Search was made among the grisly skeletons of decayed ships. Here was a fragment of the hull of the Olive, East Indiaman. The mutilated figure-head pointing significantly with its broken right arm to the parlour where Mr. Starkie had been sitting when the bullet struck the wall at his back. Here were capstans, windlasses, cranes, chain cables, anchors, mastsheads, and a