

Dickens Charles

Oliver Twist. Volume 2 of 3



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Содержание

CHAPTER XX.	5
CHAPTER XXI.	10
CHAPTER XXII.	14
CHAPTER XXIII.	18
CHAPTER XXIV.	22
CHAPTER XXV.	25
CHAPTER XXVI.	29
CHAPTER XXVI.	36
CHAPTER XXVIII.	40
CHAPTER XXIX.	45
CHAPTER XXX.	51
CHAPTER XXXI.	57
CHAPTER XXXII.	62
CHAPTER XXXIII.	67
CHAPTER XXXIV.	73
CHAPTER XXXV.	77
CHAPTER XXXVI.	79

Charles Dickens

Oliver Twist, Vol. 2 (of 3)

CHAPTER XX. WHEREIN OLIVER IS DELIVERED OVER TO MR. WILLIAM SIKES

When Oliver awoke in the morning he was a good deal surprised to find that a new pair of shoes with strong thick soles had been placed at his bedside, and that his old ones had been removed. At first he was pleased with the discovery, hoping that it might be the forerunner of his release; but such thoughts were quickly dispelled on his sitting down to breakfast alone with the Jew, who told him, in a tone and manner which increased his alarm, that he was to be taken to the residence of Bill Sikes that night.

“To – to – stop there, sir?” asked Oliver, anxiously.

“No, no, my dear, not to stop there,” replied the Jew. “We shouldn’t like to lose you. Don’t be afraid, Oliver, you shall come back to us again. Ha! ha! ha! We wont be so cruel as to send you away, my dear. Oh no, no!”

The old man, who was stooping over the fire toasting a piece of bread, looked round as he bantered Oliver thus, and chuckled as if to shew that he knew he would still be very glad to get away if he could.

“I suppose,” said the Jew, fixing his eyes on Oliver, “you want to know what you’re going to Bill’s for – eh, my dear?”

Oliver coloured involuntarily to find that the old thief had been reading his thoughts; but boldly said, “Yes, he did want to know.”

“Why, do you think?” inquired Fagin, parrying the question.

“Indeed I don’t know, sir,” replied Oliver.

“Bah!” said the Jew, turning away with a disappointed countenance from a close perusal of the boy’s face. “Wait till Bill tells you, then.”

The Jew seemed much vexed by Oliver’s not expressing any greater curiosity on the subject; but the truth is, that, although he felt very anxious, he was too much confused by the earnest cunning of Fagin’s looks, and his own speculations, to make any further inquiries just then. He had no other opportunity; for the Jew remained very surly and silent till night, when he prepared to go abroad.

“You may burn a candle,” said the Jew, putting one upon the table; “and here’s a book for you to read till they come to fetch you. Good night!”

“Good night, sir!” replied Oliver, softly.

The Jew walked to the door, looking over his shoulder at the boy as he went, and, suddenly stopping, called him by his name.

Oliver looked up; the Jew, pointing to the candle, motioned him to light it. He did so; and, as he placed the candlestick upon the table, saw that the Jew was gazing fixedly at him with lowering and contracted brows from the dark end of the room.

“Take heed, Oliver! take heed!” said the old man, shaking his right hand before him in a warning manner. “He’s a rough man, and thinks nothing of blood when his own is up. Whatever falls out, say nothing, and do what he bids you. Mind!” Placing a strong emphasis on the last word, he suffered his features gradually to resolve themselves into a ghastly grin; and, nodding his head, left the room.

Oliver leant his head upon his hand when the old man disappeared, and pondered with a trembling heart on the words he had just heard. The more he thought of the Jew’s admonition, the

more he was at a loss to divine its real purpose and meaning. He could think of no bad object to be attained by sending him to Sikes which would not be equally well answered by his remaining with Fagin; and after meditating for a long time, concluded that he had been selected to perform some ordinary menial offices for the housebreaker, until another boy better suited for his purpose could be engaged. He was too well accustomed to suffering, and had suffered too much where he was, to bewail the prospect of a change very severely. He remained lost in thought for some minutes, and then with a heavy sigh snuffed the candle, and taking up the book which the Jew had left with him, began to read.

He turned over the leaves carelessly at first, but, lighting on a passage which attracted his attention, soon became intent upon the volume. It was a history of the lives and trials of great criminals, and the pages were soiled and thumbed with use. Here, he read of dreadful crimes that make the blood run cold; of secret murders that had been committed by the lonely wayside, and bodies hidden from the eye of man in deep pits and wells, which would not keep them down, deep as they were, but had yielded them up at last, after many years, and so maddened the murderers with the sight, that in their horror they had confessed their guilt, and yelled for the gibbet to end their agony. Here, too, he read of men who, lying in their beds at dead of night, had been tempted and led on by their own bad thoughts to such dreadful bloodshed as it made the flesh creep and the limbs quail to think of. The terrible descriptions were so real and vivid, that the sallow pages seemed to turn red with gore, and the words upon them to be sounded in his ears as if they were whispered in hollow murmurs by the spirits of the dead.

In a paroxysm of fear the boy closed the book and thrust it from him. Then, falling upon his knees, he prayed Heaven to spare him from such deeds, and rather to will that he should die at once, than be reserved for crimes so fearful and appalling. By degrees he grew more calm, and besought in a low and broken voice that he might be rescued from his present dangers, and that if any aid were to be raised up for a poor outcast boy, who had never known the love of friends or kindred, it might come to him now, when, desolate and deserted, he stood alone in the midst of wickedness and guilt.

He had concluded his prayer, but still remained with his head buried in his hands, when a rustling noise aroused him.

“What’s that!” he cried, starting up, and catching sight of a figure standing by the door. “Who’s there?”

“Me – only me,” replied a tremulous voice.

Oliver raised the candle above his head, and looked towards the door. It was Nancy.

“Put down the light,” said the girl, turning away her head; “it hurts my eyes.”

Oliver saw that she was very pale, and gently inquired if she were ill. The girl threw herself into a chair, with her back towards him, and wrung her hands; but made no reply.

“God forgive me!” she cried after a while, “I never thought of all this.”

“Has anything happened?” asked Oliver, “Can I help you? I will if I can; I will, indeed.”

She rocked herself to and fro, caught her throat, and, uttering a gurgling sound, struggled and gasped for breath.

“Nancy!” cried Oliver, greatly alarmed, “What is it?”

The girl beat her hands upon her knees, and her feet upon the ground, and, suddenly stopping, drew her shawl close round her, and shivered with cold.

Oliver stirred the fire. Drawing her chair close to it, she sat there for a little time without speaking, but at length she raised her head, and looked round.

“I don’t know what comes over me sometimes,” said the girl, affecting to busy herself in arranging her dress; “it’s this damp, dirty room, I think. Now, Nolly, dear, are you ready?”

“Am I to go with you?” asked Oliver.

“Yes; I have come from Bill,” replied the girl. “You are to go with me.”

“What for?” said Oliver, recoiling.

“What for!” echoed the girl, raising her eyes, and averting them again the moment they encountered the boy’s face. “Oh! for no harm.”

“I don’t believe it,” said Oliver, who had watched her closely.

“Have it your own way,” rejoined the girl, affecting to laugh. “For no good, then.”

Oliver could see that he had some power over the girl’s better feelings, and for an instant thought of appealing to her compassion on his helpless state. But then the thought darted across his mind that it was barely eleven o’clock, and that many people were still in the streets, of whom surely some might be found to give credence to his tale. As the reflection occurred to him, he stepped forward, and said somewhat hastily that he was ready.

Neither his brief consideration nor its purport were lost upon his companion. She eyed him narrowly while he spoke, and cast upon him a look of intelligence which sufficiently shewed that she guessed what had been passing in his thoughts.

“Hush!” said the girl, stooping over him, and pointing to the door as she looked cautiously round. “You can’t help yourself. I have tried hard for you, but all to no purpose. You are hedged round and round, and if ever you are to get loose from here, this is not the time.”

Struck by the energy of her manner, Oliver looked up in her face with great surprise. She seemed to speak the truth; her countenance was white and agitated, and she trembled with very earnestness.

“I have saved you from being ill-used once, and I will again, and I do now,” continued the girl aloud; “for those who would have fetched you, if I had not, would have been far more rough than me. I have promised for your being quiet and silent; if you are not, you will only do harm to yourself and me too, and perhaps be my death. See here! I have borne all this for you already, as true as God sees me shew it.”

She pointed hastily to some livid bruises upon her neck and arms, and continued with great rapidity.

“Remember this, and don’t let me suffer more for you just now. If I could help you I would, but I have not the power. They don’t mean to harm you, and whatever they make you do, is no fault of yours. Hush! every word from you is a blow for me. Give me your hand – make haste, your hand!”

She caught the hand which Oliver instinctively placed in hers, and, blowing out the light, drew him after her up the stairs. The door was opened quickly by some one shrouded in the darkness, and as quickly closed when they had passed out. A hackney-cabriolet was in waiting; and, with the same vehemence which she had exhibited in addressing Oliver, the girl pulled him in with her, and drew the curtains close. The driver wanted no directions, but lashed his horse into full speed without the delay of an instant.

The girl still held Oliver fast by the hand, and continued to pour into his ear the warnings and assurances she had already imparted. All was so quick and hurried that he had scarcely time to recollect where he was, or how he came there, when the carriage stopped at the same house to which the Jew’s steps had been directed on the previous evening.

For one brief moment Oliver cast a hurried glance along the empty street, and a cry for help hung upon his lips. But the girl’s voice was in his ear, beseeching him in such tones of agony to remember her, that he had not the heart to utter it; while he hesitated, the opportunity was gone, for he was already in the house, and the door was shut.

“This way,” said the girl, releasing her hold for the first time. “Bill!”

“Hallo!” replied Sikes, appearing at the head of the stairs with a candle. “Oh! that’s the time of day. Come on!”

This was a very strong expression of approbation, and an uncommonly hearty welcome from a person of Mr. Sikes’s temperament. Nancy, appearing much gratified thereby, saluted him cordially.

“Bullseye’s gone home with Tom,” observed Sikes, as he lighted them up. “He’d have been in the way.”

“That’s right,” rejoined Nancy.

“So you’ve got the kid,” said Sikes, when they had all reached the room: closing the door as he spoke.

“Yes, here he is,” replied Nancy.

“Did he come quiet?” inquired Sikes.

“Like a lamb,” rejoined Nancy.

“I’m glad to hear it,” said Sikes, looking grimly at Oliver, “for the sake of his young carcass, as would otherways have suffered for it. Come here, young un, and let me read you a lectur’, which is as well got over at once.”

Thus addressing his new *protégé*, Mr. Sikes pulled off his cap and threw it into a corner; and then, taking him by the shoulder, sat himself down by the table, and stood Oliver in front of him.

“Now first, do you know wot this is?” inquired Sikes, taking up a pocket-pistol which lay on the table.

Oliver replied in the affirmative.

“Well then, look here,” continued Sikes. “This is powder, that ’ere’s a bullet, and this is a little bit of a old hat for waddin’.”

Oliver murmured his comprehension of the different bodies referred to, and Mr. Sikes proceeded to load the pistol with great nicety and deliberation.

“Now it’s loaded,” said Mr. Sikes, when he had finished.

“Yes, I see it is, sir,” replied Oliver, trembling.

“Well,” said the robber, grasping Oliver’s wrist tightly, and putting the barrel so close to his temple that they touched, at which moment the boy could not repress a shriek; “if you speak a word when you’re out o’doors with me, except when I speak to you, that loading will be in your head without notice – so, if you *do* make up your mind to speak without leave, say your prayers first.”

Having bestowed a scowl upon the object of this warning, to increase its effect, Mr. Sikes continued, —

“As near as I know, there is’nt anybody as would be asking very partickler arter you, if you *was* disposed of; so I needn’t take this devil-and-all of trouble to explain matters to you if it warn’t for your own good. D’ye hear me?”

“The short and the long of what you mean,” said Nancy, speaking very emphatically, and slightly frowning at Oliver as if to bespeak his serious attention to her words, “is, that if you’re crossed by him in this job you have on hand, you’ll prevent his ever telling tales afterwards by shooting him through the head, and take your chance of swinging for it as you do for a great many other things in the way of business every month of your life.”

“That’s it!” observed Mr. Sikes, approvingly; “women can always put things in fewest words, except when it’s blowing up, and then they lengthens it out. And now that he’s thoroughly up to it, let’s have some supper, and get a snooze afore starting.”

In pursuance of this request, Nancy quickly laid the cloth, and, disappearing for a few minutes, presently returned with a pot of porter and a dish of sheep’s heads, which gave occasion to several pleasant witticisms on the part of Mr. Sikes, founded upon the singular coincidence of “jemmies” being a cant name common to them and an ingenious implement much used in his profession. Indeed, the worthy gentleman, stimulated perhaps by the immediate prospect of being in active service, was in great spirits and good humour; in proof whereof it may be here remarked that he humorously drank all the beer at a draught, and did not utter, on a rough calculation, more than fourscore oaths during the whole progress of the meal.

Supper being ended – it may be easily conceived that Oliver had no great appetite for it – Mr. Sikes disposed of a couple of glasses of spirits and water, and threw himself upon the bed, ordering Nancy, with many imprecations in case of failure, to call him at five precisely. Oliver stretched himself

in his clothes, by command of the same authority, on a mattress upon the floor; and the girl mending the fire, sat before it, in readiness to rouse them at the appointed time.

For a long time Oliver lay awake, thinking it not impossible that Nancy might seek that opportunity of whispering some further advice; but the girl sat brooding over the fire without moving, save now and then to trim the light. Weary with watching and anxiety, he at length fell asleep.

When he awoke, the table was covered with tea-things, and Sikes was thrusting various articles into the pockets of his great-coat, which hung over the back of a chair, while Nancy was busily engaged in preparing breakfast. It was not yet daylight, for the candle was still burning, and it was quite dark outside. A sharp rain, too, was beating against the window-panes, and the sky looked black and cloudy.

“Now, then!” growled Sikes, as Oliver started up; “half-past five! Look sharp, or you’ll get no breakfast, for it’s late as it is.”

Oliver was not long in making his toilet; and, having taken some breakfast, replied to a surly inquiry from Sikes, by saying that he was quite ready.

Nancy, scarcely looking at the boy, threw him a handkerchief to tie round his throat, and Sikes gave him a large rough cape to button over his shoulders. Thus attired, he gave his hand to the robber, who, merely pausing to shew him, with a menacing gesture, that he had the pistol in a side pocket of his great-coat, clasped it firmly in his, and, exchanging a farewell with Nancy, led him away.

Oliver turned for an instant when they reached the door, in the hope of meeting a look from the girl. But she had resumed her old seat in front of the fire, and sat perfectly motionless before it.

CHAPTER XXI. THE EXPEDITION

It was a cheerless morning when they got into the street, blowing and raining hard, and the clouds looking dull and stormy. The night had been very wet, for large pools of water had collected in the road and the kennels were overflowing. There was a faint glimmering of the coming day in the sky, but it rather aggravated than relieved the gloom of the scene, the sombre light only serving to pale that which the street-lamps afforded, without shedding any warmer or brighter tints upon the wet housetops and dreary streets. There appeared to be nobody stirring in that quarter of the town, for the windows of the houses were all closely shut, and the streets through which they passed were noiseless and empty.

By the time they had turned into the Bethnal Green road, the day had fairly begun to break. Many of the lamps were already extinguished; a few country waggons were slowly toiling on towards London; and now and then a stagecoach, covered with mud, rattled briskly by, the driver bestowing, as he passed, an admonitory lash upon the heavy waggoner who, by keeping on the wrong side of the road, had endangered his arriving at the office a quarter of a minute after his time. The public-houses, with gas-lights burning inside, were already open. By degrees other shops began to be unclosed, and a few scattered people were met with. Then came straggling groups of labourers going to their work; then men and women with fish-baskets on their heads; donkey-carts laden with vegetables, chaise-carts filled with live-stock or whole carcasses of meat; milkwomen with pails; and an unbroken concourse of people trudging out with various supplies to the eastern suburbs of the town. As they approached the City, the noise and traffic gradually increased; and when they threaded the streets between Shoreditch and Smithfield, it had swelled into a roar of sound and bustle. It was as light as it was likely to be till night came on again, and the busy morning of half the London population had begun.

Turning down Sun-street and Crown-street, and crossing Finsbury-square, Mr. Sikes struck, by way of Chiswell-street, into Barbican, thence into Long-lane, and so into Smithfield, from which latter place arose a tumult of discordant sounds that filled Oliver Twist with surprise and amazement.

It was market-morning. The ground was covered nearly ankle-deep with filth and mire; and a thick steam perpetually rising from the reeking bodies of the cattle, and mingling with the fog, which seemed to rest upon the chimney-tops, hung heavily above. All the pens in the centre of the large area, and as many temporary ones as could be crowded into the vacant space, were filled with sheep; and tied up to posts by the gutter side were long lines of beasts and oxen three or four deep. Countrymen, butchers, drovers, hawkers, boys, thieves, idlers, and vagabonds of every low grade, were mingled together in a dense mass; the whistling of drovers, the barking of dogs, the bellowing and plunging of beasts, the bleating of sheep, and grunting and squeaking of pigs; the cries of hawkers, the shouts, oaths, and quarrelling on all sides; the ringing of bells and roar of voices that issued from every public-house; the crowding, pushing, driving, beating, whooping, and yelling; the hideous and discordant din that resounded from every corner of the market; and the unwashed, unshaven, squalid, and dirty figures constantly running to and fro, and bursting in and out of the throng, rendered it a stunning and bewildering scene, which quite confounded the senses.

Mr. Sikes, dragging Oliver after him, elbowed his way through the thickest of the crowd, and bestowed very little attention upon the numerous sights and sounds which so astonished the boy. He nodded twice or thrice to a passing friend, and, resisting as many invitations to take a morning dram, pressed steadily onward until they were clear of the turmoil, and had made their way through Hosier-lane into Holborn.

“Now, young un!” said Sikes surlily, looking up at the clock of St. Andrew’s church, “hard upon seven! you must step out. Come, don’t lag behind already, Lazy-legs!”

Mr. Sikes accompanied this speech with a fierce jerk at his little companion’s wrist; and Oliver, quickening his pace into a kind of trot, between a fast walk and a run, kept up with the rapid strides of the housebreaker as well as he could.

They kept on their course at this rate until they had passed Hyde Park corner, and were on their way to Kensington, when Sikes relaxed his pace until an empty cart which was at some little distance behind, came up: when, seeing “Hounslow” written upon it, he asked the driver, with as much civility as he could assume, if he would give them a lift as far as Isleworth.

“Jump up,” said the man. “Is that your boy?”

“Yes; he’s my boy,” replied Sikes, looking hard at Oliver, and putting his hand abstractedly into the pocket where the pistol was.

“Your father walks rather too quick for you, don’t he, my man?” inquired the driver, seeing that Oliver was out of breath.

“Not a bit of it,” replied Sikes, interposing. “He’s used to it. Here, take hold of my hand, Ned. In with you!”

Thus addressing Oliver, he helped him into the cart; and the driver, pointing to a heap of sacks, told him to lie down there, and rest himself.

As they passed the different milestones, Oliver wondered more and more where his companion meant to take him. Kensington, Hammersmith, Chiswick, Kew Bridge, Brentford, were all passed; and yet they kept on as steadily as if they had only begun their journey. At length they came to a public-house called the Coach and Horses, a little way beyond which another road appeared to turn off. And here the cart stopped.

Sikes dismounted with great precipitation, holding Oliver by the hand all the while; and, lifting him down directly, bestowed a furious look upon him, and rapped the side-pocket with his fist in a very significant manner.

“Good-bye, boy,” said the man.

“He’s sulky,” replied Sikes, giving him a shake; “he’s sulky, – a young dog! Don’t mind him.”

“Not I!” rejoined the other, getting into his cart. “It’s a fine day, after all.” And he drove away.

Sikes waited till he had fairly gone, and then, telling Oliver he might look about him if he wanted, once again led him forward on his journey.

They turned round to the left a short way past the public-house, and then, taking a right-hand road, walked on for a long time, passing many large gardens and gentlemen’s houses on both sides of the way, and stopping for nothing but a little beer, until they reached a town, in which, against the wall of a house, Oliver saw written up in pretty large letters, “Hampton.” Here they lingered about in the fields for some hours. At length, they came back into the town, and keeping on, past a public-house which bore the sign of the Red Lion, and by the river-side for a short distance, they came to an old public-house with a defaced sign-board, and ordered some dinner by the kitchen fire.

The kitchen was an old, low-roofed room, with a great beam across the middle of the ceiling, and benches with high backs to them by the fire, on which were seated several rough men in smock-frocks, drinking and smoking. They took no notice of Oliver, and very little of Sikes; and, as Sikes took very little notice of them, he and his young comrade sat in a corner by themselves, without being much troubled by the company.

They had some cold meat for dinner, and sat here so long after it, while Mr. Sikes indulged himself with three or four pipes, that Oliver began to feel quite certain they were not going any further. Being much tired with the walk and getting up so early, he dozed a little at first, and then, quite overpowered by fatigue and the fumes of the tobacco, fell fast asleep.

It was quite dark when he was awakened by a push from Sikes. Rousing himself sufficiently to sit up and look about him, he found that worthy in close fellowship and communication with a labouring man, over a pint of ale.

“So, you’re going on to Lower Halliford, are you?” inquired Sikes.

“Yes, I am,” replied the man, who seemed a little the worse – or better, as the case might be – for drinking; “and not slow about it neither. My horse hasn’t got a load behind him going back, as he had coming up in the mornin’, and he wont be long a-doing of it. Here’s luck to him! Ecod! he’s a good un!”

“Could you give my boy and me a lift as far as there?” demanded Sikes, pushing the ale towards his new friend.

“If you’re going directly, I can,” replied the man, looking out of the pot. “Are you going to Halliford?”

“Going on to Shepperton,” replied Sikes.

“I’m your man as far as I go,” replied the other. “Is all paid, Becky?”

“Yes, the other gentleman’s paid,” replied the girl.

“I say!” said the man, with tipsy gravity, “that wont do, you know.”

“Why not?” rejoined Sikes. “You’re a-going to accommodate us, and wot’s to prevent my standing treat for a pint or so, in return?”

The stranger reflected upon this argument with a very profound face, and having done so, seized Sikes by the hand, and declared he was a real good fellow. To which Mr. Sikes replied, he was joking; – as if he had been sober, there would have been strong reason to suppose he was.

After the exchange of a few more compliments, they bade the company good night, and went out, the girl gathering up the pots and glasses as they did so, and lounging out to the door, with her hands full, to see the party start.

The horse, whose health had been drunk in his absence, was standing outside, ready harnessed to the cart. Oliver and Sikes got in without any further ceremony, and the man, to whom he belonged, having lingered a minute or two “to bear him up,” and to defy the hostler and the world to produce his equal, mounted also. Then the hostler was told to give the horse his head, and, his head being given him, he made a very unpleasant use of it, tossing it into the air with great disdain, and running into the parlour windows over the way; after performing which feats, and supporting himself for a short time on his hind-legs, he started off at great speed, and rattled out of the town right gallantly.

The night was very dark. A damp mist rose from the river and the marshy ground about, and spread itself over the dreary fields. It was piercing cold, too; all was gloomy and black. Not a word was spoken, for the driver had grown sleepy, and Sikes was in no mood to lead him into conversation. Oliver sat huddled together in a corner of the cart, bewildered with alarm and apprehension, and figuring strange objects in the gaunt trees, whose branches waved grimly to and fro, as if in some fantastic joy at the desolation of the scene.

As they passed Sunbury church, the clock struck seven. There was a light in the ferry-house window opposite, which streamed across the road, and threw into more sombre shadow a dark yew-tree with graves beneath it. There was a dull sound of falling water not far off, and the leaves of the old tree stirred gently in the night wind. It seemed like quiet music for the repose of the dead.

Sunbury was passed through, and they came again into the lonely road. Two or three miles more, and the cart stopped. Sikes alighted, and, taking Oliver by the hand, they once again walked on.

They turned into no house at Shepperton, as the weary boy had expected, but still kept walking on, in mud and darkness, through gloomy lanes and over cold open wastes, until they came within sight of the lights of a town at no great distance. On looking intently forward, Oliver saw that the water was just below them, and that they were coming to the foot of a bridge.

Sikes kept straight on till they were close upon the bridge, and then turned suddenly down a bank upon the left. "The water!" thought Oliver, turning sick with fear. "He has brought me to this lonely place to murder me!"

He was about to throw himself on the ground, and make one struggle for his young life, when he saw that they stood before a solitary house, all ruinous and decayed. There was a window on each side of the dilapidated entrance, and one story above; but no light was visible. It was dark, dismantled, and, to all appearance, uninhabited.

Sikes, with Oliver's hand still in his, softly approached the low porch, and raised the latch. The door yielded to the pressure, and they passed in together.

CHAPTER XXII. THE BURGLARY

“Hallo!” cried a loud, hoarse voice, directly they had set foot in the passage.

“Don’t make such a row,” said Sikes, bolting the door. “Shew a glim, Toby.”

“Aha! my pal,” cried the same voice; “a glim, Barney, a glim! Shew the gentleman in, Barney; and wake up first, if convenient.”

The speaker appeared to throw a boot-jack, or some such article, at the person he addressed, to rouse him from his slumbers; for the noise of a wooden body falling violently was heard, and then an indistinct muttering, as of a man between asleep and awake.

“Do you hear?” cried the same voice. “There’s Bill Sikes in the passage with nobody to do the civil to him; and you sleeping there, as if you took laudanum with your meals, and nothing stronger. Are you any fresher now, or do you want the iron candlestick to wake you thoroughly?”

A pair of slipshod feet shuffled hastily across the bare floor of the room as this interrogatory was put; and there issued from a door on the right hand, first a feeble candle, and next, the form of the same individual who has been heretofore described as labouring under the infirmity of speaking through his nose, and officiating as waiter at the public-house on Saffron Hill.

“Bister Sikes!” exclaimed Barney, with real or counterfeit joy; “cub id, sir; cub id.”

“Here! you get on first,” said Sikes, putting Oliver in front of him. “Quicker! or I shall tread upon your heels.”

Muttering a curse upon his tardiness, Sikes pushed Oliver before him, and they entered a low dark room with a smoky fire, two or three broken chairs, a table, and a very old couch, on which, with his legs much higher than his head, a man was reposing at full length, smoking a long clay pipe. He was dressed in a smartly-cut snuff-coloured coat, with large brass buttons, an orange neckerchief, a coarse, staring, shawl-pattern waistcoat, and drab breeches. Mr. Crackit (for he it was) had no very great quantity of hair, either upon his head or face, but what he had was of a reddish dye, and tortured into long corkscrew curls, through which he occasionally thrust some very dirty fingers, ornamented with large common rings. He was a trifle above the middle size, and apparently rather weak in the legs; but this circumstance by no means detracted from his own admiration of his top-boots, which he contemplated in their elevated situation with lively satisfaction.

“Bill, my boy!” said this figure, turning his head towards the door, “I’m glad to see you. I was almost afraid you’d given it up, in which case I should have made a personal wentur. Hallo!”

Uttering this exclamation in a tone of great surprise, as his eyes rested on Oliver, Mr. Toby Crackit brought himself into a sitting posture and demanded who that was.

“The boy – only the boy!” replied Sikes, drawing a chair towards the fire.

“Wud of Bister Fagid’s lads,” exclaimed Barney, with a grin.

“Fagin’s, eh!” exclaimed Toby, looking at Oliver. “Wot an inwalable boy that’ll make for the old ladies’ pockets in chapels. His mug is a fortun’ to him.”

“There – there’s enough of that,” interposed Sikes, impatiently, and stooping over his recumbent friend he whispered a few words in his ear, at which Mr. Crackit laughed immensely, and honoured Oliver with a long stare of astonishment.

“Now,” said Sikes, as he resumed his seat, “if you’ll give us something to eat and drink while we’re waiting, you’ll put some heart in us, – or in me, at all events. Sit down by the fire, younker, and rest yourself; for you’ll have to go out with us again to-night, though not very far off.”

Oliver looked at Sikes in mute and timid wonder, and drawing a stool to the fire, sat with his aching head upon his hands, scarcely knowing where he was, or what was passing around him.

“Here,” said Toby, as the young Jew placed some fragments of food and a bottle upon the table, “Success to the crack!” He rose to honour the toast, and, carefully depositing his empty pipe in a corner, advanced to the table, filled a glass with spirits, and drank off its contents. Mr. Sikes did the same.

“A drain for the boy,” said Toby, half filling a wine-glass. “Down with it, innocence.”

“Indeed,” said Oliver, looking piteously up into the man’s face; “indeed, I – ”

“Down with it!” echoed Toby. “Do you think I don’t know what’s good for you? Tell him to drink it, Bill.”

“He had better,” said Sikes, clapping his hand upon his pocket. “Burn my body, if he isn’t more trouble than a whole family of Dodgers. Drink it, you perverse imp; drink it!”

Frightened by the menacing gestures of the two men, Oliver hastily swallowed the contents of the glass, and immediately fell into a violent fit of coughing, which delighted Toby Crackit and Barney, and even drew a smile from the surly Mr. Sikes.

This done, and Sikes having satisfied his appetite (Oliver could eat nothing but a small crust of bread which they made him swallow), the two men laid themselves down on chairs for a short nap. Oliver retained his stool by the fire; and Barney, wrapped in a blanket, stretched himself on the floor, close outside the fender.

They slept, or appeared to sleep, for some time; nobody stirring but Barney, who rose once or twice to throw coals upon the fire. Oliver fell into a heavy doze, imagining himself straying along through the gloomy lanes, or wandering about the dark churchyard, or retracing some one or other of the scenes of the past day, when he was roused by Toby Crackit jumping up and declaring it was half-past one.

In an instant the other two were on their legs, and all were actively engaged in busy preparation. Sikes and his companion enveloped their necks and chins in large dark shawls, and drew on their great-coats, while Barney, opening a cupboard, brought forth several articles, which he hastily crammed into the pockets.

“Barkers for me, Barney,” said Toby Crackit.

“Here they are,” replied Barney, producing a pair of pistols. “You loaded them yourself.”

“All right!” replied Toby, stowing them away. “The persuaders?”

“I’ve got ’em,” replied Sikes.

“Crape, keys, centre-bits, darkies – nothing forgotten?” inquired Toby, fastening a small crowbar to a loop inside the skirt of his coat.

“All right,” rejoined his companion. “Bring them bits of timber, Barney: that’s the time of day.”

With these words he took a thick stick from Barney’s hands, who, having delivered another to Toby, busied himself in fastening on Oliver’s cape.

“Now then!” said Sikes, holding out his hand.

Oliver, who was completely stupified by the unwonted exercise, and the air, and the drink which had been forced upon him, put his hand mechanically into that which Sikes extended for the purpose.

“Take his other hand, Toby,” said Sikes. “Look out, Barney.”

The man went to the door, and returned to announce that all was quiet. The two robbers issued forth with Oliver between them; and Barney, having made all fast, rolled himself up as before, and was soon asleep again.

It was now intensely dark. The fog was much heavier than it had been in the early part of the night, and the atmosphere was so damp that, although no rain fell, Oliver’s hair and eyebrows, within a few minutes after leaving the house, had become stiff with the half-frozen moisture that was floating about. They crossed the bridge, and kept on towards the lights which he had seen before. They were at no great distance off; and, as they walked pretty briskly, they soon arrived at Chertsey.

“Slap through the town,” whispered Sikes; “there’ll be nobody in the way to-night to see us.”

Toby acquiesced; and they hurried through the main street of the little town, which at that late hour was wholly deserted. A dim light shone at intervals from some bedroom-window, and the hoarse barking of dogs occasionally broke the silence of the night; but there was nobody abroad, and they had cleared the town as the church bell struck two.

Quickening their pace, they turned up a road upon the left hand. After walking about a quarter of a mile, they stopped before a detached house surrounded by a wall, to the top of which Toby Crackit, scarcely pausing to take breath, climbed in a twinkling.

“The boy next,” said Toby. “Hoist him up: I’ll catch hold of him.”

Before Oliver had time to look round, Sikes had caught him under the arms, and in three or four seconds he and Toby were lying on the grass on the other side. Sikes followed directly, and they stole cautiously towards the house.

And now, for the first time, Oliver, well nigh mad with grief and terror, saw that housebreaking and robbery, if not murder, were the objects of the expedition. He clasped his hands together, and involuntarily uttered a subdued exclamation of horror. A mist came before his eyes, the cold sweat stood upon his ashy face, his limbs failed him, and he sunk upon his knees.

“Get up!” murmured Sikes, trembling with rage, and drawing the pistol from his pocket; “get up, or I’ll strew your brains upon the grass.”

“Oh! for God’s sake let me go!” cried Oliver; “let me run away and die in the fields. I will never come near London; never, never! Oh! pray have mercy upon me, and do not make me steal. For the love of all the bright angels that rest in heaven, have mercy upon me!”

The man to whom this appeal was made swore a dreadful oath, and had cocked the pistol, when Toby, striking it from his grasp, placed his hand upon the boy’s mouth and dragged him to the house.

“Hush!” cried the man; “it wont answer here. Say another word, and I’ll do your business myself with a crack on the head that makes no noise, and is quite as certain and more genteel. Here, Bill, wrench the shutter open. He’s game enough, now, I’ll engage. I’ve seen older hands of his age took the same way for a minute or two on a cold night.”

Sikes, invoking terrific imprecations upon Fagin’s head for sending Oliver on such an errand, plied the crowbar vigorously, but with little noise; after some delay, and some assistance from Toby, the shutter to which he had referred swung open on its hinges.

It was a little lattice window, about five feet and a half above the ground, at the back of the house, which belonged to a scullery, or small brewing-place, at the end of the passage: the aperture was so small that the inmates had probably not thought it worth while to defend it more securely; but it was large enough to admit a boy of Oliver’s size nevertheless. A very brief exercise of Mr. Sikes’s art sufficed to overcome the fastening of the lattice, and it soon stood wide open also.

“Now listen, you young limb,” whispered Sikes, drawing a dark lantern from his pocket, and throwing the glare full on Oliver’s face; “I’m a going to put you through there. Take this light, go softly up the steps straight afore you, and along the little hall to the street-door: unfasten it, and let us in.”

“There’s a bolt at the top you wont be able to reach,” interposed Toby. “Stand upon one of the hall chairs. There are three there, Bill, with a jolly large blue unicorn and a gold pitchfork on ’em, which is the old lady’s arms.”

“Keep quiet, can’t you?” replied Sikes, with a threatening look. “The room-door is open, is it?”

“Wide,” replied Toby, after peeping in to satisfy himself. “The game of that is that they always leave it open with a catch, so that the dog, who’s got a bed in here, may walk up and down the passage when he feels wakeful. Ha! ha! Barney ’ticed him away to-night, so neat.”

Although Mr. Crackit spoke in a scarcely audible whisper, and laughed without noise, Sikes imperiously commanded him to be silent, and to get to work. Toby complied by first producing his lantern, and placing it on the ground; and then planting himself firmly with his head against the wall beneath the window, and his hands upon his knees, so as to make a step of his back. This was no

sooner done than Sikes, mounting upon him, put Oliver gently through the window with his feet first; and, without leaving hold of his collar, planted him safely on the floor inside.

“Take this lantern,” said Sikes, looking into the room. “You see the stairs afore you?”

Oliver, more dead than alive, gasped out, “Yes;” and Sikes, pointing to the street-door with the pistol-barrel, briefly advised him to take notice that he was within shot all the way, and that if he faltered he would fall dead that instant.

“It’s done in a minute,” said Sikes, in the same low whisper. “Directly I leave go of you, do your work. Hark!”

“What’s that?” whispered the other man.

They listened intently.

“Nothing,” said Sikes, releasing his hold of Oliver. “Now!”

In the short time he had had to collect his senses, the boy had firmly resolved that, whether he died in the attempt or not, he would make one effort to dart up stairs from the hall and alarm the family. Filled with this idea, he advanced at once, but stealthily.

“Come back!” suddenly cried Sikes aloud. “Back! back!”

Scared by the sudden breaking of the dead stillness of the place, and a loud cry which followed it, Oliver let his lantern fall, and knew not whether to advance or fly.

The cry was repeated – a light appeared – a vision of two terrified half-dressed men at the top of the stairs swam before his eyes – a flash – a loud noise – a smoke – a crash somewhere, but where he knew not, – and he staggered back.

Sikes had disappeared for an instant; but he was up again, and had him by the collar before the smoke had cleared away. He fired his own pistol after the men who were already retreating, and dragged the boy up.

“Clasp your arm tighter,” said Sikes, as he drew him through the window. “Give me a shawl here. They’ve hit him. Quick! Damnation, how the boy bleeds!”

Then came the loud ringing of a bell, mingled with the noise of fire-arms and the shouts of men, and the sensation of being carried over uneven ground at a rapid pace. And then the noises grew confused in the distance, and a cold deadly feeling crept over the boy’s heart, and he saw or heard no more.

CHAPTER XXIII. WHICH CONTAINS THE SUBSTANCE OF A PLEASANT CONVERSATION BETWEEN MR. BUMBLE AND A LADY; AND SHEWS THAT EVEN A BEADLE MAY BE SUSCEPTIBLE ON SOME POINTS

The night was bitter cold. The snow lay upon the ground frozen into a hard thick crust, so that only the heaps that had drifted into byways and corners were affected by the sharp wind that howled abroad, which, as if expending increased fury on such prey as it found, caught it savagely up in clouds, and, whirling it into a thousand misty eddies, scattered it in air. Bleak, dark, and piercing cold, it was a night for the well-housed and fed to draw round the bright fire and thank God they were at home, and for the homeless starving wretch to lay him down and die. Many hunger-worn outcasts close their eyes in our bare streets at such times, who, let their crimes have been what they may, can hardly open them in a more bitter world.

Such was the aspect of out-of-doors affairs when Mrs. Corney, the matron of the workhouse, to which our readers have been already introduced as the birthplace of Oliver Twist, sat herself down before a cheerful fire in her own little room, and glanced with no small degree of complacency at a small round table, on which stood a tray of corresponding size, furnished with all necessary materials for the most grateful meal that matrons enjoy. In fact, Mrs. Corney was about to solace herself with a cup of tea: and as she glanced from the table to the fireplace, where the smallest of all possible kettles was singing a small song in a small voice, her inward satisfaction evidently increased, – so much so, indeed, that Mrs. Corney smiled.

“Well,” said the matron, leaning her elbow on the table, and looking reflectively at the fire, “I’m sure we have all on us a great deal to be grateful for – a great deal, if we did but know it. Ah!”

Mrs. Corney shook her head mournfully, as if deploring the mental blindness of those paupers who did not know it, and thrusting a silver spoon (private property) into the inmost recesses of a two-ounce tin tea-caddy, proceeded to make the tea.

How slight a thing will disturb the equanimity of our frail minds! The black teapot, being very small and easily filled, ran over while Mrs. Corney was moralizing, and the water slightly scalded Mrs. Corney’s hand.

“Drat the pot!” said the worthy matron, setting it down very hastily on the hob; “a little stupid thing, that only holds a couple of cups! What use is it of to any body? – except,” said Mrs. Corney, pausing, – “except to a poor desolate creature like me. Oh dear!”

With these words the matron dropped into her chair, and, once more resting her elbow on the table, thought of her solitary fate. The small teapot and the single cup had awakened in her mind sad recollections of Mr. Corney (who had not been dead more than five-and-twenty years), and she was overpowered.

“I shall never get another!” said Mrs. Corney, pettishly; “I shall never get another – like him.”

Whether this remark bore reference to the husband or the teapot is uncertain. It might have been the latter; for Mrs. Corney looked at it as she spoke, and took it up afterwards. She had just tasted her first cup, when she was disturbed by a soft tap at the room-door.

“Oh, come in with you!” said Mrs. Corney, sharply. “Some of the old women dying, I suppose; – they always die when I’m at meals. Don’t stand there, letting the cold air in, don’t. What’s amiss now, eh?”

“Nothing, ma’am, nothing,” replied a man’s voice.

“Dear me!” exclaimed the matron, in a much sweeter tone, “is that Mr. Bumble?”

“At your service, ma’am,” said Mr. Bumble, who had been stopping outside to rub his shoes clean, and shake the snow off his coat, and who now made his appearance, bearing the cocked-hat in one hand and a bundle in the other. “Shall I shut the door, ma’am?”

The lady modestly hesitated to reply, lest there should be any impropriety in holding an interview with Mr. Bumble with closed doors. Mr. Bumble, taking advantage of the hesitation, and being very cold himself, shut it without farther permission.

“Hard weather, Mr. Bumble,” said the matron.

“Hard, indeed, ma’am,” replied the beadle. “Anti-porochial weather this, ma’am. We have given away, Mrs. Corney, – we have given away a matter of twenty quartern loaves and a cheese and a half this very blessed afternoon; and yet them paupers are not contented.”

“Of course not. When would they be, Mr. Bumble?” said the matron, sipping her tea.

“When, indeed, ma’am!” rejoined Mr. Bumble. “Why, here’s one man that, in consideration of his wife and large family, has a quartern loaf and a good pound of cheese, full weight. Is he grateful, ma’am, – is he grateful? Not a copper farthing’s worth of it! What does he do, ma’am, but ask for a few coals, if it’s only a pocket-handkerchief full, he says! Coals! – what would he do with coals? – Toast his cheese with ’em, and then come back for more. That’s the way with these people, ma’am; – give ’em a apron full of coals to-day, and they’ll come back for another the day after to-morrow, as brazen as alabaster.”

The matron expressed her entire concurrence in this intelligible simile, and the beadle went on.

“I never,” said Mr. Bumble, “see anything like the pitch it’s got to. The day afore yesterday, a man – you have been a married woman, ma’am, and I may mention it to you – a man, with hardly a rag upon his back (here Mrs. Corney looked at the floor), goes to our overseer’s door when he has got company coming to dinner, and says, he must be relieved, Mrs. Corney. As he wouldn’t go away, and shocked the company very much, our overseer sent him out a pound of potatoes and half a pint of oatmeal. ‘My God!’ says the ungrateful villain, ‘what’s the use of *this* to me? You might as well give me a pair of iron spectacles ‘Very good,’ says our overseer, taking ’em away again, ‘you wont get anything else here.’ – ‘Then I’ll die in the streets!’ says the vagrant. – ‘Oh no, you wont,’ says our overseer.”

“Ha! ha! – that was very good! – so like Mr. Grannet, wasn’t it?” interposed the matron. “Well, Mr. Bumble?”

“Well, ma’am,” rejoined the beadle, “he went away and *did* die in the streets. There’s a obstinate pauper for you!”

“It beats anything I could have believed,” observed the matron, emphatically. “But don’t you think out-of-door relief a very bad thing any way, Mr. Bumble? You’re a gentleman of experience, and ought to know. Come.”

“Mrs. Corney,” said the beadle, smiling as men smile who are conscious of superior information, “out-of-door relief, properly managed, – properly managed, ma’am, – is the porochial safeguard. The great principle of out-of-door relief is to give the paupers exactly what they don’t want, and then they get tired of coming.”

“Dear me!” exclaimed Mrs. Corney. “Well, that is a good one, too!”

“Yes. Betwixt you and me, ma’am,” returned Mr. Bumble, “that’s the great principle; and that’s the reason why, if you look at any cases that get into them owdacious newspapers, you’ll always observe that sick families have been relieved with slices of cheese. That’s the rule now, Mrs. Corney, all over the country. – But, however,” said the beadle, stooping to unpack his bundle, “these are official secrets, ma’am; not to be spoken of except, as I may say, among the porochial officers, such as ourselves. This is the port wine, ma’am, that the board ordered for the infirmary, – real, fresh, genuine port wine, only out of the cask this afternoon, – clear as a bell, and no sediment.”

Having held the first bottle up to the light, and shaken it well to test its excellence, Mr. Bumble placed them both on the top of a chest of drawers, folded the handkerchief in which they had been wrapped, put it carefully in his pocket, and took up his hat as if to go.

“You’ll have a very cold walk, Mr. Bumble,” said the matron.

“It blows, ma’am,” replied Mr. Bumble, turning up his coat-collar, “enough to cut one’s ears off.”

The matron looked from the little kettle to the beadle who was moving towards the door, and as the beadle coughed, preparatory to bidding her good night, bashfully inquired whether – whether he wouldn’t take a cup of tea?

Mr. Bumble instantaneously turned back his collar again, laid his hat and stick upon a chair, and drew another chair up to the table. As he slowly seated himself, he looked at the lady. She fixed her eyes upon the little teapot. Mr. Bumble coughed again, and slightly smiled.

Mrs. Corney rose to get another cup and saucer from the closet. As she sat down, her eyes once again encountered those of the gallant beadle; she coloured, and applied herself to the task of making his tea. Again Mr. Bumble coughed, – louder this time than he had coughed yet.

“Sweet? Mr. Bumble,” inquired the matron, taking up the sugar-basin.

“Very sweet, indeed, ma’am,” replied Mr. Bumble. He fixed his eyes on Mrs. Corney as he said this; and if ever a beadle looked tender, Mr. Bumble was that beadle at that moment.

The tea was made, and handed in silence. Mr. Bumble, having spread a handkerchief over his knees to prevent the crumbs from sullyng the splendour of his shorts, began to eat and drink; varying these amusements occasionally by fetching a deep sigh, which, however, had no injurious effect upon his appetite, but, on the contrary, rather seemed to facilitate his operations in the tea and toast department.

“You have a cat, ma’am, I see,” said Mr. Bumble, glancing at one, who, in the centre of her family, was basking before the fire; “and kittens too, I declare!”

“I am so fond of them, Mr. Bumble, you can’t think,” replied the matron. “They’re *so* happy, *so* frolicsome, and *so* cheerful, that they are quite companions for me.”

“Very nice animals, ma’am,” replied Mr. Bumble, approvingly; “so very domestic.”

“Oh, yes!” rejoined the matron, with enthusiasm; “so fond of their home too, that it’s quite a pleasure, I’m sure.”

“Mrs. Corney, ma’am,” said Mr. Bumble, slowly, and marking the time with his teaspoon, “I mean to say this, ma’am, that any cat or kitten that could live with you, ma’am, and *not* be fond of its home, must be a ass, ma’am.”

“Oh, Mr. Bumble!” remonstrated Mrs. Corney.

“It’s no use disguising facts, ma’am,” said Mr. Bumble, slowly flourishing the teaspoon with a kind of amorous dignity that made him doubly impressive; “I would drown it myself with pleasure.”

“Then you’re a cruel man,” said the matron vivaciously, as she held out her hand for the beadle’s cup, “and a very hard-hearted man besides.”

“Hard-hearted, ma’am,” said Mr. Bumble, “hard!” Mr. Bumble resigned his cup without another word, squeezed Mrs. Corney’s little finger as she took it, and inflicting two open-handed slaps upon his laced waistcoat, gave a mighty sigh, and hitched his chair a very little morsel farther from the fire.

It was a round table; and as Mrs. Corney and Mr. Bumble had been sitting opposite each other, with no great space between them, and fronting the fire, it will be seen that Mr. Bumble, in receding from the fire, and still keeping at the table, increased the distance between himself and Mrs. Corney; which proceeding some prudent readers will doubtless be disposed to admire, and to consider an act of great heroism on Mr. Bumble’s part, he being in some sort tempted by time, place, and opportunity, to give utterance to certain soft nothings, which, however well they may become the lips of the light and thoughtless, do seem immeasurably beneath the dignity of judges of the land, members of parliament, ministers of state, lord-mayors, and other great public functionaries, but more particularly beneath the stateliness and gravity of a beadle, who (as is well known) should be the sternest and most inflexible among them all.

Whatever were Mr. Bumble's intentions, however, – and no doubt they were of the best, – whatever they were, it unfortunately, happened, as has been twice before remarked, that the table was a round one; consequently, Mr. Bumble, moving his chair by little and little, soon began to diminish the distance between himself and the matron, and, continuing to travel round the outer edge of the circle, brought his chair in time close to that in which the matron was seated. Indeed, the two chairs touched; and when they did so, Mr. Bumble stopped.

Now, if the matron had moved her chair to the right, she would have been scorched by the fire, and if to the left, she must have fallen into Mr. Bumble's arms; so (being a discreet matron, and no doubt foreseeing these consequences at a glance) she remained where she was, and handed Mr. Bumble another cup of tea.

“Hard-hearted, Mrs. Corney?” said Mr. Bumble, stirring his tea, and looking up into the matron's face; “are *you* hard-hearted, Mrs. Corney?”

“Dear me!” exclaimed the matron, “what a very curious question from a single man. What can you want to know for, Mr. Bumble?”

The beadle drank his tea to the last drop, finished a piece of toast, whisked the crumbs off his knees, wiped his lips, and deliberately kissed the matron.

“Mr. Bumble,” cried that discreet lady in a whisper, for the fright was so great that she had quite lost her voice, “Mr. Bumble, I shall scream!” Mr. Bumble made no reply, but in a slow and dignified manner put his arm round the matron's waist.

As the lady had stated her intention of screaming, of course she would have screamed at this additional boldness, but that the exertion was rendered unnecessary by a hasty knocking at the door, which was no sooner heard than Mr. Bumble darted with much agility to the wine-bottles, and began dusting them with great violence, while the matron sharply demanded who was there. It is worthy of remark, as a curious physical instance of the efficacy of a sudden surprise in counteracting the effects of extreme fear, that her voice had quite recovered all its official asperity.

“If you please, mistress,” said a withered old female pauper, hideously ugly, putting her head in at the door, “Old Sally is a-going fast.”

“Well, what's that to me?” angrily demanded the matron. “I can't keep her alive, can I?”

“No, no, mistress,” replied the old woman; “nobody can; she's far beyond the reach of help. I've seen a many people die, little babes and great strong men, and I know when death's a-coming well enough. But she's troubled in her mind; and when the fits are not on her, – and that's not often, for she is dying very hard, – she says she has got something to tell which you must hear. She'll never die quiet till you come, mistress.”

At this intelligence the worthy Mrs. Corney muttered a variety of invectives against old women who couldn't even die without purposely annoying their betters; and, muffling herself in a thick shawl which she hastily caught up, briefly requested Mr. Bumble to stop till she came back, lest anything particular should occur, and bidding the messenger walk fast, and not be all night hobbling up the stairs, followed her from the room with a very ill grace, scolding all the way.

Mr. Bumble's conduct on being left to himself was rather inexplicable. He opened the closet, counted the tea-spoons, weighed the sugar-tongs, closely inspected a silver milk-pot to ascertain that it was of the genuine metal; and, having satisfied his curiosity upon these points, put on his cocked-hat corner-wise, and danced with much gravity four distinct times round the table. Having gone through this very extraordinary performance, he took off the cocked-hat again, and, spreading himself before the fire with his back towards it, seemed to be mentally engaged in taking an exact inventory of the furniture.

CHAPTER XXIV. TREATS OF A VERY POOR SUBJECT, BUT IS A SHORT ONE, AND MAY BE FOUND OF IMPORTANCE IN THIS HISTORY

It was no unfit messenger of death that had disturbed the quiet of the matron's room. Her body was bent by age, her limbs trembled with palsy, and her face, distorted into a mumbling leer, resembled more the grotesque shaping of some wild pencil than the work of Nature's hand.

Alas! how few of Nature's faces there are to gladden us with their beauty! The cares, and sorrows, and hungerings of the world change them as they change hearts, and it is only when those passions sleep, and have lost their hold for ever, that the troubled clouds pass off, and leave heaven's surface clear. It is a common thing for the countenances of the dead, even in that fixed and rigid state, to subside into the long-forgotten expression of sleeping infancy, and settle into the very look of early life; so calm, so peaceful do they grow again, that those who knew them in their happy childhood kneel by the coffin's side in awe, and see the angel even upon earth.

The old crone tottered along the passages and up the stairs, muttering some indistinct answers to the chidings of her companion; and being at length compelled to pause for breath, gave the light into her hand, and remained behind to follow as she might, while the more nimble superior made her way to the room where the sick woman lay.

It was a bare garret-room, with a dim light burning at the farther end. There was another old woman watching by the bed, and the parish apothecary's apprentice was standing by the fire, making a toothpick out of a quill.

"Cold night, Mrs. Corney," said this young gentleman, as the matron entered.

"Very cold indeed, sir," replied the mistress, in her most civil tones, and dropping a curtsy as she spoke.

"You should get better coals out of your contractors," said the apothecary's deputy, breaking a lump on the top of the fire with the rusty poker; "these are not at all the sort of thing for a cold night."

"They're the board's choosing, sir," returned the matron. "The least they could do would be to keep us pretty warm, for our places are hard enough."

The conversation was here interrupted by a moan from the sick woman.

"Oh!" said the young man, turning his face towards the bed, as if he had previously quite forgotten the patient, "it's all U. P. there, Mrs. Corney."

"It is, is it, sir?" asked the matron.

"If she lasts a couple of hours, I shall be surprised," said the apothecary's apprentice, intent upon the toothpick's point. "It's a break-up of the system altogether. Is she dozing, old lady?"

The attendant stooped over the bed to ascertain, and nodded in the affirmative.

"Then perhaps she'll go off in that way, if you don't make a row," said the young man. "Put the light on the floor, – she wont see it there."

The attendant did as she was bidden, shaking her head meanwhile to intimate that the woman would not die so easily; and having done so, resumed her seat by the side of the other nurse, who had by this time returned. The mistress, with an expression of impatience, wrapped herself in her shawl and sat at the foot of the bed.

The apothecary's apprentice, having completed the manufacture of the toothpick, planted himself in front of the fire and made good use of it for ten minutes or so, when, apparently growing rather dull, he wished Mrs. Corney joy of her job, and took himself off on tiptoe.

When they had sat in silence for some time the two old women rose from the bed, and crouching over the fire, held out their withered hands to catch the heat. The flame threw a ghastly light on their shrivelled faces, and made their ugliness appear perfectly terrible, as in this position they began to converse in a low voice.

“Did she say any more, Anny dear, while I was gone?” inquired the messenger.

“Not a word,” replied the other. “She plucked and tore at her arms for a little time; but I held her hands, and she soon dropped off. She hasn’t much strength in her, so I easily kept her quiet. I ain’t so weak for an old woman, although I am on parish allowance; – no, no!”

“Did she drink the hot wine the doctor said she was to have?” demanded the first.

“I tried to get it down,” rejoined the other; “but her teeth were tight set, and she clenched the mug so hard that it was as much as I could do to get it back again. So *I* drank it, and it did me good.”

Looking cautiously round to ascertain that they were not overheard, the two hags cowered nearer to the fire, and chuckled heartily.

“I mind the time,” said the first speaker, “when she would have done the same, and made rare fun of it afterwards.”

“Ay, that she would,” rejoined the other; “she had a merry heart. A many many beautiful corpses she laid out, as nice and neat as wax-work. My old eyes have seen them – ay, and these old hands touched them too; for I have helped her scores of times.”

Stretching forth her trembling fingers as she spoke, the old creature shook them exultingly before her face, and fumbling in her pocket brought out an old time-discoloured tin snuff-box, from which she shook a few grains into the outstretched palm of her companion, and a few more into her own. While they were thus employed, the matron, who had been impatiently watching until the dying woman should awaken from her stupor, joined them by the fire, and sharply asked how long she was to wait.

“Not long, mistress,” replied the second woman, looking up into her face. “We have none of us long to wait for Death. Patience, patience! he’ll be here soon enough for us all.”

“Hold your tongue, you doting idiot!” said the matron, sternly. “You, Martha, tell me; has she been in this way before?”

“Often,” answered the first woman.

“But will never be again,” added the second one; “that is, she’ll never wake again but once – and mind, mistress, that wont be for long.”

“Long or short,” said the matron, snappishly, “she wont find me here when she does, and take care, both of you, how you worry me again for nothing. It’s no part of my duty to see all the old women in the house die, and I wont – that’s more. Mind that, you impudent old harridans. If you make a fool of me again, I’ll soon cure you, I warrant you!”

She was bouncing away, when a cry from the two women, who had turned towards the bed, caused her to look round. The sick woman had raised herself upright, and was stretching her arms towards them.

“Who’s that?” she cried, in a hollow voice.

“Hush, hush!” said one of the women, stooping over her – “lie down, lie down!”

“I’ll never lie down again alive!” said the woman, struggling. “I *will* tell her! Come here – nearer. Let me whisper in your ear.”

She clutched the matron by the arm, and forcing her into a chair by the bedside was about to speak, when looking round, she caught sight of the two old women bending forward in the attitude of eager listeners.

“Turn them away,” said the woman, drowsily; “make haste – make haste!”

The two old crones, chiming in together, began pouring out many piteous lamentations that the poor dear was too far gone to know her best friends, and uttering sundry protestations that they would never leave her, when the superior pushed them from the room, closed the door, and returned

to the bedside. On being excluded, the old ladies changed their tone, and cried through the keyhole that old Sally was drunk; which, indeed, was not unlikely, since, in addition to a moderate dose of opium prescribed by the apothecary, she was labouring under the effects of a final taste of gin and water which had been privily administered in the openness of their hearts by the worthy old ladies themselves.

“Now listen to me,” said the dying woman, aloud, as if making a great effort to revive one latent spark of energy. “In this very room – in this very bed – I once nursed a pretty young creetur’, that was brought into the house with her feet cut and bruised with walking, and all soiled with dust and blood. She gave birth to a boy, and died. Let me think – what was the year again?”

“Never mind the year,” said the impatient auditor; “what about her?”

“Ay,” murmured the sick woman, relapsing into her former drowsy state, “what about her? – what about – I know!” she cried, jumping fiercely up: her face flushed, and her eyes starting from her head – “I robbed her, so I did! She wasn’t cold – I tell you she wasn’t cold, when I stole it!”

“Stole what, for God’s sake?” cried the matron, with a gesture as if she would call for help.

“*It!*” replied the woman, laying her hand over the other’s mouth – “the only thing she had. She wanted clothes to keep her warm, and food to eat; but she had kept it safe, and had it in her bosom. It was gold, I tell you! – rich gold, that might have saved her life!”

“Gold!” echoed the matron, bending eagerly over the woman as she fell back. “Go on, go on – yes – what of it? Who was the mother? – when was it?”

“She charged me to keep it safe,” replied the woman, with a groan, “and trusted me as the only woman about her. I stole it in my heart when she first shewed it me hanging round her neck; and the child’s death, perhaps, is on me besides! They would have treated him better if they had known it all!”

“Known what?” asked the other. “Speak!”

“The boy grew so like his mother,” said the woman, rambling on, and not heeding the question, “that I could never forget it when I saw his face. Poor girl! poor girl! – she was so young, too! – such a gentle lamb! – Wait; there’s more to tell. I have not told you all, have I?”

“No, no,” replied the matron, inclining her head to catch the words as they came more faintly from the dying woman. – “Be quick, or it may be too late!”

“The mother,” said the woman, making a more violent effort than before – “the mother, when the pains of death first came upon her, whispered in my ear that if her baby was born alive, and thrived, the day might come when it would not feel so much disgraced to hear its poor young mother named. ‘And oh, my God!’ she said, folding her thin hands together, ‘whether it be boy or girl, raise up some friends for it in this troubled world, and take pity upon a lonely, desolate child, abandoned to its mercy!’”

“The boy’s name?” demanded the matron.

“They *called* him Oliver,” replied the woman, feebly. “The gold I stole was – ”

“Yes, yes – what?” cried the other.

She was bending eagerly over the woman to hear her reply, but drew back instinctively as she once again rose slowly and stiffly into a sitting posture, and, clutching the coverlid with both hands, muttered some indistinct sounds in her throat, and fell lifeless on the bed.

“Stone dead!” said one of the old women, hurrying in as soon as the door was opened.

“And nothing to tell, after all,” rejoined the matron, walking carelessly away.

The two crones were, to all appearance, too busily occupied in the preparations for their dreadful duties to make any reply, and were left alone hovering about the body.

CHAPTER XXV. WHEREIN THIS HISTORY REVERTS TO MR. FAGIN AND COMPANY

While these things were passing in the country workhouse, Mr. Fagin sat in the old den – the same from which Oliver had been removed by the girl – brooding over a dull smoky fire. He held a pair of bellows upon his knee, with which he had apparently been endeavouring to rouse it into more cheerful action; but he had fallen into deep thought, and with his arms folded upon them, and his chin resting on his thumbs, fixed his eyes abstractedly on the rusty bars.

At a table behind him sat the Artful Dodger, Master Charles Bates, and Mr. Chitling, all intent upon a game of whist; the Artful taking dummy against Master Bates and Mr. Chitling. The countenance of the first-named gentleman, peculiarly intelligent at all times, acquired great additional interest from his close observance of the game, and his attentive perusal of Mr. Chitling's hand, upon which, from time to time, as occasion served, he bestowed a variety of earnest glances, wisely regulating his own play by the result of his observations upon his neighbour's cards. It being a cold night, the Dodger wore his hat, as, indeed, was often his custom within doors. He also sustained a clay pipe between his teeth, which he only removed for a brief space when he deemed it necessary to apply for refreshment to a quart-pot upon the table, which stood ready filled with gin and water for the accommodation of the company.

Master Bates was also attentive to the play; but being of a more excitable nature than his accomplished friend, it was observable that he more frequently applied himself to the gin and water, and moreover indulged in many jests and irrelevant remarks, all highly unbecoming a scientific rubber. Indeed, the Artful, presuming upon their close attachment, more than once took occasion to reason gravely with his companion upon these improprieties: all of which remonstrances Master Bates took in extremely good part, merely requesting his friend to be "blowed," or to insert his head in a sack, or replying with some other neatly-turned witticism of a similar kind, the happy application of which excited considerable admiration in the mind of Mr. Chitling. It was remarkable that the latter gentleman and his partner invariably lost, and that the circumstance, so far from angering Master Bates, appeared to afford him the highest amusement, inasmuch as he laughed most uproariously at the end of every deal, and protested that he had never seen such a jolly game in all his born days.

"That's two doubles and the rub," said Mr. Chitling, with a very long face, as he drew half-a-crown from his waistcoat-pocket "I never see such a feller as you, Jack; you win every thing. Even when we've good cards, Charley and I can't make nothing of 'em."

Either the matter or manner of this remark, which was made very ruefully, delighted Charley Bates so much, that his consequent shout of laughter roused the Jew from his reverie, and induced him to inquire what was the matter.

"Matter, Fagin!" cried Charley. "I wish you had watched a play. Tommy Chitling hasn't won the point, and I went partners with him against the Artful and dum."

"Ay, ay!" said the Jew, with a grin, which sufficiently demonstrated that he was at no loss to understand the reason. "Try 'em again, Tom; try 'em again."

"No more of it for me, thankee, Fagin," replied Mr. Chitling; "I've had enough. That 'ere Dodger has such a run of luck that there's no standing again' him."

"Ha! ha! my dear," replied the Jew, "you must get up very early in the morning to win against the Dodger."

"Morning!" said Charley Bates; "you must put your boots on overnight, and have a telescope at each eye, and a opera-glass between your shoulders, if you want to come over him."

Mr. Dawkins received these handsome compliments with much philosophy, and offered to cut any gentleman in company for the first picture-card, at a shilling a time. Nobody accepting the challenge, and his pipe being by this time smoked out, he proceeded to amuse himself by sketching a ground-plan of Newgate on the table with the piece of chalk which had served him in lieu of counters; whistling meantime with peculiar shrillness.

“How precious dull you are, Tommy!” said the Dodger, stopping short when there had been a long silence, and addressing Mr. Chitling. “What do you think he’s thinking of, Fagin?”

“How should I know, my dear?” replied the Jew, looking round as he plied the bellows. “About his losses, maybe; or the little retirement in the country that he’s just left, eh? – Ha! ha! Is that it, my dear?”

“Not a bit of it,” replied the Dodger, stopping the subject of discourse as Mr. Chitling was about to reply. “What do *you* say, Charley?”

“*I* should say,” replied Master Bates, with a grin, “that he was uncommon sweet upon Betsy. See how he’s a-blushing! Oh, my eye! here’s a merry-go-rounder! – Tommy Chitling’s in love! – Oh, Fagin, Fagin! what a spree!”

Thoroughly overpowered with the notion of Mr. Chitling being the victim of the tender passion, Master Bates threw himself back in his chair with such violence that he lost his balance, and pitched over upon the floor, where (the accident abating nothing of his merriment) he lay at full length till his laugh was over, when he resumed his former position and began another.

“Never mind him, my dear,” said the Jew, winking at Mr. Dawkins, and giving Master Bates a reproving tap with the nozzle of the bellows. “Betsy’s a fine girl. Stick up to her, Tom: stick up to her.”

“What I mean to say, Fagin,” replied Mr. Chitling, very red in the face, “is, that that isn’t anything to anybody here.”

“No more it is,” replied the Jew “Charley will talk. Don’t mind him, my dear; don’t mind him. Betsy’s a fine girl. Do as she bids you, Tom, and you’ll make your fortune.”

“So I *do* do as she bids me,” replied Mr. Chitling; “I shouldn’t have been milled if it hadn’t been for her advice. But it turned out a good job for you, didn’t it, Fagin? And what’s six weeks of it? It must come some time or another; and why not in the winter time when you don’t want to go out a-walking so much; eh, Fagin?”

“Ah, to be sure, my dear,” replied the Jew.

“You wouldn’t mind it again, Tom, would you,” asked the Dodger, winking upon Charley and the Jew, “if Bet was all right?”

“I mean to say that I shouldn’t,” replied Tom, angrily; “there, now! Ah! Who’ll say as much as that, I should like to know; eh, Fagin?”

“Nobody, my dear,” replied the Jew; “not a soul, Tom. I don’t know one of ’em that would do it besides you; not one of ’em, my dear.”

“I might have got clear off if I’d split upon her; mighn’t I, Fagin?” angrily pursued the poor half-witted dupe. “A word from me would have done it; wouldn’t it, Fagin?”

“To be sure it would, my dear,” replied the Jew.

“But I didn’t blab it, did I, Fagin?” demanded Tom, pouring question upon question with great volubility.

“No, no, to be sure,” replied the Jew; “you were too stout-hearted for that, – a deal too stout, my dear.”

“Perhaps I was,” rejoined Tom, looking round; “and if I was, what’s to laugh at in that; eh, Fagin?”

The Jew, perceiving that Mr. Chitling was considerably roused, hastened to assure him that nobody was laughing, and, to prove the gravity of the company, appealed to Master Bates, the principal offender; but unfortunately Charley, in opening his mouth to reply that he was never more serious in his life, was unable to prevent the escape of such a violent roar that the abused Mr. Chitling,

without any preliminary ceremonies rushed across the room, and aimed a blow at the offender, who, being skilful in evading pursuit, ducked to avoid it, and chose his time so well that it lighted on the chest of the merry old gentleman, and caused him to stagger to the wall, where he stood panting for breath, while Mr. Chitling looked on in intense dismay.

“Hark!” cried the Dodger at this moment, “I heard the tinkler.” Catching up the light, he crept softly up stairs.

The bell rang again with some impatience while the party were in darkness. After a short pause, the Dodger reappeared, and whispered Fagin mysteriously.

“What!” cried the Jew, “alone?”

The Dodger nodded in the affirmative, and, shading the flame of the candle with his hand, gave Charley Bates a private intimation in dumb show that he had better not be funny just then. Having performed this friendly office, he fixed his eyes on the Jew’s face and awaited his directions.

The old man bit his yellow fingers, and meditated for some seconds; his face working with agitation the while, as if he dreaded something, and feared to know the worst. At length he raised his head.

“Where is he?” he asked.

The Dodger pointed to the floor above, and made a gesture as if to leave the room.

“Yes,” said the Jew, answering the mute inquiry; “bring him down. Hush! – Quiet, Charley! – gently, Tom! Scarce, scarce!”

This brief direction to Charley Bates and his recent antagonist to retire, was softly and immediately obeyed. There was no sound of their whereabouts when the Dodger descended the stairs bearing the light in his hand, and followed by a man in a coarse smock-frock, who, after casting a hurried glance round the room, pulled off a large wrapper which had concealed the lower portion of his face, and disclosed – all haggard, unwashed, and unshaven, the features of flash Toby Crackit.

“How are you, Fagey?” said the worthy, nodding to the Jew. “Pop that shawl away in my castor, Dodger, so that I may know where to find it when I cut; that’s the time of day! You’ll be a fine young cracksman afore the old file now.”

With these words he pulled up the smock-frock, and, winding it round his middle, drew a chair to the fire, and placed his feet upon the hob.

“See there, Fagey,” he said, pointing disconsolately to his top-boots; “not a drop of Day and Martin since you know when; not a bubble of blacking, by – ! but don’t look at me in that way, man. All in good time; I can’t talk about business till I’ve eat and drank, so produce the sustenance, and let’s have a quiet fill-out for the first time these three days!”

The Jew motioned to the Dodger to place what eatables there were upon the table; and, seating himself opposite the housebreaker, waited his leisure.

To judge from appearances, Toby was by no means in a hurry to open the conversation. At first the Jew contented himself with patiently watching his countenance, as if to gain from its expression some clue to the intelligence he brought; but in vain. He looked tired and worn, but there was the same complacent repose upon his features that they always wore, and through dirt, and beard, and whisker, there still shone unimpaired the self-satisfied smirk of flash Toby Crackit. Then the Jew in an agony of impatience watched every morsel he put into his mouth, pacing up and down the room meanwhile in irrepressible excitement. It was all of no use. Toby continued to eat with the utmost outward indifference until he could eat no more; and then, ordering the Dodger out, closed the door, mixed a glass of spirits and water, and composed himself for talking.

“First and foremost, Fagey,” said Toby.

“Yes, yes!” interposed the Jew, drawing up his chair.

Mr. Crackit stopped to take a draught of spirits and water, and to declare that the gin was excellent; and then, placing his feet against the low mantelpiece, so as to bring his boots to about the level of his eye, quietly resumed.

“First and foremost, Fagey,” said the housebreaker, “how’s Bill?”

“What!” screamed the Jew, starting from his seat.

“Why, you don’t mean to say – ” began Toby, turning pale.

“Mean!” cried the Jew, stamping furiously on the ground. “Where are they? – Sikes and the boy – where are they? – where have they been? – where are they hiding? – why have they not been here?”

“The crack failed,” said Toby, faintly.

“I know it,” replied the Jew, tearing a newspaper from his pocket, and pointing to it. “What more?”

“They fired and hit the boy. We cut over the fields at the back with him between us – straight as the crow flies – through hedge and ditch. They gave chase. D – me! the whole country was awake, and the dogs upon us.”

“The boy!” gasped the Jew.

“Bill had him on his back, and scudded like the wind. We stopped to take him again between us; his head hung down, and he was cold. They were close upon our heels: every man for himself, and each from the gallows. We parted company, and left the youngster lying in a ditch. Alive or dead, that’s all I know of him.”

The Jew stopped to hear no more; but uttering a loud yell, and twining his hands in his hair, rushed from the room and from the house.

CHAPTER XXVI. IN WHICH A MYSTERIOUS CHARACTER APPEARS UPON THE SCENE, AND MANY THINGS INSEPARABLE FROM THIS HISTORY ARE DONE AND PERFORMED

The old man had gained the street corner before he began to recover the effect of Toby Crackit's intelligence. He had relaxed nothing of his unusual speed, but was still pressing onward in the same wild and disordered manner, when the sudden dashing past of a carriage, and a boisterous cry from the foot-passengers, who saw his danger, drove him back upon the pavement. Avoiding as much as possible all the main streets, and skulking only through the byways and alleys, he at length emerged on Snow Hill. Here he walked even faster than before; nor did he linger until he had again turned into a court, when, as if conscious that he was now in his proper element, he fell into his usual shuffling pace, and seemed to breathe more freely.

Near to the spot on which Snow Hill and Holborn Hill meet, there opens, upon the right hand as you come out of the city, a narrow and dismal alley leading to Saffron Hill. In its filthy shops are exposed for sale huge bunches of second-hand silk handkerchiefs, of all sizes and patterns – for here reside the traders who purchase them from pickpockets. Hundreds of these handkerchiefs hang dangling from pegs outside the windows, or flaunting from the door-posts; and the shelves within are piled with them. Confined as the limits of Field Lane are, it has its barber, its coffee-shop, its beer-shop, and its fried-fish warehouse. It is a commercial colony of itself, the emporium of petty larceny, visited at early morning and setting-in of dusk by silent merchants, who traffic in dark back-parlours, and go as strangely as they come. Here the clothesman, the shoe-vamper, and the rag-merchant, display their goods as sign-boards to the petty thief; and stores of old iron and bones, and heaps of mildewy fragments of woollen-stuff and linen, rust and rot in the grimy cellars.

It was into this place that the Jew turned. He was well known to the sallow denizens of the lane, for such of them as were on the lookout to buy or sell nodded familiarly as he passed along. He replied to their salutations in the same way, but bestowed no closer recognition until he reached the further end of the alley, when he stopped to address a salesman of small stature, who had squeezed as much of his person into a child's chair as the chair would hold, and was smoking a pipe at his warehouse door.

“Why, the sight of you, Mr. Fagin, would cure the hoptalmy!” said this respectable trader, in acknowledgment of the Jew's inquiry after his health.

“The neighbourhood was a little too hot, Lively,” said Fagin, elevating his eyebrows, and crossing his hands upon his shoulders.

“Well! I've heerd that complaint of it once or twice before,” replied the trader; “but it soon cools down again; don't you find it so?”

Fagin nodded in the affirmative, and pointing in the direction of Saffron Hill, inquired whether any one was up yonder to-night.

“At the Cripples?” inquired the man.

The Jew nodded.

“Let me see,” pursued the merchant, reflecting. “Yes; there's some half-dozen of 'em gone in that I knows. I don't think your friend's there.”

“Sikes is not, I suppose?” inquired the Jew, with a disappointed countenance.

“*Non istwentus*, as the lawyers say,” replied the little man, shaking his head, and looking amazingly sly. “Have you got anything in my line to-night?”

“Nothing to-night,” said the Jew, turning away.

“Are you going up to the Cripples, Fagin?” cried the little man, calling after him. “Stop! I don’t mind if I have a drop there with you!”

But as the Jew, looking back, waved his hand to intimate that he preferred being alone; and, moreover, as the little man could not very easily disengage himself from the chair, the sign of the Cripples was, for a time, bereft of the advantage of Mr. Lively’s presence. By the time he had got upon his legs the Jew had disappeared; so Mr. Lively, after ineffectually standing on tiptoe, in the hope of catching sight of him, again forced himself into the little chair, and, exchanging a shake of the head with a lady in the opposite shop, in which doubt and mistrust were plainly mingled, resumed his pipe with a grave demeanour.

The Three Cripples, or rather the Cripples, which was the sign by which the establishment was familiarly known to its patrons, was the same public-house in which Mr. Sikes and his dog have already figured. Merely making a sign to a man in the bar, Fagin walked straight up stairs, and opening the door of a room, and softly insinuating himself into the chamber, looked anxiously about, shading his eyes with his hand, as if in search of some particular person.

The room was illuminated by two gas-lights, the glare of which was prevented by the barred shutters and closely-drawn curtains of faded red from being visible outside. The ceiling was blackened to prevent its colour being injured by the flaring of the lamps; and the place was so full of dense tobacco-smoke, that at first it was scarcely possible to discern anything further. By degrees, however, as some of it cleared away through the open door, an assemblage of heads, as confused as the noises that greeted the ear, might be made out; and as the eye grew more accustomed to the scene, the spectator gradually became aware of the presence of a numerous company, male and female, crowded round a long table, at the upper end of which sat a chairman with a hammer of office in his hand, while a professional gentleman, with a bluish nose and his face tied up for the benefit of a toothache, presided at a jingling piano in a remote corner.

As Fagin stepped softly in, the professional gentleman, running over the keys by way of prelude, occasioned a general cry of order for a song; which having subsided, a young lady proceeded to entertain the company with a ballad in four verses, between each of which the accompanist played the melody all through as loud as he could. When this was over, the chairman gave a sentiment; after which, the professional gentlemen on the chairman’s right and left volunteered a duet, and sang it with great applause.

It was curious to observe some faces which stood out prominently from among the group. There was the chairman himself, (the landlord of the house,) a coarse, rough, heavy-built fellow, who, while the songs were proceeding, rolled his eyes hither and, thither, and, seeming to give himself up to joviality, had an eye for every thing that was done, and an ear for everything that was said – and sharp ones, too. Near him were the singers, receiving, with professional indifference, the compliments of the company, and applying themselves in turn to a dozen proffered glasses of spirits and water tendered by their more boisterous admirers, whose countenances, expressive of almost every vice in almost every grade, irresistibly attracted the attention by their very repulsiveness. Cunning, ferocity, and drunkenness in all its stages, were there in their strongest aspects; and women – some with the last lingering tinge of their early freshness almost fading as you looked, and others with every mark and stamp of their sex utterly beaten out, and presenting but one loathsome blank of profligacy and crime – some mere girls, others but young women, and none past the prime of life – formed the darkest and saddest portion of this dreary picture.

Fagin, troubled by no grave emotions, looked eagerly from face to face while these proceedings were in progress, but, apparently, without meeting that of which he was in search. Succeeding, at length, in catching the eye of the man who occupied the chair, he beckoned to him slightly, and left the room as quietly as he had entered it.

“What can I do for you, Mr. Fagin?” inquired the man, as he followed him out to the landing. “Wont you join us? They’ll be delighted, every one of ’em.”

The Jew shook his head impatiently, and said in a whisper, “Is *he* here?”

“No,” replied the man.

“And no news of Barney?” inquired Fagin.

“None,” replied the landlord of the Cripples; for it was he. “He wont stir till it’s all safe. Depend on it that they’re on the scent down there, and that if he moved he’d blow upon the thing at once. He’s all right enough, Barney is, else I should have heard of him. I’ll pound it that Barney’s managing properly. Let him alone for that.”

“Will *he* be here to-night?” asked the Jew, laying the same emphasis on the pronoun as before.

“Monks, do you mean?” inquired the landlord, hesitating.

“Hush!” said the Jew. “Yes.”

“Certain,” replied the man, drawing a gold watch from his fob; “I expected him here before now. If you’ll wait ten minutes, he’ll be – ”

“No, no,” said the Jew, hastily, as though, however desirous he might be to see the person in question, he was nevertheless relieved by his absence. “Tell him I came here to see him, and that he must come to me to-night; no, say to-morrow. As he is not here, to-morrow will be time enough.”

“Good!” said the man. “Nothing more?”

“Not a word now,” said the Jew, descending the stairs.

“I say,” said the other, looking over the rails, and speaking in a hoarse whisper; “what a time this would be for a sell! I’ve got Phil Barker here, so drunk that a boy might take him.”

“Aha! But it’s not Phil Barker’s time,” said the Jew, looking up. “Phil has something more to do before we can afford to part with him; so go back to the company, my dear, and tell them to lead merry lives — *while they last*. Ha! ha! ha!”

The landlord reciprocated the old man’s laugh, and returned to his guests. The Jew was no sooner alone, than his countenance resumed its former expression of anxiety and thought. After a brief reflection, he called a hack-cabriolet, and bade the man drive towards Bethnal Green. He dismissed him within some quarter of a mile of Mr. Sikes’s residence, and performed the short remainder of the distance on foot.

“Now,” muttered the Jew, as he knocked at the door, “if there is any deep play here, I shall have it out of you, my girl, cunning as you are.”

She was in her room, the woman said; so Fagin crept softly up stairs, and entered it without any previous ceremony. The girl was alone, lying with her head upon the table, and her hair straggling over it.

“She has been drinking,” thought the Jew, coolly, “or perhaps she is only miserable.”

The old man turned to close the door as he made this reflection, and the noise thus occasioned roused the girl. She eyed his crafty face narrowly, as she inquired whether there was any news, and listened to his recital of Toby Crackit’s story. When it was concluded, she sunk into her former attitude, but spoke not a word. She pushed the candle impatiently away, and once or twice, as she feverishly changed her position, shuffled her feet upon the ground; but this was all.

During this silence, the Jew looked restlessly about the room, as if to assure himself that there were no appearances of Sikes having covertly returned. Apparently satisfied with his inspection, he coughed twice or thrice, and made as many efforts to open a conversation; but the girl heeded him no more than if he had been made of stone. At length he made another attempt, and, rubbing his hands together, said, in his most conciliatory tone,

“And where should you think Bill was now, my dear – eh?”

The girl moaned out some scarcely intelligible reply, that she could not tell, and seemed, from the half-smothered noise that escaped her, to be crying.

“And the boy, too,” said the Jew, straining his eyes to catch a glimpse of her face. “Poor leetle child! – left in a ditch, Nance; only think!”

“The child,” said the girl, suddenly looking up, “is better where he is than among us: and if no harm comes to Bill from it, I hope he lies dead in the ditch, and that his young bones may rot there.”

“What!” cried the Jew, in amazement.

“Ay, I do,” returned the girl, meeting his gaze. “I shall be glad to have him away from my eyes, and to know that the worst is over. I can’t bear to have him about me. The sight of him turns me against myself and all of you.”

“Pooh!” said the Jew, scornfully. “You’re drunk, girl.”

“Am I?” cried the girl, bitterly. “It’s no fault of yours if I am not! you’d never have me anything else if you had your will, except now; – the humour doesn’t suit you, doesn’t it?”

“No!” rejoined the Jew, furiously. “It does not.”

“Change it, then!” responded the girl, with a laugh.

“Change it!” exclaimed the Jew, exasperated beyond all bounds by his companion’s unexpected obstinacy, and the vexation of the night, “I will change it! Listen to me, you drab! listen to me, who with six words can strangle Sikes as surely as if I had his bull’s throat between my fingers now. If he comes back, and leaves that boy behind him, – if he gets off free, and, dead or alive, fails to restore him to me, murder him yourself if you would have him escape Jack Ketch, and do it the moment he sets foot in this room, or, mind me, it will be too late!”

“What is all this?” cried the girl, involuntarily.

“What is it?” pursued Fagin, mad with rage. “This – When the boy’s worth hundreds of pounds to me, am I to lose what chance threw me in the way of getting safely, through the whims of a drunken gang that I could whistle away the lives of, – and me bound, too, to a born devil that only wants the will, and has got the power to, to – ”

Panting for breath, the old man stammered for a word, and in that one instant checked the torrent of his wrath, and changed his whole demeanour. A moment before, his clenched hands grasped the air, his eyes had dilated, and his face grown livid with passion; but now he shrunk into a chair, and, cowering together, trembled with the apprehension of having himself disclosed some hidden villany. After a short silence, he ventured to look round at his companion, and appeared somewhat reassured on beholding her in the same listless attitude from which he had first roused her.

“Nancy, dear!” croaked the Jew, in his usual voice. “Did you mind me, dear?”

“Don’t worry me, now, Fagin!” replied the girl, raising her head languidly. “If Bill has not done it this time, he will another. He has done many a good job for you, and will do many more when he can; and when he can’t, he wont; so no more about that.”

“Regarding this boy, my dear?” said the Jew, rubbing the palms of his hands nervously together.

“The boy must take his chance with the rest,” interrupted Nancy, hastily; “and I say again, I hope he is dead, and out of harm’s way, and out of yours, – that is, if Bill comes to no harm, and if Toby got clear off, he’s pretty sure to, for he’s worth two of him any time.”

“And about what I was saying, my dear?” observed the Jew, keeping his glistening eye steadily upon her.

“You must say it all over again if it’s any thing you want me to do,” rejoined Nancy: “and if it is, you had better wait till to-morrow. You put me up for a minute, but now I’m stupid again.”

Fagin put several other questions, all with the same drift of ascertaining whether the girl had profited by his unguarded hints; but she answered them so readily, and was withal so utterly unmoved by his searching looks, that his original impression of her being more than a trifle in liquor was fully confirmed. Nancy, indeed, was not exempt from a failing which was very common among the Jew’s female pupils, and in which, in their tenderer years, they were rather encouraged than checked. Her disordered appearance, and a wholesale perfume of Geneva which pervaded the apartment, afforded strong confirmatory evidence of the justice of the Jew’s supposition; and when, after indulging in the

temporary display of violence above described, she subsided, first into dulness, and afterwards into a compound of feelings, under the influence of which she shed tears one minute, and in the next gave utterance to various exclamations of “Never say die!” and divers calculations as to what might be the amount of the odds so long as a lady or gentleman were happy, Mr. Fagin, who had had considerable experience of such matters in his time, saw, with great satisfaction, that she was very far gone indeed.

Having eased his mind by this discovery, and accomplished his twofold object of imparting to the girl what he had that night heard, and ascertaining with his own eyes that Sikes had not returned, Mr. Fagin again turned his face homeward, leaving his young friend asleep with her head upon the table.

It was within an hour of midnight, and the weather being dark and piercing cold, he had no great temptation to loiter. The sharp wind that scoured the streets seemed to have cleared them of passengers as of dust and mud, for few people were abroad, and they were to all appearance hastening fast home. It blew from the right quarter for the Jew, however, and straight before it he went, trembling and shivering as every fresh gust drove him rudely on his way.

He had reached the corner of his own street, and was already fumbling in his pocket for the door-key, when a dark figure emerged from a projecting entrance which lay in deep shadow, and, crossing the road, glided up to him unperceived.

“Fagin!” whispered a voice close to his ear.

“Ah!” said the Jew, turning quickly round, “is that – ”

“Yes!” interrupted the stranger, harshly. “I have been lingering here these two hours. Where the devil have you been?”

“On your business, my dear,” replied the Jew, glancing uneasily at his companion, and slackening his pace as he spoke. “On your business all night.”

“Oh, of course!” said the stranger, with a sneer. “Well; and what’s come of it?”

“Nothing good,” said the Jew.

“Nothing bad, I hope?” said the stranger, stopping short, and turning a startled look upon his companion.

The Jew shook his head, and was about to reply, when the stranger, interrupting him, motioned to the house before which they had by this time arrived, and remarked, that he had better say what he had got to say under cover, for his blood was chilled with standing about so long, and the wind blew through him.

Fagin looked as if he could have willingly excused himself from taking home a visiter at that unseasonable hour, and muttered something about having no fire; but his companion repeating his request in a peremptory manner, he unlocked the door, and requested him to close it softly, while he got a light.

“It’s as dark as the grave,” said the man, groping forward a few steps. “Make haste. I hate this!”

“Shut the door,” whispered Fagin from the end of the passage. As he spoke, it closed with a loud noise.

“That wasn’t my doing,” said the other man, feeling his way. “The wind blew it to, or it shut of its own accord; one or the other. Look sharp with the light, or I shall knock my brains out against something in this confounded hole.”

Fagin stealthily descended the kitchen stairs, and, after a short absence, returned with a lighted candle, and the intelligence that Toby Crackit was asleep in the back-room below, and the boys in the front one. Beckoning the other man to follow him, he led the way up stairs.

“We can say the few words we’ve got to say in here, my dear,” said the Jew, throwing open a door on the first floor; “and as there are holes in the shutters, and we never shew lights to our neighbours, we’ll set the candle on the stairs. There!”

With these words, the Jew, stooping down, placed the candle on an upper flight of stairs, exactly opposite the room door, and led the way into the apartment, which was destitute of all moveables save

a broken arm-chair, and an old couch or sofa without covering, which stood behind the door. Upon this piece of furniture the stranger flung himself with the air of a weary man, and the Jew drawing up the arm-chair opposite, they sat face to face. It was not quite dark, for the door was partially open, and the candle outside threw a feeble reflection on the opposite wall.

They conversed for some time in whispers; although nothing of the conversation was distinguishable beyond a few disjointed words here and there; a listener might easily have perceived that Fagin appeared to be defending himself against some remarks of the stranger, and that the latter was in a state of considerable irritation. They might have been talking thus for a quarter of an hour or more, when Monks – by which name the Jew had designated the strange man several times in the course of their colloquy – said, raising his voice a little,

“I tell you again it was badly planned. Why not have kept him here among the rest, and made a sneaking, snivelling pickpocket of him at once?”

“Only hear him!” exclaimed the Jew, shrugging his shoulders.

“Why, do you mean to say you couldn’t have done it if you had chosen?” demanded Monks, sternly. “Haven’t you done it with other boys scores of times? If you had had patience for a twelvemonth, at most, couldn’t you have got him convicted and sent safely out of the kingdom, perhaps for life?”

“Whose turn would that have served, my dear?” inquired the Jew, humbly.

“Mine,” replied Monks.

“But not mine,” said the Jew, submissively. “He might have become of use to me. When there are two parties to a bargain, it is only reasonable that the interest of both should be consulted; is it, my good friend?”

“What then?” demanded Monks, sulkily. “I saw it was not easy to train him to the business,” replied the Jew; “he was not like other boys in the same circumstances.”

“Curse him, no!” muttered the man, “or he would have been a thief long ago.”

“I had no hold upon him to make him worse,” pursued the Jew, anxiously watching the countenance of his companion. “His hand was not in; I had nothing to frighten him with, which we always must have in the beginning, or we labour in vain. What could I do? Send him out with the Dodger and Charley? We had enough of that at first, my dear; I trembled for us all.”

“*That* was not my doing,” observed Monks.

“No, no, my dear!” renewed the Jew, “and I don’t quarrel with it now, because, if it had never happened, you might never have clapped eyes upon the boy to notice him, and so led to the discovery that it was him you were looking for. Well; I got him back for you by means of the girl, and then *she* begins to favour him.”

“Throttle the girl!” said Monks, impatiently.

“Why, we can’t afford to do that just now, my dear,” replied the Jew, smiling; “and, besides, that sort of thing is not in our way, or one of these days I might be glad to have it done. I know what these girls are, Monks, well. As soon as the boy begins to harden, she’ll care no more for him than for a block of wood. You want him made a thief: if he is alive, I can make him one from this time; and if – if – ” said the Jew, drawing nearer to the other, – “it’s not likely, mind, – but if the worst comes to the worst, and he is dead – ”

“It’s no fault of mine if he is!” interposed the other man, with a look of terror, and clasping the Jew’s arm with trembling hands. “Mind that, Fagin; I had no hand in it. Anything but his death, I told you from the first. I won’t shed blood; it’s always found out, and haunts a man besides. If they shot him dead, I was not the cause; do you hear me? Fire this infernal den! – what’s that?”

“What!” cried the Jew, grasping the coward round the body with both arms as he sprung to his feet. “Where?”

“Yonder!” replied the man, glaring at the opposite wall. “The shadow – I saw the shadow of a woman, in a cloak and bonnet, pass along the wainscot like a breath!”

The Jew released his hold, and they rushed tumultuously from the room. The candle, wasted by the draught, was standing where it had been placed, and shewed them the empty staircase, and their own white faces. They listened intently, but a profound silence reigned throughout the house.

“It’s your fancy,” said the Jew, taking up the light, and turning to his companion.

“I’ll swear I saw it!” replied Monks, trembling violently. “It was bending forward when I saw it first, and when I spoke it darted away.”

The Jew glanced contemptuously at the pale face of his associate, and, telling him he could follow if he pleased, ascended the stairs. They looked into all the rooms; they were cold, bare, and empty. They descended into the passage, and thence into the cellars below. The green damp hung upon the low walls, and the tracks of the snail and slug glistened in the light; but all was still as death.

“What do you think now?” said the Jew, when they had regained the passage. “Besides ourselves, there’s not a creature in the house except Toby and the boys, and they’re safe enough. See here!”

As a proof of the fact, the Jew drew forth two keys from his pocket; and explained, that when he first went down stairs he had locked them in, to prevent any intrusion on the conference.

This accumulated testimony effectually staggered Mr. Monks. His protestations had gradually become less and less vehement as they proceeded in their search without making any discovery; and now he gave vent to several very grim laughs, and confessed it could only have been his excited imagination. He declined any renewal of the conversation, however, for that night, suddenly remembering that it was past one o’clock: and so the amiable couple parted.

CHAPTER XXVI. ATONES FOR THE UNPOLITENESS OF A FORMER CHAPTER, WHICH DESERTED A LADY MOST UNCEREMONIOUSLY

As it would be by no means seemly in an humble author to keep so mighty a personage as a beadle waiting with his back to the fire, and the skirts of his coat gathered up under his arms, until such time as it might suit his pleasure to relieve him; and as it would still less become his station, or his gallantry, to involve in the same neglect a lady on whom that beadle had looked with an eye of tenderness and affection, and in whose ear he had whispered sweet words, which, coming from such a quarter, might well thrill the bosom of maid or matron of whatsoever degree; the faithful historian whose pen traces these words, trusting that he knows his place, and entertains a becoming reverence for those upon earth to whom high and important authority is delegated, hastens to pay them that respect which their position demands, and to treat them with all that duteous ceremony which their exalted rank and (by consequence) great virtues imperatively claim at his hands. Towards this end, indeed, he had purposed to introduce in this place a dissertation touching the divine right of beadles, and elucidative of the position, that a beadle can do no wrong, which could not fail to have been both pleasurable and profitable to the right-minded reader, but which he is unfortunately compelled, by want of time and space, to postpone to some more convenient and fitting opportunity; on the arrival of which, he will be prepared to shew, that a beadle properly constituted, – that is to say, a parochial beadle, attached to a parochial workhouse, and attending in his official capacity the parochial church, – is, in right and virtue of his office, possessed of all the excellences and best qualities of humanity; and that to none of those excellences can mere companies' beadles, or court-of-law beadles, or even chapel-of-ease beadles (save the last, and they in a very lowly and inferior degree), lay the remotest sustainable claim.

Mr. Bumble had recounted the tea-spoons, re-weighed the sugar-tongs, made a closer inspection of the milk-pot, and ascertained to a nicety the exact condition of the furniture down to the very horse-hair seats of the chairs; and had repeated each process full half-a-dozen times, before he began to think that it was time for Mrs. Corney to return. Thinking begets thinking; and, as there were no sounds of Mrs. Corney's approach, it occurred to Mr. Bumble that it would be an innocent and virtuous way of spending the time, if he were further to allay his curiosity by a cursory glance at the interior of Mrs. Corney's chest of drawers.

Having listened at the keyhole to assure himself that nobody was approaching the chamber, Mr. Bumble, beginning at the bottom, proceeded to make himself acquainted with the contents of the three long drawers, which, being filled with various garments of good fashion and texture, carefully preserved between two layers of old newspapers, speckled with dried lavender, seemed to yield him exceeding satisfaction. Arriving, in course of time, at the right-hand corner drawer (in which was the key), and beholding therein a small padlocked box, which, being shaken, gave forth a pleasant sound, as of the chinking of coin, Mr. Bumble returned with a stately walk to the fireplace, and, resuming his old attitude, said, with a grave and determined air, "I'll do it!" He followed up this remarkable declaration by shaking his head in a waggish manner for ten minutes, as though he were remonstrating with himself for being such a pleasant dog, and then took a view of his legs in profile with much seeming pleasure and interest.

He was still placidly engaged in this latter survey, when Mrs. Corney, hurrying into the room, threw herself, in a breathless state, on a chair by the fireside, and covering her eyes with one hand, placed the other over her heart, and gasped for breath.

“Mrs. Corney,” said Mr. Bumble, stooping over the matron, “what is this, ma’am? has anything happened, ma’am? Pray answer me; I’m on – on – ” Mr. Bumble, in his alarm, could not immediately think of the word “tenterhooks,” so he said, “broken bottles.”

“Oh, Mr. Bumble!” cried the lady, “I have been so dreadfully put out!”

“Put out, ma’am!” exclaimed Mr. Bumble; “who has dared to – ? I know!” said Mr. Bumble, checking himself, with native majesty, “this is them wicious paupers!”

“It’s dreadful to think of!” said the lady, shuddering.

“Then *don’t* think of it, ma’am,” rejoined Mr. Bumble.

“I can’t help it,” whimpered the lady.

“Then take something, ma’am,” said Mr. Bumble, soothingly. “A little of the wine?”

“Not for the world!” replied Mrs. Corney. “I couldn’t, – oh! The top shelf in the right-hand corner – oh!” Uttering these words, the good lady pointed distractedly to the cupboard, and underwent a convulsion from internal spasms. Mr. Bumble rushed to the closet, and, snatching a pint green-glass bottle from the shelf, thus incoherently indicated, filled a tea-cup with its contents, and held it to the lady’s lips.

“I’m better now,” said Mrs. Corney, falling back, after drinking half of it.

Mr. Bumble raised his eyes piously to the ceiling in thankfulness, and, bringing them down again to the brim of the cup, lifted it to his nose.

“Peppermint,” explained Mrs. Corney, in a faint voice, smiling gently on the beadle as she spoke. “Try it; there’s a little – a little something else in it.”

Mr. Bumble tasted the medicine with a doubtful look; smacked his lips, took another taste, and put the cup down empty.

“It is very comforting,” said Mrs. Corney.

“Very much so indeed, ma’am,” said the beadle. As he spoke, he drew a chair beside the matron, and tenderly inquired what had happened to distress her.

“Nothing,” replied Mrs. Corney. “I am a foolish, excitable, weak creetur.”

“Not weak, ma’am,” retorted Mr. Bumble, drawing his chair a little closer. “Are you a weak creetur, Mrs. Corney?”

“We are all weak creeturs,” said Mrs. Corney, laying down a general principle.

“So we are,” said the beadle.

Nothing was said on either side for a minute or two afterwards; and by the expiration of that time, Mr. Bumble had illustrated the position by removing his left arm from the back of Mrs. Corney’s chair, where it had previously rested, to Mrs. Corney’s apron-string, round which it gradually became entwined.

“We are all weak creeturs,” said Mr. Bumble.

Mrs. Corney sighed.

“Dont sigh, Mrs. Corney,” said Mr. Bumble.

“I can’t help it,” said Mrs. Corney. And she sighed again.

“This is a very comfortable room, ma’am,” said Mr. Bumble, looking round. “Another room and this, ma’am, would be a complete thing.”

“It would be too much for one,” murmured the lady.

“But not for two, ma’am,” rejoined Mr. Bumble, in soft accents. “Eh, Mrs. Corney?”

Mrs. Corney drooped her head when the beadle said this, and the beadle drooped his to get a view of Mrs. Corney’s face. Mrs. Corney, with great propriety, turned her head away, and released her hand to get at her pocket-handkerchief, but insensibly replaced it in that of Mr. Bumble.

“The board allow you coals, don’t they, Mrs. Corney?” inquired the beadle, affectionately pressing her hand.

“And candles,” replied Mrs. Corney, slightly returning the pressure.

“Coals, candles, and house-rent free,” said Mr. Bumble. “Oh, Mrs. Corney, what an angel you are!”

The lady was not proof against this burst of feeling. She sunk into Mr. Bumble’s arms; and that gentleman, in his agitation, imprinted a passionate kiss upon her chaste nose.

“Such porochial perfection!” exclaimed Mr. Bumble, rapturously. “You know that Mr. Slout is worse to-night, my fascinator?”

“Yes,” replied Mrs. Corney, bashfully.

“He can’t live a week, the doctor says,” pursued, Mr. Bumble. “He is the master of this establishment; his death will cause a vacancy; that vacancy must be filled up. Oh Mrs. Corney, what a prospect this opens! What an opportunity for a joining of hearts and housekeeping!”

Mrs. Corney sobbed.

“The little word?” said Mr. Bumble, bending over the bashful beauty – “the one little, little, little word, my blessed Corney?”

“Ye – ye – yes!” sighed out the matron.

“One more,” pursued the beadle; “compose your darling feelings for only one more. When is it to come off?”

Mrs. Corney twice essayed to speak, and twice failed. At length, summoning up courage, she threw her arms round Mr. Bumble’s neck, and said, it might be as soon as ever he pleased, and that he was “a irresistible duck.”

Matters being thus amicably and satisfactorily arranged, the contract was solemnly ratified in another tea-cupful of the peppermint mixture, which was rendered the more necessary by the flutter and agitation of the lady’s spirits. While it was being disposed of, she acquainted Mr. Bumble with the old woman’s decease.

“Very good,” said that gentleman, sipping his peppermint “I’ll call at Sowerberry’s as I go home, and tell him to send to-morrow morning. Was it that as frightened you, love?”

“It wasn’t anything particular, dear,” said the lady, evasively.

“It must have been something, love,” urged Mr. Bumble. “Wont you tell your own B.?”

“Not now,” rejoined the lady; “one of these days, – after we’re married, dear.”

“After we’re married!” exclaimed Mr. Bumble. “It wasn’t any impudence from any of them male paupers as – ”

“No, no, love!” interposed the lady, hastily.

“If I thought it was,” continued Mr. Bumble, – “if I thought any one of ’em had dared to lift his vulgar eyes to that lovely countenance – ”

“They wouldn’t have dared to do it, love,” responded the lady.

“They had better not!” said Mr. Bumble, clenching his fist. “Let me see any man, porochial, or extra-porochial, as would presume to do it, and I can tell him that he wouldn’t do it a second time!”

Unembellished by any violence of gesticulation, this might have sounded as no very high compliment to the lady’s charms; but, as Mr. Bumble accompanied the threat with many warlike gestures, she was much touched with this proof of his devotion, and protested, with great admiration, that he was indeed a dove.

The dove then turned up his coat-collar, and put on his cocked-hat, and having exchanged a long and affectionate embrace with his future partner, once again braved the cold wind of the night; merely pausing for a few minutes in the male paupers’ ward to abuse them a little, with the view of satisfying himself that he could fill the office of workhouse-master with needful acerbity. Assured of his qualifications, Mr. Bumble left the building with a light heart and bright visions of his future promotion, which served to occupy his mind until he reached the shop of the undertaker.

Now, Mr. and Mrs. Sowerberry having gone out to tea and supper, and Noah Claypole not being at any time disposed to take upon himself a greater amount of physical exertion than is necessary to a convenient performance of the two functions of eating and drinking, the shop was not closed,

although it was past the usual hour of shutting-up. Mr. Bumble tapped with his cane on the counter several times; but, attracting no attention, and beholding a light shining through the glass-window of the little parlour, at the back of the shop, he made bold to peep in and see what was going forward; and, when he saw what *was* going forward, he was not a little surprised.

The cloth was laid for supper, and the table was covered with bread and butter, plates, and glasses, a porter-pot, and a wine-bottle. At the upper end of the table, Mr. Noah Claypole lolled negligently in an easy-chair, with his legs thrown over one of the arms, an open clasp-knife in one hand, and a mass of buttered bread in the other; close beside him stood Charlotte, opening oysters from a barrel, which Mr. Claypole condescended to swallow with remarkable avidity. A more than ordinary redness in the region of the young gentleman's nose, and a kind of fixed wink in his right eye, denoted that he was in a slight degree intoxicated; and these symptoms were confirmed by the intense relish with which he took his oysters, for which nothing but a strong appreciation of their cooling properties, in cases of internal fever, could have sufficiently accounted.

"Here's a delicious fat one, Noah, dear!" said Charlotte; "try him, do; only this one."

"What a delicious thing is a oyster!" remarked Mr. Claypole, after he had swallowed it. "What a pity it is a number of 'em should ever make you feel uncomfortable, isn't it, Charlotte?"

"It's quite a cruelty," said Charlotte.

"So it is," acquiesced Mr. Claypole. "A'n't yer fond of oysters?"

"Not overmuch," replied Charlotte. "I like to see you eat 'em, Noah dear, better than eating them myself."

"Lor'!" said Noah, reflectively; "how queer!"

"Have another," said Charlotte. "Here's one with such a beautiful, delicate beard!"

"I can't manage any more," said Noah. "I'm very sorry. Come here, Charlotte, and I'll kiss yer."

"What!" said Mr. Bumble, bursting into the room. "Say that again, sir."

Charlotte uttered a scream, and hid her face in her apron; while Mr. Claypole, without making any further change in his position than suffering his legs to reach the ground, gazed at the beadle in drunken terror.

"Say it again, you vile, owdacious fellow!" said Mr. Bumble. "How dare you mention such a thing, sir? And how dare you encourage him, you insolent minx? Kiss her!" exclaimed Mr. Bumble, in strong indignation. "Faugh!"

"I didn't mean to do it!" said Noah, blubbering. "She's always a-kissing of me, whether I like it, or not."

"Oh, Noah!" cried Charlotte, reproachfully.

"Yer are, yer know yer are!" retorted Noah. "She's always a-doing of it, Mr. Bumble, sir; she chucks me under the chin, please sir, and makes all manner of love!"

"Silence!" cried Mr. Bumble, sternly. "Take yourself down stairs, ma'am. Noah, you shut up the shop, and say another word till your master comes home at your peril; and, when he does come home, tell him that Mr. Bumble said he was to send a old woman's shell after breakfast to-morrow morning. Do you hear, sir? Kissing!" cried Mr. Bumble, holding up his hands. "The sin and wickedness of the lower orders in this porochial district is frightful; if parliament don't take their abominable courses under consideration, this country's ruined, and the character of the peasantry gone for ever!" With these words, the beadle strode, with a lofty and gloomy air, from the undertaker's premises.

And now that we have accompanied him so far on his road home, and have made all necessary preparations for the old woman's funeral, let us set on foot a few inquiries after young Oliver Twist, and ascertain whether he be still lying in the ditch where Toby Crackit left him.

CHAPTER XXVIII. LOOKS AFTER OLIVER, AND PROCEEDS WITH HIS ADVENTURES

“Wolves tear your throats!” muttered Sikes, grinding his teeth. “I wish I was among some of you; you’d howl the hoarser for it.”

As Sikes growled forth this imprecation, with the most desperate ferocity that his desperate nature was capable of, he rested the body of the wounded boy across his bended knee, and turned his head for an instant to look back at his pursuers.

There was little to be made out in the mist and darkness; but the loud shouting of men vibrated through the air, and the barking of the neighbouring dogs, roused by the sound of the alarm-bell, resounded in every direction.

“Stop, you white-livered hound!” cried the robber, shouting after Toby Crackit, who, making the best use of his long legs, was already ahead, – “stop!”

The repetition of the word brought Toby to a dead stand-still, for he was not quite satisfied that he was beyond the range of pistol-shot, and Sikes was in no mood to be played with.

“Bear a hand with the boy,” roared Sikes, beckoning furiously to his confederate. “Come back!”

Toby made a show of returning, but ventured, in a low voice, broken for want of breath, to intimate considerable reluctance as he came slowly along.

“Quicker!” cried Sikes, laying the boy in a dry ditch at his feet, and drawing a pistol from his pocket. “Dont play the booby with me.”

At this moment the noise grew louder, and Sikes, again looking round, could discern that the men who had given chase were already climbing the gate of the field in which he stood, and that a couple of dogs were some paces in advance of them.

“It’s all up, Bill,” cried Toby; “drop the kid, and show ’em your heels.” With this parting advice, Mr. Crackit, preferring the chance of being shot by his friend to the certainty of being taken by his enemies, fairly turned tail, and darted off at full speed. Sikes clenched his teeth, took one look round, threw over the prostrate form of Oliver the cape in which he had been hurriedly muffled, ran along the front of the hedge, as if to distract the attention of those behind from the spot where the boy lay, paused for a second before another hedge which met it at right angles, and whirling his pistol high into the air, cleared it at a bound, and was gone.

“Ho, ho, there!” cried a tremulous voice in the rear. “Pincher, Neptune, come here, come here!”

The dogs, which, in common with their masters, seemed to have no particular relish for the sport in which they were engaged, readily answered to this command: and three men, who had by this time advanced some distance into the field, stopped to take counsel together.

“My advice, or, leastways, I should say, my *orders*, is,” said the fattest man of the party, “that we ’mediately go home again.”

“I am agreeable to anything which is agreeable to Mr. Giles,” said a shorter man, who was by no means of a slim figure, and who was very pale in the face, and very polite, as frightened men frequently are.

“I shouldn’t wish to appear ill-mannered, gentlemen,” said the third, who had called the dogs back, “Mr. Giles ought to know.”

“Certainly,” replied the shorter man; “and whatever Mr. Giles says it isn’t our place to contradict him. No, no, I know my situation, – thank my stars, I know my situation.” To tell the truth, the little man *did* seem to know his situation, and to know perfectly well that it was by no means a desirable one, for his teeth chattered in his head as he spoke.

“You are afraid, Brittles,” said Mr. Giles.

“I a’n’t,” said Brittles.

“You are,” said Giles.

“You’re a falsehood, Mr. Giles,” said Brittles.

“You’re a lie, Brittles,” said Mr. Giles.

Now, these four retorts arose from Mr. Giles’s taunt, and Mr. Giles’s taunt had arisen from his indignation at having the responsibility of going home again imposed upon himself under cover of a compliment. The third man brought the dispute to a close most philosophically.

“I’ll tell you what it is, gentlemen,” said he, “we’re all afraid.”

“Speak for yourself, sir,” said Mr. Giles, who was the palest of the party.

“So I do,” replied the man. “It’s natural and proper to be afraid, under such circumstances. *I* am.”

“So am I,” said Brittles; “only there’s no call to tell a man he is, so bounceably.”

These frank admissions softened Mr. Giles, who at once owned that *he* was afraid; upon which they all three faced about and ran back again with the completest unanimity, till Mr. Giles (who had the shortest wind of the party, and was encumbered with a pitchfork) most handsomely insisted upon stopping to make an apology for his hastiness of speech.

“But it’s wonderful,” said Mr. Giles, when he had explained, “what a man will do when his blood is up. I should have committed murder, I know I should, if we’d caught one of the rascals.”

As the other two were impressed with a similar presentiment, and their blood, like his, had all gone down again, some speculation ensued upon the cause of this sudden change in their temperament.

“I know what it was,” said Mr. Giles; “it was the gate.”

“I shouldn’t wonder if it was,” exclaimed Brittles, catching at the idea.

“You may depend upon it,” said Giles, “that that gate stopped the flow of the excitement. I felt all mine suddenly going away as I was climbing over it.”

By a remarkable coincidence the other two had been visited with the same unpleasant sensation at that precise moment; so that it was quite conclusive that it was the gate, especially as there was no doubt regarding the time at which the change had taken place, because all three remembered that they had come in sight of the robbers at the very instant of its occurrence.

This dialogue was held between the two men who had surprised the burglars, and a travelling tinker, who had been sleeping in an outhouse, and who had been roused, together with his two mongrel curs, to join in the pursuit. Mr. Giles acted in the double capacity of butler and steward to the old lady of the mansion, and Brittles was a lad of all-work, who, having entered her service a mere child, was treated as a promising young boy still, though he was something past thirty.

Encouraging each other with such converse as this, but keeping very close together notwithstanding, and looking apprehensively round whenever a fresh gust rattled through the boughs, the three men hurried back to a tree behind which they had left their lantern, lest its light should inform the thieves in what direction to fire. Catching up the light, they made the best of their way home, at a good round trot; and long after their dusky forms had ceased to be discernible, it might have been seen twinkling and dancing in the distance, like some exhalation of the damp and gloomy atmosphere through which it was swiftly borne.

The air grew colder as day came slowly on, and the mist rolled along the ground like a dense cloud of smoke; the grass was wet, the pathways and low places were all mire and water, and the damp breath of an unwholesome wind went languidly by with a hollow moaning. Still Oliver lay motionless and insensible on the spot where Sikes had left him.

Morning drew on apace; the air became more sharp and piercing, as its first dull hue – the death of night rather than the birth of day – glimmered faintly in the sky. The objects which had looked dim and terrible in the darkness grew more and more defined, and gradually resolved into their familiar

shapes. The rain came down thick and fast, and pattered noisily among the leafless bushes. But Oliver felt it not, as it beat against him, for he still lay stretched, helpless and unconscious, on his bed of clay.

At length, a low cry of pain broke the stillness that prevailed, and uttering it, the boy awoke. His left arm, rudely bandaged in a shawl, hung heavy and useless at his side, and the bandage was saturated with blood. He was so weak that he could scarcely raise himself into a sitting posture, and when he had done so, he looked feebly round for help, and groaned with pain. Trembling in every joint, from cold and exhaustion, he made an effort to stand upright, but, shuddering from head to foot, fell prostrate on the ground.

After a short return of the stupor in which he had been so long plunged, Oliver, urged by a creeping sickness at his heart, which seemed to warn him that if he lay there he must surely die, got upon his feet and essayed to walk. His head was dizzy, and he staggered to and fro like a drunken man; but he kept up nevertheless, and, with his head drooping languidly on his breast, went stumbling onward, he knew not whither.

And now, hosts of bewildering and confused ideas came crowding on his mind. He seemed to be still walking between Sikes and Crackit, who were angrily disputing, for the very words they said sounded in his ears: and when he caught his own attention, as it were, by making some violent effort to save himself from falling, he found that he was talking to them. Then he was alone with Sikes, plodding on as they had done the previous day, and as shadowy people passed them by, he felt the robber's grasp upon his wrist. Suddenly, he started back at the report of fire-arms, and there rose into the air loud cries and shouts; lights gleamed before his eyes, and all was noise and tumult, as some unseen hand bore him hurriedly away. Through all these rapid visions there ran an undefined, uneasy consciousness of pain, which wearied and tormented him incessantly.

Thus he staggered on, creeping almost mechanically between the bars of gates, or through hedge-gaps, as they came in his way, until he reached a road; and here the rain began to fall so heavily that it roused him.

He looked about, and saw that at no great distance there was a house, which perhaps he could reach. Seeing his condition, they might have compassion on him, and if they did not, it would be better, he thought, to die near human beings than in the lonely open fields. He summoned up all his strength for one last trial, and bent his faltering steps towards it.

As he drew nearer to this house, a feeling came over him that he had seen it before. He remembered nothing of its details, but the shape and aspect of the building seemed familiar to him.

That garden-wall! On the grass inside he had fallen on his knees last night, and prayed the two men's mercy. It was the very same house they had attempted to rob.

Oliver felt such fear come over him when he recognised the place, that, for the instant, he forgot the agony of his wound, and thought only of flight. Flight! He could scarcely stand; and if he were in full possession of all the best powers of his slight and youthful frame, where could he fly to? He pushed against the garden-gate; it was unlocked, and swung open on its hinges. He tottered across the lawn, climbed the steps, knocked faintly at the door, and his whole strength failing him, sunk down against one of the pillars of the little portico.

It happened that about this time, Mr. Giles, Brittles, and the tinker, were recruiting themselves after the fatigues and terrors of the night, with tea and sundries, in the kitchen. Not that it was Mr. Giles's habit to admit to too great familiarity the humbler servants, towards whom it was rather his wont to deport himself with a lofty affability, which, while it gratified, could not fail to remind them of his superior position in society. But death, fires, and burglary make all men equals; and Mr. Giles sat with his legs stretched out before the kitchen fender, leaning his left arm on the table, while, with his right, he illustrated a circumstantial and minute account of the robbery, to which his hearers (but especially the cook and housemaid, who were of the party) listened with breathless interest.

"It was about half-past two," said Mr. Giles, "or I wouldn't swear that it mightn't have been a little nearer three, when I woke up, and, turning round in my bed, as it might be so, (here Mr. Giles

turned round in his chair, and pulled the corner of the table-cloth over him to imitate bedclothes,) I fancied I heard a noise.”

At this point of the narrative, the cook turned pale, and asked the housemaid to shut the door, who asked Brittles, who asked the tinker, who pretended not to hear.

“ – Heerd a noise,” continued Mr. Giles. “I says, at first, ‘This is illusion;’ and was composing myself off to sleep, when I heard the noise again, distinct.”

“What sort of a noise?” asked the cook.

“A kind of a busting noise,” replied Mr. Giles, looking round him.

“More like the noise of powdering an iron bar on a nutmeg-grater,” suggested Brittle.

“It was, when *you* heard, sir,” rejoined Mr. Giles; “but, at this time, it had a busting sound. I turned down the clothes,” continued Giles, rolling back the table-cloth, “sat up in bed, and listened.”

The cook and housemaid simultaneously ejaculated, “Lor!” and drew their chairs closer together.

“I heard it now, quite apparent,” resumed Mr. Giles. “‘Somebody,’ I says, ‘is forcing of a door, or window; what’s to be done? I’ll call up that poor lad, Brittles, and save him from being murdered in his bed, or his throat,’ I says, ‘may be cut from his right ear to his left, without his ever knowing it.’”

Here all eyes were turned upon Brittles, who fixed his upon the speaker, and stared at him, with his mouth wide open, and his face expressive of the most unmitigated horror.

“I tossed off the clothes,” said Giles, throwing away the table-cloth, and looking very hard at the cook and housemaid, “got softly out of bed, drew on a pair of – ”

“Ladies present, Mr. Giles,” murmured the tinker.

“ – Of *shoes*, sir,” said Giles, turning upon him, and laying great emphasis on the word, “seized the loaded pistol that always goes up stairs with the plate-basket, and walked on tiptoes to his room. ‘Brittles,’ I says, when I had woke him, ‘don’t be frightened!’”

“So you did,” observed Brittles, in a low voice.

“‘We’re dead men, I think, Brittles,’ I says,” continued Giles; “‘but don’t be under any alarm.’”

“*Was* he frightened?” asked the cook.

“Not a bit of it,” replied Mr. Giles. “He was as firm – ah! pretty near as firm as I was.”

“I should have died at once, I’m sure, if it had been me,” observed the housemaid.

“You’re a woman,” retorted Brittles, plucking up a little.

“Brittles is right,” said Mr. Giles, nodding his head, approvingly; “from a woman nothing else was to be expected. We, being men, took a dark lantern, that was standing on Brittles’s hob, and groped our way down stairs in the pitch dark, – as it might be so.”

Mr. Giles had risen from his seat, and taken two steps with his eyes shut, to accompany his description with appropriate action, when he started violently, in common with the rest of the company, and hurried back to his chair. The cook and housemaid screamed.

“It was a knock,” said Mr. Giles, assuming perfect serenity; “open the door, somebody.”

Nobody moved.

“It seems a strange sort of thing, a knock coming at such a time in the morning,” said Mr. Giles, surveying the pale faces which surrounded him, and looking very blank himself; “but the door must be opened. Do you hear, somebody?”

Mr. Giles, as he spoke, looked at Brittles; but that young man being naturally modest, probably considered himself nobody, and so held that the inquiry could not have any application to him: at all events, he tendered no reply. Mr. Giles directed an appealing glance at the tinker, but he had suddenly fallen asleep. The women were out of the question.

“If Brittles would rather open the door in the presence of witnesses,” said Mr. Giles, after a short silence, “I am ready to make one.”

“So am I,” said the tinker, waking up as suddenly as he had fallen asleep.

Brittles capitulated on these terms; and the party being somewhat reassured by the discovery (made on throwing open the shutters) that it was now broad day, took their way up stairs, with the dogs in front, and the two women, who were afraid to stop below, bringing up the rear. By the advice of Mr. Giles, they all talked very loud, to warn any evil-disposed person outside that they were strong in numbers; and by a master-stroke of policy, originating in the brain of the same ingenious gentleman, the dogs' tails were well pinched in the hall to make them bark savagely.

These precautions having been taken, Mr. Giles held on fast by the tinker's arm (to prevent his running away, as he pleasantly said), and gave the word of command to open the door. Brittles obeyed, and the group, peeping timorously over each other's shoulders, beheld no more formidable object than poor little Oliver Twist, speechless and exhausted, who raised his heavy eyes, and mutely solicited their compassion.

"A boy!" exclaimed Mr. Giles, valiantly pushing the tinker into the background. "What's the matter with the – eh? – Why – Brittles – look here – don't you know?"

Brittles, who had got behind the door to open it, no sooner saw Oliver, than he uttered a loud cry. Mr. Giles, seizing the boy by one leg and one arm – fortunately not the broken limb – lugged him straight into the hall, and deposited him at full length on the ground thereof.

"Here he is!" bawled Giles, calling, in a great state of excitement, up the staircase; "here's one of the thieves, ma'am! Here's a[151][152] thief, miss – wounded, miss! I shot him, miss; and Brittles held the light."

"In a lantern, miss," cried Brittles, applying one hand to the side of his mouth, so that his voice might travel the better.

The two women-servants ran up stairs to carry the intelligence that Mr. Giles had captured a robber; and the tinker busied himself in endeavouring to restore Oliver, lest he should die before he could be hung. In the midst of all this noise and commotion, there was heard a sweet female voice, which quelled it in an instant.

"Giles!" whispered the voice from the stair-head.

"I'm here, miss," replied Mr. Giles. "Don't be frightened, miss; I ain't much injured. He didn't make a very desperate resistance, miss; I was soon too many for him."

"Hush!" replied the young lady; "you frighten my aunt as much as the thieves did. Is the poor creature much hurt?"

"Wounded desperate, miss," replied Giles, with indescribable complacency.

"He looks as if he was a-going, miss," bawled Brittles, in the same manner as before. "Wouldn't you like to come and look at him, miss, in case he should – ?"

"Hush, pray, there's a good man!" rejoined the young lady. "Wait quietly one instant, while I speak to aunt."

With a footstep as soft and gentle as the voice, the speaker tripped away, and soon retained, with the direction that the wounded person was to be carried carefully up stairs to Mr. Giles's room, and that Brittles was to saddle the pony and betake himself instantly to Chertsey, from which place he was to despatch, with all speed, a constable and doctor.

"But won't you take one look at him, first, miss?" asked Mr. Giles, with as much pride as if Oliver were some bird of rare plumage that he had skilfully brought down. "Not one little peep, miss?"

"Not now for the world," replied the young lady. "Poor fellow! oh! treat him kindly, Giles, if it is only for my sake!"

The old servant looked up at the speaker, as she turned away, with a glance as proud and admiring as if she had been his own child. Then bending over Oliver, he helped to carry him up stairs with the care and solicitude of a woman.

CHAPTER XXIX. HAS AN INTRODUCTORY ACCOUNT OF THE INMATES OF THE HOUSE TO WHICH OLIVER RESORTED, AND RELATES WHAT THEY THOUGHT OF HIM

In a handsome room – though its furniture had rather the air of old-fashioned comfort than of modern elegance – there sat two ladies at a well-spread breakfast-table. Mr. Giles, dressed with scrupulous care in a full suit of black, was in attendance upon them. He had taken his station some half-way between the sideboard and the breakfast-table, and with his body drawn up to its full height, his head thrown back, and inclined the merest trifle on one side, his left leg advanced, and his right hand thrust into his waistcoat, while his left hung down by his side, grasping a waiter, looked like one who laboured under a very agreeable sense of his own merits and importance.

Of the two ladies, one was well advanced in years, but the high-backed oaken chair in which she sat was not more upright than she. Dressed with the utmost nicety and precision, in a quaint mixture of by-gone costume, with some slight concessions to the prevailing taste, which rather served to point the old style pleasantly than to impair its effect, she sat in a stately manner with her hands folded on the table before her, and her eyes, of which age had dimmed but little of their brightness, attentively fixed upon her young companion.

The younger lady was in the lovely bloom and spring-time of womanhood; at that age when, if ever angels be for God's good purposes enthroned in mortal forms, they may be, without impiety, supposed to abide in such as hers.

She was not past seventeen. Cast in so slight and exquisite a mould; so mild and gentle, so pure and beautiful, that earth seemed not her element, nor its rough creatures her fit companions. The very intelligence that shone in her deep blue eye, and was stamped upon her noble head, seemed scarcely of her age or of the world; and yet the changing expression of sweetness and good humour, the thousand lights that played about the face and left no shadow there; above all, the smile – the cheerful, happy smile – were intertwined with the best sympathies and affections of our nature.

She was busily engaged in the little offices of the table, and chancing to raise her eyes as the elder lady was regarding her, playfully put back her hair, which was simply braided on her forehead, and threw into one beaming look such a gush of affection and artless loveliness, that blessed spirits might have smiled to look upon her.

The elder lady smiled; but her heart was full, and she brushed away a tear as she did so.

“And Brittles has been gone upwards of an hour, has he?” asked the old lady, after a pause.

“An hour and twelve minutes, ma'am,” replied Mr. Giles, referring to a silver watch, which he drew forth by a black ribbon.

“He is always slow,” remarked the old lady.

“Brittles always was a slow boy, ma'am,” replied the attendant. And seeing, by-the-by, that Brittles had been a slow boy for upwards of thirty years, there appeared no great probability of his ever being a fast one.

“He gets worse instead of better, I think,” said the elder lady.

“It is very inexcusable in him if he stops to play with any other boys,” said the young lady, smiling.

Mr. Giles was apparently considering the propriety of indulging in a respectful smile himself, when a gig drove up to the garden-gate, out of which there jumped a fat gentleman, who ran straight

up to the door, and getting quickly into the house by some mysterious process, burst into the room, and nearly overturned Mr. Giles and the breakfast-table together.

“I never heard of such a thing!” exclaimed the fat gentleman. “My dear Mrs. Maylie – bless my soul – in the silence of night, too – I *never* heard of such a thing!”

With these expressions of condolence, the fat gentleman shook hands with both ladies, and drawing up a chair, inquired how they found themselves.

“You ought to be dead – positively dead with the fright,” said the fat gentleman. “Why didn’t you send? Bless me, my man should have come in a minute, and so would I, and my assistant would have been delighted, or anybody, I’m sure, under such circumstances; dear, dear – so unexpected – in the silence of night, too!”

The doctor seemed especially troubled by the fact of the robbery having been unexpected, and attempted in the night-time, as if it were the established custom of gentlemen in the housebreaking way to transact business at noon, and to make an appointment, by the twopenny post, a day or two previous.

“And you, Miss Rose,” said the doctor, turning to the young lady, “I – ”

“Oh! very much so, indeed,” said Rose, interrupting him; “but there is a poor creature up stairs, whom aunt wishes you to see.”

“Ah! to be sure,” replied the doctor, “so there is. That was your handiwork, Giles, I understand.”

Mr. Giles, who had been feverishly putting the tea-cups to rights, blushed very red, and said that he had had that honour.

“Honour, eh?” said the doctor; “well, I don’t know; perhaps it’s as honourable to hit a thief in a back kitchen as to hit your man at twelve paces. Fancy that he fired in the air, and you’ve fought a duel, Giles.”

Mr. Giles, who thought this light treatment of the matter an unjust attempt at diminishing his glory, answered respectfully, that it was not for the like of him to judge about that, but he rather thought it was no joke to the opposite party.

“Gad, that’s true!” said the doctor. “Where is he? Shew me the way. I’ll look in again as I come down, Mrs. Maylie. That’s the little window that he got in at, eh? Well, I couldn’t have believed it.” Talking all the way, he followed Mr. Giles up stairs; and while he is going up stairs, the reader may be informed, that Mr. Losberne, a surgeon in the neighbourhood, known through a circuit of ten miles round as “the doctor,” had grown fat more from goodhumour than from good living, and was as kind and hearty, and withal as eccentric an old bachelor, as will be found in five times that space by any explorer alive.

The doctor was absent much longer than either he or the ladies had anticipated. A large flat box was fetched out of the gig, and a bedroom bell was rung very often, and the servants ran up and down stairs perpetually; from which tokens it was justly concluded that something important was going on above. At length he returned; and in reply to an anxious inquiry after his patient, looked very mysterious, and closed the door carefully.

“This is a very extraordinary thing, Mrs. Maylie,” said the doctor, standing with his back to the door, as if to keep it shut.

“He is not in danger, I hope?” said the old lady.

“Why, that would not be an extraordinary thing, under the circumstances,” replied the doctor; “though I don’t think he is. Have you seen this thief?”

“No,” rejoined the old lady.

“Nor heard anything about him?”

“No.”

“I beg your pardon, ma’am,” interposed Mr. Giles; “but I was going to tell you about him when Doctor Losberne came in.”

The fact was, that Mr. Giles had not at first been able to bring his mind to the avowal, that he had only shot a boy. Such commendations had been bestowed upon his bravery that he could not, for the life of him, help postponing the explanation for a few delicious minutes, during which he had flourished in the very zenith of a brief reputation for undaunted courage.

“Rose wished to see the man,” said Mrs. Maylie; “but I wouldn’t hear of it.”

“Humph!” rejoined the doctor. “There’s nothing very alarming in his appearance. Have you any objection to see him in my presence?”

“If it be necessary,” replied the old lady, “certainly not.”

“Then I think it is necessary,” said the doctor; “at all events, I am quite sure that you would deeply regret not having done so, if you postponed it. He is perfectly quiet and comfortable now. Allow me – Miss Rose, will you permit me? Not the slightest fear, I pledge you my honour.”

With many more loquacious assurances that they would be agreeably surprised in the aspect of the criminal, the doctor drew the young lady’s arm through one of his, and offering his disengaged hand to Mrs. Maylie, led them, with much ceremony and stateliness, up stairs.

“Now,” said the doctor, in a whisper, as he softly turned the handle of a bedroom-door, “let us hear what you think of him. He has not been shaved very recently, but he doesn’t look at all ferocious notwithstanding. Stop, though – let me see that he is in visiting order first.”

Stepping before them, he looked into the room, and motioning them to advance, closed the door when they had entered, and gently drew back the curtains of the bed. Upon it, in lieu of the dogged, black-visaged ruffian they had expected to behold, there lay a mere child, worn with pain and exhaustion, and sunk into a deep sleep. His wounded arm, bound and splintered up, was crossed upon his breast, and his head reclined upon the other, which was half hidden by his long hair, as it streamed over the pillow.

The honest gentleman held the curtain in his hand, and looked on, for a minute or so, in silence. Whilst he was watching the patient thus, the younger lady glided softly past, and seating herself in a chair by the bedside, gathered Oliver’s hair from his face, and as she stooped over him, her tears fell upon his forehead.

The boy stirred and smiled in his sleep, as though those marks of pity and compassion had awakened some pleasant dream of a love and affection he had never known; as a strain of gentle music, or the rippling of water in a silent place, or the odour of a flower, or even the mention of a familiar word, will sometimes call up sudden dim remembrances of scenes that never were, in this life, which vanish like a breath, and which some brief memory of a happier existence, long gone by, would seem to have awakened, for no power of the human mind can ever recall them.

“What can this mean?” exclaimed the elder lady. “This poor child can never have been the pupil of robbers!”

“Vice,” sighed the surgeon, replacing the curtain, “takes up her abode in many temples; and who can say that a fair outside shall not enshrine her?”

“But at so early an age!” urged Rose.

“My dear young lady,” rejoined the surgeon, mournfully shaking his head, “crime, like death, is not confined to the old and withered alone. The youngest and fairest are too often its chosen victims.”

“But, can you – oh, sir! can you, really believe that this delicate boy has been the voluntary associate of the worst outcasts of society?” said Rose, anxiously.

The surgeon shook his head in a manner which intimated that he feared it was very possible; and observing that they might disturb the patient, led the way into an adjoining apartment.

“But even if he has been wicked,” pursued Rose, “think how young he is; think that he may never have known a mother’s love, or even the comfort of a home, and that ill-usage and blows, or the want of bread, may have driven him to herd with the men who have forced him to guilt. Aunt, dear aunt, for mercy’s sake, think of this before you let them drag this sick child to a prison, which in any case must be the grave of all his chances of amendment. Oh! as you love me, and know that I

have never felt the want of parents in your goodness and affection, but that I might have done so, and might have been equally helpless and unprotected with this poor child, have pity upon him before it is too late.”

“My dear love!” said the elder lady, as she folded the weeping girl to her bosom, “do you think I would harm a hair of his head?”

“Oh, no!” replied Rose, eagerly; “not you, aunt, not you!”

“No,” said the old lady, with a trembling lip; “my days are drawing to their close, and may mercy be shewn to me as I shew it to others. What can I do to save him, sir?”

“Let me think, ma’am,” said the doctor; “let me think.”

Mr. Losberne thrust his hands into his pockets, and took several turns up and down the room, often stopping and balancing himself on his toes, and frowning frightfully. After various exclamations of “I’ve got it now” and “no, I haven’t,” and as many renewals of the walking and frowning, he at length made a dead halt, and spoke as follows: —

“I think if you give me a full and unlimited commission to bully Giles and that little boy, Brittles, I can manage it. He is a faithful fellow and an old servant, I know; but you can make it up to him in a thousand ways, and reward him for being such a good shot besides. You don’t object to that?”

“Unless there is some other way of preserving the child,” replied Mrs. Maylie.

“There is no other,” said the doctor. “No other, take my word for it.”

“Then aunt invests you with full power,” said Rose, smiling through her tears; “but pray don’t be harder upon the poor fellows than is indispensably necessary.”

“You seem to think,” retorted the doctor, “that every body is disposed to be hard-hearted to-day except yourself. I only hope, for the sake of the rising male sex generally, that you may be found in as vulnerable and soft-hearted a mood by the very first eligible young fellow who appeals to your compassion; and I wish I were a young fellow, that I might avail myself on the spot of such a favourable opportunity for doing so as the present.”

“You are as great a boy as poor Brittles himself,” returned Rose, blushing.

“Well,” said the doctor, laughing heartily, “that is no very difficult matter. But to return to this boy: the great point of our agreement is yet to come. He will wake in an hour or so, I dare say; and although I have told that thick-headed constable-fellow down stairs that he mustn’t be moved or spoken to, on peril of his life, I think we may converse with him without danger. Now, I make this stipulation – that I shall examine him in your presence, and that if from what he says, we judge, and I can shew to the satisfaction of your cool reason, that he is a real and thorough bad one (which is more than possible), he shall be left to his fate, without any further interference on my part, at all events.”

“Oh no, aunt!” entreated Rose.

“Oh yes, aunt!” said the doctor. “Is it a bargain?”

“He cannot be hardened in vice,” said Rose; “it is impossible.”

“Very good,” retorted the doctor; “then so much the more reason for acceding to my proposition.”

Finally, the treaty was entered into, and the parties thereto sat down to wait, with some impatience, until Oliver should awake.

The patience of the two ladies was destined to undergo a longer trial than Mr. Losberne had led them to expect, for hour after hour passed on, and still Oliver slumbered heavily. It was evening, indeed, before the kind-hearted doctor brought them the intelligence, that he had at length roused sufficiently to be spoken to. The boy was very ill, he said, and weak from the loss of blood; but his mind was so troubled with anxiety to disclose something, that he deemed it better to give him the opportunity, than to insist upon his remaining quiet until next morning, which he should otherwise have done.

The conference was a long one, for Oliver told them all his simple history, and was often compelled to stop by pain and want of strength. It was a solemn thing to hear, in the darkened room,

the feeble voice of the sick child recounting a weary catalogue of evils and calamities which hard men had brought upon him. Oh! if, when we oppress and grind our fellow-creatures, we bestowed but one thought on the dark evidences of human error, which, like dense and heavy clouds, are rising, slowly it is true, but not less surely, to Heaven, to pour their after-vengeance on our heads – if we heard but one instant, in imagination, the deep testimony of dead men’s voices, which no power can stifle, and no pride shut out, where would be the injury and injustice, the suffering, misery, cruelty, and wrong, that each day’s life brings with it?

Oliver’s pillow was smoothed by woman’s hands that night, and loveliness and virtue watched him as he slept. He felt calm and happy, and could have died without a murmur.

The momentous interview was no sooner concluded, and Oliver composed to rest again, than the doctor, after wiping his eyes, and condemning them for being weak all at once, betook himself down stairs to open upon Mr. Giles. And finding nobody about the parlours, it occurred to him, that he could perhaps originate the proceedings with better effect in the kitchen; so into the kitchen he went.

There were assembled, in that lower house of the domestic parliament, the women-servants, Mr. Brittles, Mr. Giles, the tinker (who had received a special invitation to regale himself for the remainder of the day, in consideration of his services), and the constable. The latter gentleman had a large staff, a large head, large features, and large half-boots, and looked as if he had been taking a proportionate allowance of ale, as indeed he had.

The adventures of the previous night were still under discussion, for Mr. Giles was expatiating upon his presence of mind when the doctor entered; and Mr. Brittles, with a mug of ale in his hand, was corroborating everything before his superior said it.

“Sit still,” said the doctor, waving his hand.

“Thank you, sir,” said Mr. Giles. “Misses wished some ale to be given out, sir; and as I felt no ways inclined for my own little room, sir, and disposed for company, I am taking mine among ’em here.”

Brittles headed a low murmur, by which the ladies and gentlemen generally were understood to express the gratification they derived from Mr. Giles’s condescension; and Mr. Giles looked round with a patronising air, as much as to say, that so long as they behaved properly, he would never desert them.

“How is the patient to-night, sir?” asked Giles.

“So-so;” returned the doctor. “I am afraid you have got yourself into a scrape there, Mr. Giles.”

“I hope you don’t mean to say, sir,” said Mr. Giles, trembling, “that he’s going to die. If I thought it, I should never be happy again. I wouldn’t cut a boy off, no, not even Brittles here, not for all the plate in the country, sir.”

“That’s not the point,” said the doctor, mysteriously. “Mr. Giles, are you a Protestant?”

“Yes, sir, I hope so,” faltered Mr. Giles, who had turned very pale.

“And what are you, boy?” said the doctor, turning sharply upon Brittles.

“Lord bless me, sir!” replied Brittles, starting violently; “I’m the same as Mr. Giles, sir.”

“Then tell me this,” said the doctor, fiercely, “both of you – both of you; are you going to take upon yourselves to swear that that boy up stairs is the boy that was put through the little window last night? Out with it! Come; we are prepared for you.”

The doctor, who was universally considered one of the best-tempered creatures on earth, made this demand in such a dreadful tone of anger, that Giles and Brittles, who were considerably muddled by ale and excitement, stared at each other in a state of stupefaction.

“Pay attention to the reply, constable, will you?” said the doctor, shaking his forefinger with great solemnity of manner, and tapping the bridge of his nose with it, to bespeak the exercise of that worthy’s utmost acuteness. “Something may come of this before long.”

The constable looked as wise as he could, and took up his staff of office, which had been reclining indolently in the chimney-corner.

“It’s a simple question of identity, you will observe,” said the doctor.

“That’s what it is, sir,” replied the constable, coughing with great violence; for he had finished his ale in a hurry, and some of it had gone the wrong way.

“Here’s a house broken into,” said the doctor, “and a couple of men catch one moment’s glimpse of a boy in the midst of gunpowder-smoke, and in all the distraction of alarm and darkness. Here’s a boy comes to that very same house next morning, and because he happens to have his arm tied up, these men lay violent hands upon him; by doing which, they place his life in great danger, and swear he is the thief. Now, the question is, whether these men are justified by the fact; and if not, what situation do they place themselves in?”

The constable nodded profoundly, and said, that if that wasn’t law, he should be glad to know what was.

“I ask you again,” thundered the doctor, “are you, on your solemn oaths, able to identify that boy?”

Brittles looked doubtfully at Mr. Giles, Mr. Giles looked doubtfully at Brittles; the constable put his hand behind his ear to catch the reply; the two women and the tinker leant forward to listen; and the doctor glanced keenly round, when a ring was heard at the gate, and at the same moment, the sound of wheels.

“It’s the runners!” cried Brittles, to all appearance much relieved.

“The what!” exclaimed the doctor, aghast in his turn.

“The Bow-street officers, sir,” replied Brittles, taking up a candle; “me and Mr. Giles sent for ’em this morning.”

“What!” cried the doctor.

“Yes,” replied Brittles; “I sent a message up by the coachman, and I only wonder they weren’t here before, sir.”

“You did, did you? Then confound your – slow coaches down here; that’s all,” said the doctor, walking away.

CHAPTER XXX. INVOLVES A CRITICAL POSITION

“Who’s that?” inquired Brittles, opening the door a little way, with the chain up, and peeping out, shading the candle with his hand.

“Open the door,” replied a man outside; “it’s the officers from Bow-street, as was sent to, to-day.”

Much comforted by this assurance, Brittles opened the door to its full width, and confronted a portly man in a great-coat, who walked in without saying anything more, and wiped his shoes on the mat as coolly as if he lived there.

“Just send somebody out to relieve my mate, will you, young man?” said the officer; “he’s in the gig minding the prad. Have you got a coach’us here that you could put it up in for five or ten minutes?”

Brittles replying in the affirmative, and pointing out the building, the portly man stepped back to the garden-gate, and helped his companion to put up the gig, while Brittles lighted them, in a state of great admiration. This done, they returned to the house, and, being shewn into a parlour, took off their great-coats and hats, and shewed like what they were. The man who had knocked at the door was a stout personage of middle height, aged about fifty, with shiny black hair, cropped pretty close, half-whiskers, a round face, and sharp eyes. The other was a red-headed, bony man, in top-boots, with a rather ill-favoured countenance, and a turned-up, sinister-looking nose.

“Tell your governor that Blathers and Duff is here, will you?” said the stouter man, smoothing down his hair, and laying a pair of handcuffs on the table. “Oh! good evening, master. Can I have a word or two with you in private, if you please?”

This was addressed to Mr. Losberne, who now made his appearance; that gentleman, motioning Brittles to retire, brought in the two ladies, and shut the door.

“This is the lady of the house,” said Mr. Losberne, motioning towards Mrs. Maylie.

Mr. Blathers made a bow, and being desired to sit down, put his hat upon the floor, and, taking a chair, motioned Duff to do the same. The latter gentleman, who did not appear quite so much accustomed to good society, or quite so much at his ease in it, one of the two, seated himself, after undergoing several muscular affections of the limbs, and forced the head of his stick into his mouth, with some embarrassment.

“Now, with regard to this here robbery, master,” said Blathers. “What are the circumstances?”

Mr. Losberne, who appeared desirous of gaining time, recounted them at great length, and with much circumlocution: Messrs. Blathers and Duff looking very knowing meanwhile, and occasionally exchanging a nod.

“I can’t say for certain till I see the place, of course,” said Blathers; “but my opinion at once is, – I don’t mind committing myself to that extent, – that this wasn’t done by a yokel – eh, Duff?”

“Certainly not,” replied Duff.

“And, translating the word yokel for the benefit of the ladies, I apprehend your meaning to be, that this attempt was not made by a countryman?” said Mr. Losberne, with a smile.

“That’s it, master,” replied Blathers. “This is all about the robbery, is it?”

“All,” replied the doctor.

“Now, what is this about this here boy that the servants are talking of?” said Blathers.

“Nothing at all,” replied the doctor. “One of the frightened servants chose to take it into his head that he had something to do with this attempt to break into the house; but it’s nonsense – sheer absurdity.”

“Wery easy disposed of it is,” remarked Duff.

“What he says is quite correct,” observed Blathers, nodding his head in a confirmatory way, and playing carelessly with the handcuffs, as if they were a pair of castanets. “Who is the boy? What account does he give of himself? Where did he come from? He didn’t drop out of the clouds, did he, master?”

“Of course not,” replied the doctor, with a nervous glance at the two ladies. “I know his whole history; – but we can talk about that presently. You would like to see the place where the thieves made their attempt, first, I suppose?”

“Certainly,” rejoined Mr. Blathers. “We had better inspect the premises first, and examine the servants arterwards. That’s the usual way of doing business.”

Lights were then procured, and Messrs. Blathers and Duff, attended by the native constable, Brittles, Giles, and everybody else in short, went into the little room at the end of the passage and looked out at the window, and afterwards went round by way of the lawn, and looked in at the window, and after that, had a candle handed out to inspect the shutter with, and after that, a lantern to trace the footsteps with, and after that, a pitchfork to poke the bushes with. This done, amidst the breathless interest of all beholders, they came in again, and Mr. Giles and Brittles were put through a melodramatic representation of their share in the previous night’s adventures, which they performed some six times over, contradicting each other in not more than one important respect the first time, and in not more than a dozen the last. This consummation being arrived at, Blathers and Duff cleared the room, and held a long council together, compared with which, for secrecy and solemnity, a consultation of great doctors on the knottiest point in medicine would be mere child’s play.

Meanwhile, the doctor walked up and down the next room in a very uneasy state, and Mrs. Maylie and Rose looked on with anxious faces.

“Upon my word,” he said, making a halt, after a great number of very rapid turns, “I hardly know what to do.”

“Surely,” said Rose, “the poor child’s story faithfully repeated to these men will be sufficient to exonerate him.”

“I doubt it, my dear young lady,” said the doctor, shaking his head. “I don’t think it would exonerate him either with them or with legal functionaries of a higher grade. What is he, after all, they would say? – a runaway. Judged by mere world considerations and probabilities, his story is a very doubtful one.”

“You credit it, surely?” interrupted Rose, in haste.

“I believe it, strange as it is, and perhaps may be an old fool for doing so,” rejoined the doctor; “but I don’t think it is exactly the tale for a practised police-officer, nevertheless.”

“Why not?” demanded Rose.

“Because, my pretty cross-examiner,” replied the doctor, “because, viewed with their eyes, there are so many ugly points about it; he can only prove the parts that look bad, and none of those that look well. Confound the fellows, they *will* have the why and the wherefore, and take nothing for granted. On his own shewing, you see he has been the companion of thieves for some time past; he has been carried to a police-office on a charge of picking a gentleman’s pocket, and is taken away forcibly from that gentleman’s house to a place which he cannot describe or point out, and of the situation of which he has not the remotest idea. He is brought down to Chertsey by men who seem to have taken a violent fancy to him, whether he will or no, and put through a window to rob a house, and then, just at the very moment when he is going to alarm the inmates, and so do the very thing that would set him all to rights, there rushes into the way that blundering dog of a half-bred butler, and shoots him, as if on purpose to prevent his doing any good for himself. Don’t you see all this?”

“I see it, of course,” replied Rose, smiling at the doctor’s impetuosity; “but still I do not see anything in it to criminate the poor child.”

“No,” replied the doctor; “of course not! Bless the bright eyes of your sex! They never see, whether for good or bad, more than one side of any question, and that is, invariably, the one which first presents itself to them.”

Having given vent to this result of experience, the doctor put his hands into his pockets, and walked up and down the room with even greater rapidity than before.

“The more I think of it,” said the doctor, “the more I see that it will occasion endless trouble and difficulty to put these men into possession of the boy’s real story. I am certain it will not be believed; and even if they can do nothing to him in the end, still the dragging it forward, and giving publicity to all the doubts that will be cast upon it, must interfere materially with your benevolent plan of rescuing him from misery.”

“Oh! what is to be done?” cried Rose. “Dear, dear! why did they send for these people?”

“Why, indeed!” exclaimed Mrs. Maylie. “I would not have had them here for the world.”

“All I know is,” said Mr. Losberne at last, sitting down with a kind of desperate calmness, “that we must try and carry it off with a bold face, that’s all. The object is a good one, and that must be the excuse. The boy has strong symptoms of fever upon him, and is in no condition to be talked to any more; that’s one comfort. We must make the best of it we can; and if bad is the best, it is no fault of ours. – Come in.”

“Well, master,” said Blathers, entering the room, followed by his colleague, and making the door fast before he said any more. “This warn’t a put-up thing.”

“And what the devil’s a put-up thing?” demanded the doctor, impatiently.

“We call it a put-up robbery, ladies,” said Blathers, turning to them, as if he compassionated their ignorance, but had a contempt for the doctor’s, “when the servants is in it.”

“Nobody suspected them, in this case,” said Mrs. Maylie.

“Wery likely not, ma’am,” replied Blathers, “but they might have been in it for all that.”

“More likely on that wery account,” said Duff.

“We find it was a town hand,” said Blathers, continuing his report; “for the style of work is first-rate.”

“Wery pretty indeed it is,” remarked Duff, in an under tone.

“There was two of ’em in it,” continued Blathers, “and they had a boy with ’em; that’s plain from the size of the window. That’s all to be said at present. We’ll see this lad that you’ve got up stairs at once, if you please.”

“Perhaps they will take something to drink first, Mrs. Maylie?” said the doctor, his face brightening up as if some new thought had occurred to him.

“Oh! to be sure!” exclaimed Rose, eagerly. “You shall have it immediately, if you will.”

“Why, thank you, miss!” said Blathers, drawing his coat-sleeve across his mouth; “it’s dry work, this sort of duty. Anything that’s handy, miss; don’t put yourself out of the way on our accounts.”

“What shall it be?” asked the doctor, following the young lady to the sideboard.

“A little drop of spirits, master, if it’s all the same,” replied Blathers. “It’s a cold ride from London, ma’am; and I always find that spirits comes home warmer to the feelings.”

This interesting communication was addressed to Mrs. Maylie, who received it very graciously. While it was being conveyed to her, the doctor slipped out of the room.

“Ah!” said Mr. Blathers, not holding his wine-glass by the stem, but grasping the bottom between the thumb and forefinger of his left hand, and placing it in front of his chest; “I have seen a good many pieces of business like this, in my time, ladies.”

“That crack down in the back lane at Edmonton, Blathers,” said Mr. Duff, assisting his colleague’s memory.

“That was something in this way, warn’t it?” rejoined Mr. Blathers; “that was done by Conkey Chickweed, that was.”

“You always gave that to him,” replied Duff. “It was the Family Pet, I tell you, and Conkey hadn’t any more to do with it than I had.”

“Get out!” retorted Mr. Blathers; “I know better. Do you mind that time Conkey was robbed of his money, though? What a start that was! better than any novel-book I ever see!”

“What was that?” inquired Rose, anxious to encourage any symptoms of goodhumour in the unwelcome visitors.

“It was a robbery, miss, that hardly anybody would have been down upon,” said Blathers. “This here Conkey Chickweed – ”

“Conkey means Nosey, ma’am,” interposed Duff.

“Of course the lady knows that, don’t she?” demanded Mr. Blathers. “Always interrupting, you are, partner. This here Conkey Chickweed, miss, kept a public-house over Battlebridge way, and had a cellar, where a good many young lords went to see cockfighting, and badger-drawing, and that; and a wery intellectual manner the sports was conducted in, for I’ve seen ’em off’en. He warn’t one of the family at that time, and one night he was robbed of three hundred and twenty-seven guineas in a canvass bag, that was stole out of his bedroom in the dead of night by a tall man with a black patch over his eye, who had concealed himself under the bed, and after committing the robbery, jumped slap out of window, which was only a story high. He was wery quick about it. But Conkey was quick, too; for he was woke by the noise, and darting out of bed, fired a blunderbuss arter him, and roused the neighbourhood. They set up a hue-and-cry directly, and when they came to look about ’em, found that Conkey had hit the robber; for there was traces of blood all the way to some palings a good distance off, and there they lost ’em. However, he had made off with the blunt, and, consequently, the name of Mr. Chickweed, licensed witler, appeared in the Gazette among the other bankrupts; and all manner of benefits and subscriptions, and I don’t know what all, was got up for the poor man, who was in a wery low state of mind about his loss, and went up and down the streets for three or four days, pulling his hair off in such a desperate manner that many people was afraid he might be going to make away with himself. One day he come up to the office all in a hurry, and had a private interview with the magistrate, who, after a good deal of talk, rings the bell, and orders Jem Spyers in (Jem was a active officer), and tells him to go and assist Mr. Chickweed in apprehending the man as robbed his house. ‘I see him, Spyers,’ said Chickweed, ‘pass my house yesterday morning.’ – ‘Why didn’t you up, and collar him?’ says Spyers. – ‘I was so struck all of a heap that you might have fractured my skull with a toothpick,’ says the poor man; ‘but we’re sure to have him, for between ten and eleven o’clock at night he passed again.’ Spyers no sooner heard this than he put some clean linen and a comb in his pocket, in case he should have to stop a day or two; and away he goes, and sets himself down at one of the public-house windows behind a little red curtain, with his hat on, already to bolt at a moment’s notice. He was smoking his pipe here late at night, when all of a sudden Chickweed roars out – ‘Here he is! Stop thief! Murder!’ Jem Spyers dashes out; and there he sees Chickweed tearing down the street full-cry. Away goes Spyers; on keeps Chickweed; round turns the people; everybody roars out, ‘Thieves!’ and Chickweed himself keeps on shouting all the time, like mad. Spyers loses sight of him a minute as he turns a corner – shoots round – sees a little crowd – dives in. ‘Which is the man?’ – ‘D – me!’ says Chickweed, ‘I’ve lost him again!’

“It was a remarkable occurrence, but he warn’t to be seen nowhere, so they went back to the public-house; and next morning, Spyers took his old place, and looked out from behind the curtain for a tall man with a black patch over his eye, till his own two eyes ached again. At last, he couldn’t help shutting ’em to ease ’em a minute, and the very moment he did so, he hears Chickweed roaring out, ‘Here he is!’ Off he starts once more, with Chickweed half-way down the street ahead of him; and after twice as long a run as the yesterday’s one, the man’s lost again! This was done once or twice more, till one-half the neighbours gave out that Mr. Chickweed had been robbed by the devil, who was playing tricks with him arterwards; and the other half, that poor Mr. Chickweed had gone mad with grief.”

“What did Jem Spyers say?” inquired the doctor, who had returned to the room shortly after the commencement of the story.

“Jem Spyers,” resumed the officer, “for a long time said nothing at all, and listened to everything without seeming to, which shewed he understood his business. But one morning he walked into the bar, and taking out his snuff-box, said, ‘Chickweed, I’ve found out who’s done this here robbery.’ – ‘Have you?’ said Chickweed. ‘Oh, my dear Spyers, only let me have vengeance, and I shall die contented! Oh, my dear Spyers, where is the villain?’ – ‘Come!’ said Spyers, offering him a pinch of snuff, ‘none of that gammon! You did it yourself.’ So he had; and a good bit of money he had made by it, too; and nobody would ever have found it out, if he hadn’t been so precious anxious to keep up appearances; that’s more!” said Mr. Blathers, putting down his wine-glass, and clinking the handcuffs together.

“Very curious, indeed,” observed the doctor. “Now, if you please, you can walk up stairs.”

“If *you* please, sir,” returned Mr. Blathers; and closely following Mr. Losberne, the two officers ascended to Oliver’s bedroom, Mr. Giles preceding the party with a lighted candle.

Oliver had been dozing, but looked worse, and was more feverish than he had appeared yet. Being assisted by the doctor, he managed to sit up in bed for a minute or so, and looked at the strangers without at all understanding what was going forward, and, in fact, without seeming to recollect where he was, or what had been passing.

“This,” said Mr. Losberne, speaking softly, but with great vehemence notwithstanding, “this is the lad, who, being accidentally wounded by a spring-gun in some boyish trespass on Mr. What-d’ye-call-him’s grounds, at the back here, comes to the house for assistance this morning, and is immediately laid hold of and maltreated by that ingenious gentleman with the candle in his hand, who has placed his life in considerable danger, as I can professionally certify.”

London, Richard Bentley, May 1, 1838.

Messrs. Blathers and Duff looked at Mr. Giles, as he was thus recommended to their notice; and the bewildered butler gazed from them towards Oliver, and from Oliver towards Mr. Losberne, with a most ludicrous mixture of fear and perplexity.

“You don’t mean to deny that, I suppose?” said the doctor, laying Oliver gently down again.

“It was all done for the – for the best, sir!” answered Giles. “I am sure I thought it was the boy, or I wouldn’t have meddled with him. I am not of an inhuman disposition, sir.”

“Thought it was what boy?” inquired the senior officer.

“The housebreaker’s boy, sir!” replied Giles. “They – they certainly had a boy.”

“Well, do you think so now?” inquired Blathers.

“Think what, now?” replied Giles, looking vacantly at his questioner.

“Think it’s the same boy, stupid-head?” rejoined Mr. Blathers, impatiently.

“I don’t know; I really don’t know,” said Giles, with a rueful countenance. “I couldn’t swear to him.”

“What do you think?” asked Mr. Blathers.

“I don’t know what to think,” replied poor Giles. “I don’t think it is the boy; indeed, I’m almost certain that it isn’t. You know it can’t be.”

“Has this man been a-drinking, sir?” inquired Blathers, turning to the doctor.

“What a precious muddle-headed chap you are!” said Duff, addressing Mr. Giles, with supreme contempt.

Mr. Losberne had been feeling the patient’s pulse during this short dialogue; but he now rose from the chair by the bedside, and remarked, that if the officers had any doubts upon the subject, they would perhaps like to step into the next room, and have Brittles before them.

Acting upon this suggestion, they adjourned to a neighbouring apartment, where Mr. Brittles, being called in, involved himself and his respected superior in such a wonderful maze of fresh contradictions and impossibilities as tended to throw no particular light upon any thing, save the fact

of his own strong mystification; except, indeed, his declarations that he should'nt know the real boy if he were put before him that instant; that he had only taken Oliver to be he, because Mr. Giles had said he was; and that Mr. Giles had, five minutes previously, admitted in the kitchen that he began to be very much afraid he had been a little too hasty.

Among other ingenious surmises, the question was then raised, whether Mr. Giles had really hit anybody, and upon examination of the fellow pistol to that which he had fired, it turned out to have no more destructive loading than gunpowder and brown paper, – a discovery which made a considerable impression on every body but the doctor, who had drawn the ball about ten minutes before. Upon no one, however, did it make a greater impression than on Mr. Giles himself; who, after labouring for some hours under the fear of having mortally wounded a fellow-creature, eagerly caught at this new idea, and favoured it to the utmost. Finally, the officers, without troubling themselves very much about Oliver, left the Chertsey constable in the house, and took up their rest for that night in the town, promising to return next morning.

With the next morning there came a rumour that two men and a boy were in the cage at Kingston, who had been apprehended overnight under suspicious circumstances; and to Kingston Messrs. Blathers and Duff journeyed accordingly. The suspicious circumstances, however, resolving themselves, on investigation, into the one fact, that they had been discovered sleeping under a haystack, which, although a great crime, is only punishable by imprisonment, and is, in the merciful eye of the English law, and its comprehensive love of all the king's subjects, held to be no satisfactory proof, in the absence of all other evidence, that the sleeper, or sleepers, have committed burglary accompanied with violence, and have therefore rendered themselves liable to the punishment of death – Messrs. Blathers and Duff came back again as wise as they went.

In short, after some more examination, and a great deal more conversation, a neighbouring magistrate was readily induced to take the joint bail of Mrs. Maylie and Mr. Losberne for Oliver's appearance if he should ever be called upon; and Blathers and Duff, being rewarded with a couple of guineas, returned to town with divided opinions on the subject of their expedition: the latter gentleman, on a mature consideration of all the circumstances, inclining to the belief that the burglarious attempt had originated with the Family Pet; and the former being equally disposed to concede the full merit of it to the great Mr. Conkey Chickweed.

Meanwhile, Oliver gradually throve and prospered under the united care of Mrs. Maylie, Rose, and the kind-hearted Mr. Losberne. If fervent prayers, gushing from hearts overcharged with gratitude, be heard in heaven – and if they be not, what prayers are? – the blessings which the orphan child called down upon them sunk into their souls, diffusing peace and happiness.

CHAPTER XXXI. OF THE HAPPY LIFE OLIVER BEGAN TO LEAD WITH HIS KIND FRIENDS

Oliver's ailments were neither slight nor few. In addition to the pain and delay attendant upon a broken limb, his exposure to the wet and cold had brought on fever and ague, which hung about him for many weeks, and reduced him sadly. But at length he began, by slow degrees, to get better, and to be able to say sometimes, in a few tearful words, how deeply he felt the goodness of the two sweet ladies, and how ardently he hoped that, when he grew strong and well again, he could do something to shew his gratitude; only something which would let them see the love and duty with which his breast was full; something, however slight, which would prove to them that their gentle kindness had not been cast away, but that the poor boy whom their charity had rescued from misery, or death, was eager and anxious to serve them with all his heart and soul.

"Poor fellow!" said Rose, when Oliver had been one day feebly endeavouring to utter the words of thankfulness that rose to his pale lips, – "you shall have many opportunities of serving us, if you will. We are going into the country, and my aunt intends that you shall accompany us. The quiet place, the pure air, and all the pleasures and beauties of spring, will restore you in a few days, and we will employ you in a hundred ways when you can bear the trouble."

"The trouble!" cried Oliver. "Oh! dear lady, if I could but work for you – if I could only give you pleasure by watering your flowers, or watching your birds, or running up and down the whole day long to make you happy, what would I give to do it?"

"You shall give nothing at all," said Miss Maylie, smiling; "for, as I told you before, we shall employ you in a hundred ways; and if you only take half the trouble to please us that you promise now, you will make me very happy indeed."

"Happy, ma'am!" cried Oliver; "oh, how kind of you to say so!"

"You will make me happier than I can tell you," replied the young lady. "To think that my dear good aunt should have been the means of rescuing any one from such sad misery as you have described to us, would be an unspeakable pleasure to me; but to know that the object of her goodness and compassion was sincerely grateful, and attached in consequence, would delight me more than you can well imagine. Do you understand me?" she inquired, watching Oliver's thoughtful face.

"Oh yes, ma'am, yes!" replied Oliver, eagerly; "but I was thinking that I am ungrateful now."

"To whom?" inquired the young lady.

"To the kind gentleman and the dear old nurse who took so much care of me before," rejoined Oliver. "If they knew how happy I am, they would be pleased, I am sure."

"I am sure they would," rejoined Oliver's benefactress; "and Mr. Losberne has already been kind enough to promise that, when you are well enough to bear the journey, he will carry you to see them."

"Has he, ma'am?" cried Oliver, his face brightening with pleasure. "I don't know what I shall do for joy when I see their kind faces once again!"

In a short time Oliver was sufficiently recovered to undergo the fatigue of this expedition; and one morning he and Mr. Losberne set out accordingly in a little carriage which belonged to Mrs. Maylie. When they came to Chertsey Bridge, Oliver turned very pale, and uttered a loud exclamation.

"What's the matter with the boy?" cried the doctor, as usual, all in a bustle. "Do you see anything – hear anything – feel anything – eh?"

"That, sir," cried Oliver, pointing out of the carriage window. "That house!"

"Yes; well, what of it? Stop, coachman. Pull up here," cried the doctor. "What of the house, my man – eh?"

"The thieves – the house they took me to," whispered Oliver.

“The devil it is!” cried the doctor. “Halloa, there! let me out!” But before the coachman could dismount from his box, he had tumbled out of the coach, by some means or other and, running down to the deserted tenement, began kicking at the door like a madman.

“Halloa!” said a little, ugly hump-backed man, opening the door so suddenly that the doctor, from the very impetus of his last kick, nearly fell forward into the passage. “What’s the matter here?”

“Matter!” exclaimed the other, collaring him, without a moment’s reflection. “A good deal. Robbery is the matter.”

“There’ll be murder, too,” replied the hump-backed man, coolly, “if you don’t take your hands off. Do you hear me?”

“I hear you,” said the doctor, giving his captive a hearty shake. “Where’s – confound the fellow, what’s his rascally name – Sikes – that’s it. Where’s Sikes, you thief?”

The hump-backed man stared as if in excess of amazement and indignation; and twisting himself dexterously from the doctor’s grasp, growled forth a volley of horrid oaths, and retired into the house. Before he could shut the door, however, the doctor had passed into the parlour, without a word of parley. He looked anxiously round: not an article of furniture, not a vestige of anything, animate or inanimate, not even the position of the cupboards, answered Oliver’s description!

“Now,” said the hump-backed man, who had watched him keenly, “what do you mean by coming into my house in this violent way? Do you want to rob me, or to murder me? – which is it?”

“Did you ever know a man come out to do either in a chariot and pair, you ridiculous old vampire?” said the irritable doctor.

“What do you want, then?” demanded the hunchback, fiercely. “Will you take yourself off before I do you a mischief? curse you!”

“As soon as I think proper,” said Mr. Losberne, looking into the other parlour, which, like the first, bore no resemblance whatever to Oliver’s account of it. “I shall find you out some day, my friend.”

“Will you?” sneered the ill-favoured cripple. “If you ever want me, I’m here. I haven’t lived here mad, and all alone, for five-and-twenty years, to be scared by you. You shall pay for this; you shall pay for this.” And so saying, the mis-shapen little demon set up a hideous yell, and danced upon the ground as if frantic with rage.

“Stupid enough, this,” muttered the doctor to himself; “the boy must have made a mistake. There; put that in your pocket, and shut yourself up again.” With these words he flung the hunchback a piece of money, and returned to the carriage.

The man followed to the chariot door, uttering the wildest imprecations and curses all the way; but as Mr. Losberne turned to speak to the driver, he looked into the carriage, and eyed Oliver for an instant with a glance so sharp and fierce, and at the same time so furious and vindictive, that, waking or sleeping, he could not forget it for months afterwards. He continued to utter the most fearful imprecations until the driver had resumed his seat, and when they were once more on their way, they could see him some distance behind, beating his feet upon the ground, and tearing his hair in transports of frenzied rage.

“I am an ass!” said the doctor, after a long silence. “Did you know that before, Oliver?”

“No, sir.”

“Then don’t forget it another time.”

“An ass,” said the doctor again, after a further silence of some minutes. “Even if it had been the right place, and the right fellows had been there, what could I have done single-handed? And if I had had assistance, I see no good that I should have done, except leading to my own exposure, and an unavoidable statement of the manner in which I have hushed up this business. That would have served me right, though. I am always involving myself in some scrape or other by acting upon these impulses, and it might have done me good.”

Now the fact was, that the excellent doctor had never acted upon anything else but impulse all through his life; and it was no bad compliment to the nature of the impulses which governed him, that so far from being involved in any peculiar troubles or misfortunes, he had the warmest respect and esteem of all who knew him. If the truth must be told, he was a little out of temper, for a minute or two, at being disappointed in procuring corroborative evidence of Oliver's story on the very first occasion on which he had a chance of obtaining any. He soon came round again, however, and finding that Oliver's replies to his questions were still as straightforward and consistent, and still delivered with as much apparent sincerity and truth, as they had ever been, he made up his mind to attach full credence to them from that time forth.

As Oliver knew the name of the street in which Mr. Brownlow resided, they were enabled to drive straight thither. When the coach turned into it, his heart beat so violently that he could scarcely draw his breath.

"Now, my boy, which house is it?" inquired Mr. Losberne.

"That, that!" replied Oliver, pointing eagerly out of the window. "The white house. Oh! make haste! Pray make haste! I feel as if I should die: it makes me tremble so."

"Come, come!" said the good doctor, patting him on the shoulder. "You will see them directly, and they will be overjoyed to find you safe and well."

"Oh! I hope so!" cried Oliver. "They were so good to me; so very very good to me, sir."

The coach rolled on. It stopped. No; that was the wrong house. The next door. It went on a few paces, and stopped again. Oliver looked up at the windows, with tears of happy expectation coursing down his face.

Alas! the white house was empty, and there was a bill in the window – "To Let."

"Knock at the next door," cried Mr. Losberne, taking Oliver's arm in his. "What has become of Mr. Brownlow, who used to live in the adjoining house, do you know?"

The servant did not know; but would go and inquire. She presently returned, and said, that Mr. Brownlow had sold off his goods, and gone to the West Indies six weeks before. Oliver clasped his hands, and sank feebly backwards.

"Has his housekeeper gone, too?" inquired Mr. Losberne, after a moment's pause.

"Yes, sir;" replied the servant. "The old gentleman, the housekeeper, and a gentleman, a friend of Mr. Brownlow's, all went together."

"Then turn towards home again," said Mr. Losberne to the driver, "and don't stop to bait the horses till you get out of this confounded London!"

"The book-stall keeper, sir?" said Oliver. "I know the way there. See him, pray sir! Do see him!"

"My poor boy, this is disappointment enough for one day," said the doctor. "Quite enough for both of us. If we go to the book-stall keeper's we shall certainly find that he is dead, or has set his house on fire, or run away. No; home again straight!" And in obedience to the doctor's first impulse, home they went.

This bitter disappointment caused Oliver much sorrow and grief, even in the midst of his happiness; for he had pleased himself many times during his illness with thinking of all that Mr. Brownlow and Mrs. Bedwin would say to him, and what delight it would be to tell them how many long days and nights he had passed in reflecting upon what they had done for him, and in bewailing his cruel separation from them. The hope of eventually clearing himself with them, too, and explaining how he had been forced away, had buoyed him up and sustained him under many of his recent trials; and now the idea that they should have gone so far, and carried with them the belief that he was an impostor and a robber, – a belief which might remain uncontradicted to his dying day, – was almost more than he could bear.

The circumstance occasioned no alteration, however, in the behaviour of his benefactors. After another fortnight, when the fine warm weather had fairly begun, and every tree and flower was putting forth its young leaves and rich blossoms, they made preparations for quitting the house at Chertsey

for some months. Sending the plate which had so excited the Jew's cupidity to the banker's, and leaving Giles and another servant in care of the house, they departed for a cottage some distance in the country, and took Oliver with them.

Who can describe the pleasure and delight, the peace of mind and soft tranquillity, which the sickly boy felt in the balmy air, and among the green hills and rich woods, of an inland village! Who can tell how scenes of peace and quietude sink into the minds of pain-worn dwellers in close and noisy places, and carry their own freshness deep into their jaded hearts! Men who have lived in crowded, pent-up streets, through whole lives of toil, and never wished for change; men, to whom custom has indeed been second nature, and who have come almost to love each brick and stone that formed the narrow boundaries of their daily walks – even they, with the hand of death upon them, have been known to yearn at last for one short glimpse of Nature's face; and carried far from the scenes of their old pains and pleasures, have seemed to pass at once into a new state of being, and crawling forth from day to day to some green sunny spot, have had such memories wakened up within them by the mere sight of sky, and hill, and plain, and glistening water, that a foretaste of heaven itself has soothed their quick decline, and they have sunk into their tombs as peacefully as the sun – whose setting they watched from their lonely chamber window but a few hours before – faded from their dim and feeble sight! The memories which peaceful country scenes call up are not of this world, or of its thoughts or hopes. Their gentle influence may teach us to weave fresh garlands for the graves of those we loved, may purify our thoughts, and bear down before it old enmity and hatred; but beneath all this, there lingers in the least reflective mind a vague and half-formed consciousness of having held such feelings long before in some remote and distant time, which calls up solemn thoughts of distant times to come, and bends down pride and worldliness beneath it.

It was a lovely spot to which they repaired, and Oliver, whose days had been spent among squalid crowds, and in the midst of noise and brawling, seemed to enter upon a new existence there. The rose and honeysuckle clung to the cottage walls, the ivy crept round the trunks of the trees, and the garden-flowers perfumed the air with delicious odours. Hard by, was a little churchyard: not crowded with tall, unsightly gravestones, but full of humble mounds, covered with fresh turf and moss, beneath which the old people of the village lay at rest. Oliver often wandered here, and thinking of the wretched grave in which his mother lay, would sometimes sit him down and sob unseen; but, as he raised his eyes to the deep sky overhead, he would cease to think of her as lying in the ground, and weep for her sadly, but without pain.

It was a happy time. The days were peaceful and serene, and the nights brought with them no fear or care; no languishing in a wretched prison, or associating with wretched men: nothing but pleasant and happy thoughts. Every morning he went to a white-headed old gentleman, who lived near the little church, who taught him to read better, and to write, and spoke so kindly, and took such pains, that Oliver could never try enough to please him. Then he would walk with Mrs. Maylie and Rose, and hear them talk of books, or perhaps sit near them, in some shady place, and listen whilst the young lady read, which he could have done till it grew too dark to see the letters. Then he had his own lesson for the next day to prepare, and at this he would work hard, in a little room which looked into the garden, till evening came slowly on, when the ladies would walk out again, and he with them; listening with such pleasure to all they said, and so happy if they wanted a flower that he could climb to reach, or had forgotten anything he could run to fetch, that he could never be quick enough about it. When it became quite dark, and they returned home, the young lady would sit down to the piano, and play some melancholy air, or sing, in a low and gentle voice, some old song which it pleased her aunt to hear. There would be no candles at such times as these, and Oliver would sit by one of the windows, listening to the sweet music, while tears of tranquil joy stole down his face.

And when Sunday came, how differently the day was spent from any manner in which he had ever spent it yet! and how happily, too; like all the other days in that most happy time! There was the little church, in the morning, with the green leaves fluttering at the windows, the birds singing

without, and the sweet-smelling air stealing in at the low porch, and filling the homely building with its fragrance. The poor people were so neat and clean, and knelt so reverently in prayer, that it seemed a pleasure, not a tedious duty, their assembling there together; and though the singing might be rude, it was real, and sounded more musical (to Oliver's ears at least) than any he had ever heard in church before. Then there were the walks as usual, and many calls at the clean houses of the labouring men; and at night, Oliver read a chapter or two from the Bible, which he had been studying all the week, and in the performance of which duty he felt more proud and pleased than if he had been the clergyman himself.

In the morning, Oliver would be a-foot by six o'clock, roaming the fields and surveying the hedges, far and wide, for nosegays of wild flowers, with which he would return laden home, and which it took great care and consideration to arrange, to the best advantage, for the embellishment of the breakfast-table. There was fresh groundsel, too, for Miss Maylie's birds, with which Oliver – who had been studying the subject under the able tuition of the village clerk – would decorate the cages in the most approved taste. When the birds were made all spruce and smart for the day, there was usually some little commission of charity to execute in the village; or, failing that, there was always something to do in the garden, or about the plants, to which Oliver – who had studied this science also under the same master, who was a gardener by trade – applied himself with hearty goodwill till Miss Rose made her appearance, when there were a thousand commendations to be bestowed upon all he had done, for which one of those light-hearted, beautiful smiles was an ample recompence.

So three months glided away; three months which, in the life of the most blessed and favoured of mortals, would have been unmixed happiness; but which, in Oliver's troubled and clouded dawn, were felicity indeed. With the purest and most amiable generosity on one side, and the truest, and warmest, and most soul-felt gratitude on the other, it is no wonder that, by the end of that short time, Oliver Twist had become completely domesticated with the old lady and her niece; and that the fervent attachment of his young and sensitive heart was repaid by their pride in, and attachment to, himself.

CHAPTER XXXII. WHEREIN THE HAPPINESS OF OLIVER AND HIS FRIENDS EXPERIENCES A SUDDEN CHECK

Spring flew swiftly by, and summer came; and if the village had been beautiful at first, it was now in the full glow and luxuriance of its richness. The great trees, which had looked shrunken and bare in the earlier months, had now burst into strong life and health, and stretching forth their green arms over the thirsty ground, converted open and naked spots into choice nooks, where was a deep and pleasant shade from which to look upon the wide prospect, steeped in sunshine, which lay stretched out beyond. The earth had donned her mantle of brightest green, and shed her richest perfumes abroad. It was the prime and vigour of the year, and all things were glad and flourishing.

Still the same quiet life went on at the little cottage, and the same cheerful serenity prevailed among its inmates. Oliver had long since grown stout and healthy; but health or sickness made no difference in his warm feelings to those about him, (though they do in the feelings of a great many people,) and he was still the same gentle, attached, affectionate creature that he had been when pain and suffering had wasted his strength, and he was dependent for every slight attention and comfort on those who tended him.

One beautiful night they had taken a longer walk than was customary with them, for the day had been unusually warm, and there was a brilliant moon, and a light wind had sprung up, which was unusually refreshing. Rose had been in high spirits, too, and they had walked on, in merry conversation, until they had far exceeded their ordinary bounds. Mrs. Maylie was fatigued, and they returned more slowly home. The young lady, merely throwing off her simple bonnet, sat down to the piano, as usual; after running abstractedly over the keys for a few minutes, she fell into a low and very solemn air; and as she played it, they heard her sob as if she were weeping.

“Rose, my dear?” said the elder lady.

Rose made no reply, but played a little quicker, as though the sound had roused her from some painful thoughts.

“Rose, my love!” cried Mrs. Maylie, rising hastily, and bending over her. “What is this? Your face is bathed in tears. My dear child, what distresses you?”

“Nothing, aunt, – nothing,” replied the young lady. “I don’t know what it is; I can’t describe it; but I feel so low to-night, and – ”

“Not ill, my love?” interposed Mrs. Maylie.

“No, no! Oh, not ill!” replied Rose, shuddering, as though some deadly chillness were passing over her while she spoke; “at least, I shall be better presently. Close the window, pray.”

Oliver hastened to comply with the request; and the young lady, making an effort to recover her cheerfulness, strove to play some livelier tune; but her fingers dropped powerless on the keys, and covering her face with her hands, she sank upon a sofa, and gave vent to the tears which she was now unable to repress.

“My child!” said the elder lady, folding her arms about her, “I never saw you thus before.”

“I would not alarm you if I could avoid it,” rejoined Rose; “but indeed I have tried very hard, and cannot help this. I fear I *am* ill, aunt.”

She was, indeed; for, when candles were brought, they saw that in the very short time which had elapsed since their return home, the hue of her countenance had changed to a marble whiteness. Its expression had lost nothing of its beauty, but yet it was changed, and there was an anxious, haggard look about that gentle face which it had never worn before. Another minute, and it was suffused with a crimson flush, and a heavy wildness came over the soft blue eye; again this disappeared, like the shadow thrown by a passing cloud, and she was once more deadly pale.

Oliver, who watched the old lady anxiously, observed that she was alarmed by these appearances, and so, in truth, was he; but seeing that she affected to make light of them, he endeavoured to do the same; and they so far succeeded, that when Rose was persuaded by her aunt to retire for the night, she was in better spirits, and appeared even in better health, and assured them that she felt certain she should wake in the morning quite well.

“I hope, ma’am,” said Oliver, when Mrs. Maylie returned, “that nothing serious is the matter? Miss Maylie doesn’t look well to-night, but – ”

The old lady motioned him not to speak, and sitting herself down in a dark corner of the room, remained silent for some time. At length, she said, in a trembling voice, —

“I hope not, Oliver. I have been very happy with her for some years – too happy, perhaps, and it may be time that I should meet with some misfortune; but I hope it is not this.”

“What misfortune, ma’am?” inquired Oliver.

“The heavy blow,” said the old lady, almost inarticulately, “of losing the dear girl who has so long been my comfort and happiness.”

“Oh! God forbid!” exclaimed Oliver, hastily.

“Amen to that, my child!” said the old lady, wringing her hands.

“Surely there is no danger of anything so dreadful!” said Oliver. “Two hours ago she was quite well.”

“She is very ill now,” rejoined Mrs. Maylie, “and will be worse, I am sure. My dear, dear Rose! Oh, what should I do without her!”

The lady sank beneath her desponding thoughts, and gave way to such great grief that Oliver, suppressing his own emotion, ventured to remonstrate with her, and to beg earnestly that, for the sake of the dear young lady herself, she would be more calm.

“And consider, ma’am,” said Oliver, as the tears forced themselves into his eyes, despite his efforts to the contrary, “Oh! consider how young and good she is, and what pleasure and comfort she gives to all about her. I am sure – certain – quite certain – that, for your sake, who are so good yourself, and for her own, and for the sake of all she makes so happy, she will not die. God will never let her die yet.”

“Hush!” said Mrs. Maylie, laying her hand on Oliver’s head. “You think like a child, poor boy; and although what you say may be natural, it is wrong. But you teach me my duty, notwithstanding. I had forgotten it for a moment, Oliver, and I hope I may be pardoned, for I am old, and have seen enough of illness and death to know the pain they leave to those behind. I have seen enough, too, to know that it is not always the youngest and best who are spared to those that love them; but this should give us comfort rather than sorrow, for Heaven is just, and such things teach us impressively that there is a far brighter world than this, and that the passage to it is speedy. God’s will be done! but I love her, and He alone knows how well!”

Oliver was surprised to see that as Mrs. Maylie said these words, she checked her lamentations as though by one struggle, and drawing herself up as she spoke, became quite composed and firm. He was still more astonished to find that this firmness lasted, and that, under all the care and watching which ensued, Mrs. Maylie was ever ready and collected, performing all the duties which devolved upon her steadily, and, to all external appearance, even cheerfully. But he was young, and did not know what strong minds are capable of under trying circumstances. How should he, indeed, when their possessors so seldom know themselves?

An anxious night ensued, and when morning came, Mrs. Maylie’s predictions were but too well verified. Rose was in the first stage of a high and dangerous fever.

“We must be active, Oliver, and not give way to useless grief,” said Mrs. Maylie, laying her finger on her lip, as she looked steadily into his face; “this letter must be sent, with all possible expedition, to Mr. Losberne. It must be carried to the market-town, which is not more than four miles

off, by the footpath across the fields, and thence dispatched by an express on horseback straight to Chertsey. The people at the inn will undertake to do this, and I can trust you to see it done, I know.”

Oliver could make no reply, but looked his anxiety to be gone at once.

“Here is another letter,” said Mrs. Maylie, pausing to reflect; “but whether to send it now, or wait until I see how Rose goes on, I scarcely know. I would not forward it unless I feared the worst.”

“Is it for Chertsey, too, ma’am?” inquired Oliver, impatient to execute his commission, and holding out his trembling hand for the letter.

“No,” replied the old lady, giving it him mechanically. Oliver glanced at it, and saw that it was directed to Harry Maylie, Esquire, at some lord’s house in the country; where, he could not make out.

“Shall it go, ma’am?” asked Oliver, looking up impatiently.

“I think not,” replied Mrs. Maylie, taking it back. “I will wait till to-morrow.”

With these words she gave Oliver her purse, and he started off without more delay at the greatest speed he could muster.

Swiftly he ran across the fields, and down the little lanes which sometimes divided them, now almost hidden by the high corn on either side, and now emerging into an open field, where the mowers and haymakers were busy at their work; nor did he stop once, save now and then, for a few seconds, to recover breath, until he emerged, in a great heat, and covered with dust, on the little market-place of the market-town.

Here he paused, and looked about for the inn. There was a white bank, and a red brewery, and a yellow town-hall; and in one corner a large house, with all the wood about it painted green, before which was the sign of “The George,” to which he hastened directly it caught his eye.

Oliver spoke to a postboy who was dozing under the gateway, and who, after hearing what he wanted, referred him to the hostler; who, after hearing all he had to say again, referred him to the landlord, who was a tall gentleman in a blue neckcloth, a white hat, drab breeches, and boots with tops to match, and was leaning against a pump by the stable-door, picking his teeth with a silver toothpick.

This gentleman walked with much deliberation to the bar to make out the bill, which took a long time making out, and after it was ready, and paid, a horse had to be saddled, and a man to be dressed, which took up ten good minutes more; meanwhile, Oliver was in such a desperate state of impatience and anxiety, that he felt as if he could have jumped upon the horse himself, and galloped away full tear to the next stage. At length, all was ready, and the little parcel having been handed up, with many injunctions and entreaties for its speedy delivery, the man set spurs to his horse, and rattling over the uneven paving of the market-place, was out of the town, and galloping along the turnpike-road, in a couple of minutes.

It was something to feel certain that assistance was sent for, and that no time had been lost. Oliver hurried up the inn-yard with a somewhat lighter heart, and was turning out of the gateway when he accidentally stumbled against a tall man, wrapped in a cloak, who was that moment coming out at the inn-door.

“Hah!” cried the man, fixing his eyes on Oliver, and suddenly recoiling. “What the devil’s this?”

“I beg your pardon, sir,” said Oliver; “I was in a great hurry to get home, and didn’t see you were coming.”

“Death!” muttered the man to himself, glaring at the boy with his large dark eyes. “Who’d have thought it! Grind him to ashes! He’d start up from a marble coffin to come in my way!”

“I am sorry, sir,” stammered Oliver, confused by the strange man’s wild look. “I hope I have not hurt you?”

“Rot his bones!” murmured the man, in a horrible passion, between his clenched teeth; “if I had only had the courage to say the word, I might have been free of him in a night. Curses light upon your head, and black death upon your heart, you imp! What are you doing here?”

The man shook his fist, and gnashed his teeth, as he uttered these words incoherently; and advancing towards Oliver, as if with the intention of aiming a blow at him, fell violently on the ground, writhing and foaming, in a fit.

Oliver gazed for a moment at the fearful struggles of the madman (for such he supposed him to be), and then darted into the house for help. Having seen him safely carried into the hotel, he turned his face homewards, running as fast as he could, to make up for lost time, and recalling, with a great deal of astonishment and some fear, the extraordinary behaviour of the person from whom he had just parted.

The circumstance did not dwell in his recollection long, however; for when he reached the cottage, there was enough to occupy his mind, and to drive all considerations of self completely from his memory.

Rose Maylie had rapidly grown worse, and before midnight was delirious. A medical practitioner, who resided on the spot, was in constant attendance upon her, and after first seeing the patient, he had taken Mrs. Maylie aside, and pronounced her disorder to be one of a most alarming nature. "In fact," he said, "it would be little short of a miracle if she recovered."

How often did Oliver start from his bed that night, and stealing out, with noiseless footstep, to the staircase, listen for the slightest sound from the sick chamber! How often did a tremble shake his frame, and cold drops of terror start upon his brow, when a sudden trampling of feet caused him to fear that something too dreadful to think of had even then occurred. And what had been the fervency of all the prayers he had ever uttered, compared with those he poured forth now, in the agony and passion of his supplication, for the life and health of the gentle creature who was tottering on the deep grave's verge!

The suspense, the fearful, acute suspense, of standing idly by while the life of one we dearly love is trembling in the balance – the racking thoughts that crowd upon the mind, and make the heart beat violently, and the breath come thick, by the force of the images they conjure up before it – the desperate anxiety *to be doing something* to relieve the pain, or lessen the danger, which we have no power to alleviate; and the sinking of soul and spirit, which the sad remembrance of our helplessness produces, – what tortures can equal these, and what reflections or efforts can, in the full tide and fever of the time, allay them!

Morning came, and the little cottage was lonely and still. People spoke in whispers; anxious faces appeared at the gate from time to time, and women and children went away in tears. All the livelong day, and for hours after it had grown dark, Oliver paced softly up and down the garden, raising his eyes every instant to the sick chamber, and shuddering to see the darkened window looking as if death lay stretched inside. Late at night, Mr. Losberne arrived. "It is hard," said the good doctor, turning away as he spoke; "so young – so much beloved – but there is very little hope."

Another morning, the sun shone brightly, – as brightly as if it looked upon no misery or care; and, with every leaf and flower in full bloom about her, – with life, and health, and sounds and sights of joy, surrounding her on every side, the fair young creature lay wasting fast. Oliver crept away to the old churchyard, and sitting down on one of the green mounds, wept for her in silence.

There was such peace and beauty in the scene, so much of brightness and mirth in the sunny landscape, such blithesome music in the songs of the summer birds, such freedom in the rapid flight of the rook, careering overhead, so much of life and joyousness in all, that when the boy raised his aching eyes, and looked about, the thought instinctively occurred to him, that this was not a time for death; that Rose could surely never die when humbler things were all so glad and gay; that graves were for cold and cheerless winter, not for sunlight and fragrance. He almost thought that shrouds were for the old and shrunken, and never wrapped the young and graceful form within their ghastly folds.

A knell from the church bell broke harshly on these youthful thoughts. Another – again! It was tolling for the funeral service. A group of humble mourners entered the gate, and they wore white

favours, for the corpse was young. They stood uncovered by a grave; and there was a mother – a mother once – among the weeping train. But the sun shone brightly, and the birds sang on.

Oliver turned homewards, thinking on the many kindnesses he had received from the young lady, and wishing that the time could come over again, that he might never cease shewing her how grateful and attached he was. He had no cause for self-reproach on the score of neglect, or want of thought, for he had been devoted to her service; and yet a hundred little occasions rose up before him on which he fancied he might have been more zealous and more earnest, and wished he had been. We need be careful how we deal with those about us, for every death carries with it to some small circle of survivors thoughts of so much omitted, and so little done – of so many things forgotten, and so many more which might have been repaired, that such recollections are among the bitterest we can have. There is no remorse so deep as that which is unavailing; if we would be spared its tortures, let us remember this in time.

When he reached home, Mrs. Maylie was sitting in the little parlour. Oliver's heart sank at sight of her, for she had never left the bedside of her niece, and he trembled to think what change could have driven her away. He learnt that she had fallen into a deep sleep, from which she would waken either to recovery and life, or to bid them farewell, and die.

They sat, listening, and afraid to speak, for hours. The untasted meal was removed; and with looks which shewed that their thoughts were elsewhere, they watched the sun as he sank lower and lower, and, at length, cast over sky and earth those brilliant hues which herald his departure. Their quick ears caught the sound of an approaching footstep, and they both involuntarily darted towards the door, as Mr. Losberne entered.

“What of Rose?” cried the old lady. “Tell me at once! I can bear it; anything but suspense! Oh, tell me! in the name of Heaven!”

“You must compose yourself,” said the doctor, supporting her. “Be calm, my dear ma'am, pray.”

“Let me go, in God's name!” gasped Mrs. Maylie. “My dear child! She is dead! She is dying!”

“No!” cried the doctor, passionately. “As He is good and merciful, she will live to bless us all for years to come.”

The lady fell upon her knees, and tried to fold her hands together; but the energy which had supported her so long fled to Heaven with her first thanksgiving, and she sank back into the friendly arms which were extended to receive her.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

CONTAINS SOME INTRODUCTORY PARTICULARS RELATIVE TO A YOUNG GENTLEMAN WHO NOW ARRIVES UPON THE SCENE, AND A NEW ADVENTURE WHICH HAPPENED TO OLIVER

It was almost too much happiness to bear. Oliver felt stunned and stupified by the unexpected intelligence; he could not weep, or speak, or rest. He had scarcely the power of understanding anything that had passed, until, after a long ramble in the quiet evening air, a burst of tears came to his relief, and he seemed to awaken all at once to a full sense of the joyful change that had occurred, and the almost insupportable load of anguish which had been taken from his breast.

The night was fast closing in when he returned homewards, laden with flowers which he had culled with peculiar care for the adornment of the sick chamber. As he walked briskly along the road, he heard behind him the noise of some vehicle approaching at a furious pace. Looking round, he saw that it was a post-chaise, driven at great speed; and as the horses were galloping, and the road was narrow, he stood leaning against a gate until it should have passed him by.

As it dashed on, Oliver caught a glimpse of a man in a white nightcap, whose face seemed familiar to him, although his view was so brief that he could not identify the person. In another second or two, the nightcap was thrust out of the chaise-window, and a stentorian voice bellowed to the driver to stop, which he did as soon as he could pull up his horses, when the nightcap once again appeared, and the same voice called Oliver by his name.

“Here!” cried the voice. “Master Oliver, what’s the news? Miss Rose – Master O-li-ver.”

“Is it you, Giles?” cried Oliver, running up to the chaise-door.

Giles popped out his nightcap again, preparatory to making some reply, when he was suddenly pulled back by a young gentleman who occupied the other corner of the chaise, and who eagerly demanded what was the news.

“In a word,” cried the gentleman, “better or worse?”

“Better – much better!” replied Oliver, hastily.

“Thank Heaven!” exclaimed the gentleman. “You are sure?”

“Quite, sir,” replied Oliver; “the change took place only a few hours ago, and Mr. Losberne says, that all danger is at an end.”

The gentleman said not another word, but, opening the chaise-door, leaped out, and taking Oliver hurriedly by the arm, led him aside.

“This is quite certain? – there is no possibility of any mistake on your part, my boy, is there?” demanded the gentleman, in a tremulous voice. “Pray do not deceive me by awakening any hopes that are not to be fulfilled.”

“I would not for the world, sir,” replied Oliver. “Indeed you may believe me. Mr. Losberne’s words were, that she would live to bless us all for many years to come. I heard him say so.”

The tears stood in Oliver’s eyes as he recalled the scene which was the beginning of so much happiness, and the gentleman turned his face away, and remained silent for some minutes. Oliver thought he heard him sob more than once, but he feared to interrupt him by any further remark – for he could well guess what his feelings were – and so stood apart, feigning to be occupied with his nosegay.

All this time, Mr. Giles, with the white nightcap on, had been sitting upon the steps of the chaise, supporting an elbow on each knee, and wiping his eyes with a blue cotton pocket-handkerchief dotted with white spots. That the honest fellow had not been feigning emotion was abundantly

demonstrated by the very red eyes with which he regarded the young gentleman, when he turned round and addressed him.

“I think you had better go on to my mother’s in the chaise, Giles,” said he. “I would rather walk slowly on, so as to gain a little time before I see her. You can say I am coming.”

“I beg your pardon, Mr. Harry,” said Giles, giving a final polish to his ruffled countenance with the handkerchief; “but if you would leave the postboy to say that, I should be very much obliged to you. It wouldn’t be proper for the maids to see me in this state, sir; I should never have any more authority with them if they did.”

“Well,” rejoined Harry Maylie, smiling, “you can do as you like. Let him go on with the portmanteaus, if you wish it, and do you follow with us. Only first exchange that nightcap for some more appropriate covering, or we shall be taken for madmen.”

Mr. Giles, reminded of his unbecoming costume, snatched off and pocketed his nightcap, and substituted a hat of grave and sober shape, which he took out of the chaise. This done, the postboy drove off, and Giles, Mr. Maylie, and Oliver, followed at their leisure.

As they walked along, Oliver glanced from time to time with much interest and curiosity at the new-comer. He seemed about five-and-twenty years of age, and was of the middle height; his countenance was frank and handsome, and his demeanour singularly easy and prepossessing. Notwithstanding the differences between youth and age, he bore so strong a likeness to the old lady that Oliver would have had no great difficulty in imagining their relationship, even if he had not already spoken of her as his mother.

Mrs. Maylie was anxiously waiting to receive her son when he reached the cottage, and the meeting did not take place without great emotion on both sides.

“Oh, mother!” whispered the young man, “why did you not write before?”

“I did write,” replied Mrs. Maylie; “but, on reflection, I determined to keep back the letter until I had heard Mr. Losberne’s opinion.”

“But why,” said the young man, “why run the chance of that occurring which so nearly happened? If Rose had – I cannot utter that word now – if this illness had terminated differently, how could you ever have forgiven yourself, or I been happy again?”

“If that *had* been the case, Harry,” said Mrs. Maylie, “I fear your happiness would have been effectually blighted, and that your arrival here a day sooner or later would have been of very, very little import.”

“And who can wonder if it be so, mother?” rejoined the young man; “or why should I say, *if*? – It is – it is – you know it, mother – you must know it!”

“I know that she well deserves the best and purest love that the heart of man can offer,” said Mrs. Maylie; “I know that the devotion and affection of her nature require no ordinary return, but one that shall be deep and lasting. If I did not feel this, and know, besides, that a changed behaviour in one she loved would break her heart, I should not feel my task so difficult of performance, or have to encounter so many struggles in my own bosom, when I take what seems to me to be the strict line of duty.”

“This is unkind, mother,” said Harry. “Do you still suppose that I am so much a boy as not to know my own mind, or to mistake the impulses of my own soul?”

“I think, my dear fellow,” returned Mrs. Maylie, laying her hand upon his shoulder, “that youth has many generous impulses which do not last; and that among them are some which, being gratified, become only the more fleeting. Above all, I think,” said the lady, fixing her eyes on her son’s face, “that if an enthusiastic, ardent, ambitious young man has a wife on whose name is a stain, which, though it originate in no fault of hers, may be visited by cold and sordid people upon her, and upon his children also, and, in exact proportion to his success in the world, be cast in his teeth, and made the subject of sneers against him, he may – no matter how generous and good his nature – one day

repent of the connexion he formed in early life, and she may have the pain and torture of knowing that he does so.”

“Mother,” said the young man, impatiently, “he would be a mere selfish brute, unworthy alike of the name of man and of the woman you describe, who acted thus.”

“You think so now, Harry,” replied his mother.

“And ever will!” said the young man. “The mental agony I have suffered during the last two days wrings from me the undisguised avowal to you of a passion which, as you well know, is not one of yesterday, nor one I have lightly formed. On Rose, sweet, gentle girl! my heart is set as firmly as ever heart of man was set on woman. I have no thought, or view, or hope, in life beyond her; and if you oppose me in this great stake, you take my peace and happiness in your hands, and cast them to the wind. Mother, think better of this, and of me, and do not disregard the warm feelings of which you seem to think so little.”

“Harry,” said Mrs. Maylie, “it is because I think so much of warm and sensitive hearts, that I would spare them from being wounded. But we have said enough, and more than enough, on this matter just now.”

“Let it rest with Rose, then,” interposed Harry. “You will not press these overstrained opinions of yours so far as to throw any obstacle in my way?”

“I will not,” rejoined Mrs. Maylie; “but I would have you consider – ”

“*I have considered!*” was the impatient reply, – “I have considered for years – considered almost since I have been capable of serious reflection. My feelings remain unchanged, as they ever will; and why should I suffer the pain of a delay in giving them vent, which can be productive of no earthly good? No! Before I leave this place, Rose shall hear me.”

“She shall,” said Mrs. Maylie.

“There is something in your manner which would almost imply that she will hear me coldly, mother,” said the young man, anxiously.

“Not coldly,” rejoined the old lady; “far from it.”

“How then?” urged the young man. “She has formed no other attachment?”

“No, indeed,” replied his mother; “you have, or I mistake, too strong a hold on her affections already.”

“What I would say,” resumed the old lady, stopping her son as he was about to speak, “is this: Before you stake your all on this chance, – before you suffer yourself to be carried to the highest point of hope, reflect for a few moments, my dear child, on Rose’s history, and consider what effect the knowledge of her doubtful birth may have on her decision, – devoted as she is to us, with all the intensity of her noble mind, and that perfect sacrifice of self which, in all matters, great or trifling, has always been her characteristic.”

“What do you mean?”

“That I leave to you to discover,” replied Mrs. Maylie. “I must go back to Rose. God bless you!”

“I shall see you again to-night?” said the young man, eagerly.

“By and by,” replied the lady; “when I leave Rose.”

“You will tell her I am here?” said Harry.

“Of course,” replied Mrs. Maylie.

“And say how anxious I have been, and how much I have suffered, and how I long to see her – you will not refuse to do this, mother?”

“No,” said the old lady; “I will tell her that,” and pressing her son’s hand affectionately, she hastened from the room.

Mr. Losberne and Oliver had remained at another end of the apartment while this hurried conversation was proceeding. The former now held out his hand to Harry Maylie, and hearty salutations were exchanged between them. The doctor then communicated, in reply to multifarious questions from his young friend, a precise account of his patient’s situation, which was quite as

consolatory and full of promise as Oliver's statement had encouraged him to hope; and to the whole of which, Mr. Giles, who affected to be busy about the luggage, listened with greedy ears.

"Have you shot anything particular lately, Giles?" inquired the doctor, when he had concluded.

"Nothing particular, sir," replied Mr. Giles, colouring up to the eyes.

"Nor catching any thieves, nor identifying any housebreakers?" said the doctor, maliciously.

"None at all, sir," replied Mr. Giles, with much gravity.

"Well," said the doctor, "I am sorry to hear it, because you do that sort of thing so well. Pray, how is Brittles?"

"The boy is very well, sir," said Mr. Giles, recovering his usual tone of patronage; "and sends his respectful duty, sir."

"That's well," said the doctor. "Seeing you here, reminds me, Mr. Giles, that on the day before that on which I was called away so hurriedly, I executed, at the request of your good mistress, a small commission in your favour. Just step into this corner a moment, will you?"

Mr. Giles walked into the corner with much importance, and some wonder, and was honoured with a short whispering conference with the doctor; on the termination of which, he made a great many bows, and retired with steps of unusual stateliness. The subject matter of this conference was not disclosed in the parlour, but the kitchen was speedily enlightened concerning it; for Mr. Giles walked straight thither, and having called for a mug of ale, announced, with an air of majestic majesty, which was highly effective, that it had pleased his mistress, in consideration of his gallant behaviour on the occasion of that attempted robbery, to deposit in the local savings-bank the sum of twenty-five pounds for his sole use and benefit. At this, the two women-servants lifted up their hands and eyes, and supposed that Mr. Giles would begin to be quite proud now; whereunto Mr. Giles, pulling out his shirt-frill, replied, "No, no," – and that if they observed that he was at all haughty to his inferiors, he would thank them to tell him so. And then he made a great many other remarks, no less illustrative of his humility, which were received with equal favour and applause, and were withal as original, and as much to the purpose, as the remarks of great men commonly are.

Above stairs, the remainder of the evening passed cheerfully away, for the doctor was in high spirits, and however fatigued or thoughtful Harry Maylie might have been at first, he was not proof against the worthy gentleman's good humour, which displayed itself in a great variety of sallies and professional recollections, and an abundance of small jokes, which struck Oliver as being the drollest things he had ever heard, and caused him to laugh proportionately, to the evident satisfaction of the doctor, who laughed immoderately at himself, and made Harry laugh almost as heartily, by the very force of sympathy. So they were as pleasant a party as, under the circumstances, they could well have been, and it was late before they retired, with light and thankful hearts, to take that rest of which, after the doubt and suspense they had recently undergone, they stood so much in need.

Oliver rose next morning in better heart, and went about his usual early occupations with more hope and pleasure than he had known for many days. The birds were once more hung out to sing in their old places, and the sweetest wild flowers that could be found were once more gathered to gladden Rose with their beauty and fragrance. The melancholy which had seemed to the sad eyes of the anxious boy to hang for days past over every object, beautiful as they all were, was dispelled by magic. The dew seemed to sparkle more brightly on the green leaves, the air to rustle among them with a sweeter music, and the sky itself to look more blue and bright. Such is the influence which the condition of our own thoughts exercises even over the appearance of external objects. Men who look on nature and their fellow-men, and cry that all is dark and gloomy, are in the right; but the sombre colours are reflections from their own jaundiced eyes and hearts. The real hues are delicate, and require a clearer vision.

It is worthy of remark, and Oliver did not fail to note it at the time, that his morning expeditions were no longer made alone. Harry Maylie, after the very first morning when he met Oliver coming laden home, was seized with such a passion for flowers, and displayed such a taste

in their arrangement, as left his young companion far behind. If Oliver were behind-hand in these respects, however, he knew where the best were to be found, and morning after morning they scoured the country together, and brought home the fairest that blossomed. The window of the young lady's chamber was opened now, for she loved to feel the rich summer air stream in and revive her with its freshness; but there always stood in water, just inside the lattice, one particular little bunch which was made up with great care every morning. Oliver could not help noticing that the withered flowers were never thrown away, although the little vase was regularly replenished; nor could he help observing, that whenever the doctor came into the garden he invariably cast his eyes up to that particular corner, and nodded his head most expressively, as he set forth on his morning's walk. Pending these observations, the days were flying by, and Rose was rapidly and surely recovering.

Nor did Oliver's time hang heavy upon his hands, although the young lady had not yet left her chamber, and there were no evening walks, save now and then for a short distance with Mrs. Maylie. He applied himself with redoubled assiduity to the instructions of the white-headed old gentleman, and laboured so hard that his quick progress surprised even himself. It was while he was engaged in this pursuit that he was greatly startled and distressed by a most unexpected occurrence.

The little room in which he was accustomed to sit, when busy at his books, was on the ground-floor, at the back of the house. It was quite a cottage-room, with a lattice-window, around which were clusters of jessamine and honeysuckle, that crept over the casement, and filled the place with their delicious perfume. It looked into a garden, whence a wicket-gate opened into a small paddock; all beyond was fine meadow-land and wood. There was no other dwelling near in that direction, and the prospect it commanded was very extensive.

One beautiful evening, when the first shades of twilight were beginning to settle upon the earth, Oliver sat at this window, intent upon his books. He had been poring over them for some time; and as the day had been uncommonly sultry, and he had exerted himself a great deal, it is no disparagement to the authors, whoever they may have been, to say, that gradually and by slow degrees he fell asleep.

There is a kind of sleep that steals upon us sometimes, which, while it holds the body prisoner, does not free the mind from a sense of things about it, and enable it to ramble as it pleases. So far as an overpowering heaviness, a prostration of strength, and an utter inability to control our thoughts or power of motion, can be called sleep, this is it; and yet we have a consciousness of all that is going on about us, and even if we dream, words which are really spoken, or sounds which really exist at the moment, accommodate themselves with surprising readiness to our visions, until reality and imagination become so strangely blended that it is afterwards almost a matter of impossibility to separate the two. Nor is this the most striking phenomenon incidental to such a state. It is an ascertained fact, that although our senses of touch and sight be for the time dead, yet our sleeping thoughts, and the visionary scenes that pass before us, will be influenced, and materially influenced, by the *mere silent presence* of some external object, which may not have been near us when we closed our eyes, and of whose vicinity we have had no waking consciousness.

Oliver knew perfectly well that he was in his own little room, that his books were lying on the table before him, and that the sweet air was stirring among the creeping plants outside, – and yet he was asleep. Suddenly, the scene changed, the air became close and confined, and he thought, with a glow of terror, that he was in the Jew's house again. There sat the hideous old man, in his accustomed corner, pointing at him, and whispering to another man with his face averted who sat beside him.

“Hush, my dear!” he thought he heard the Jew say; “it is him, sure enough. Come away.”

“He!” the other man seemed to answer; “could I mistake him, think you? If a crowd of devils were to put themselves into his exact shape, and he stood amongst them, there is something that would tell me how to point him out. If you buried him fifty feet deep, and took me across his grave, I should know, if there wasn't a mark above it, that he lay buried there. Wither his flesh, I should!”

The man seemed to say this with such dreadful hatred that Oliver awoke with the fear, and started up.

Good God! what was that which sent the blood tingling to his heart, and deprived him of voice, or power to move! There – there – at the window – close before him – so close, that he could have almost touched him before he started back – with his eyes peering into the room, and meeting his – there stood the Jew! and beside him, white with rage, or fear, or both, were the scowling features of the very man who had accosted him at the inn-yard.

It was but an instant, a glance, a flash, before his eyes, and they were gone. But they had recognised him, and he them; and their look was as firmly impressed upon his memory as if it had been deeply carved in stone, and set before him from his birth. He stood transfixed for a moment, and then, leaping from the window into the garden, called loudly for help.

CHAPTER XXXIV. CONTAINING THE UNSATISFACTORY RESULT OF OLIVER'S ADVENTURE, AND A CONVERSATION OF SOME IMPORTANCE BETWEEN HARRY MAYLIE AND ROSE

When the inmates of the house, attracted by Oliver's cries, hurried to the spot from which they proceeded, they found him, pale and agitated, pointing in the direction of the meadows behind the house, and scarcely able to articulate the words, "The Jew! the Jew!"

Mr. Giles was at a loss to comprehend what this outcry meant; but Harry Maylie, whose perceptions were something quicker, and who had heard Oliver's history from his mother, understood it at once.

"What direction did he take?" he asked, catching up a heavy stick which was standing in a corner.

"That," replied Oliver, pointing out the course the men had taken; "I missed them all in an instant."

"Then they are in the ditch!" said Harry. "Follow, and keep as near me as you can." So saying, he sprang over the hedge, and darted off with a speed which rendered it matter of exceeding difficulty for the others to keep near him.

Giles followed as well as he could, and Oliver followed too; and in the course of a minute or two, Mr. Losberne, who had been out walking, and just then returned, tumbled over the hedge after them, and picking himself up with more agility than he could have been supposed to possess, struck into the same course at no contemptible speed, shouting all the while most prodigiously to know what was the matter.

On they all went; nor stopped they once to breathe, until the leader, striking off into an angle of the field indicated by Oliver, began to search narrowly the ditch and hedge adjoining; which afforded time for the remainder of the party to come up, and for Oliver to communicate to Mr. Losberne the circumstances that had led to so vigorous a pursuit.

The search was all in vain. There were not even the traces of recent footsteps to be seen. They stood now on the summit of a little hill, commanding the open fields in every direction for three or four miles. There was the village in the hollow on the left; but, in order to gain that, after pursuing the track Oliver had pointed out, the men must have made a circuit of open ground, which it was impossible they could have accomplished in so short a time. A thick wood skirted the meadow-land in another direction; but they could not have gained that covert for the same reason.

"It must have been a dream, Oliver?" said Harry Maylie, taking him aside.

"Oh no, indeed, sir," replied Oliver, shuddering at the very recollection of the old wretch's countenance; "I saw him too plainly for that. I saw them both as plainly as I see you now."

"Who was the other?" inquired Harry and Mr. Losberne, together.

"The very same man that I told you of who came so suddenly upon me at the inn," said Oliver. "We had our eyes fixed full upon each other, and I could swear to him."

"They took this way?" demanded Harry; "are you certain of that?"

"As I am that the men were at the window," replied Oliver, pointing down, as he spoke, to the hedge which divided the cottage-garden from the meadow. "The tall man leaped over just there; and the Jew, running a few paces to the right, crept through that gap."

The two gentlemen watched Oliver's earnest face as he spoke, and looking from him to each other, seemed to feel satisfied of the accuracy of what he said. Still, in no direction were there any

appearances of the trampling of men in hurried flight. The grass was long, but it was trodden down nowhere, save where their own feet had crushed it. The sides and brinks of the ditches were of damp clay, but in no one place could they discern the print of men's shoes, or the slightest mark which would indicate that any feet had pressed the ground for hours before.

"This is strange!" said Harry.

"Strange!" echoed the doctor. "Blathers and Duff themselves could make nothing of it."

Notwithstanding the evidently inefficacious nature of their search, however, they did not desist until the coming on of night rendered its farther prosecution hopeless, and even then they gave it up with reluctance. Giles was dispatched to the different alehouses in the village, furnished with the best description Oliver could give of the appearance and dress of the strangers; of whom the Jew was, at all events, sufficiently remarkable to be remembered, supposing he had been seen drinking, or loitering about; but he returned without any intelligence calculated to dispel or lessen the mystery.

On the next day, further search was made, and the inquiries renewed, but with no better success. On the day following, Oliver and Mr. Maylie repaired to the market-town, in the hope of seeing or hearing something of the men there; but this effort was equally fruitless; and after a few days, the affair began to be forgotten, as most affairs are, when wonder, having no fresh food to support it, dies away of itself.

Meanwhile, Rose was rapidly recovering. She had left her room, was able to go out, and mixing once more with the family, carried joy into the hearts of all.

But although this happy change had a visible effect on the little circle, and although cheerful voices and merry laughter were once more heard in the cottage, there was, at times, an unwonted restraint upon some there – even upon Rose herself – which Oliver could not fail to remark. Mrs. Maylie and her son were often closeted together for a long time, and more than once Rose appeared with traces of tears upon her face. After Mr. Losberne had fixed a day for his departure to Chertsey, these symptoms increased, and it became evident that something was in progress which affected the peace of the young lady, and of somebody else besides.

At length, one morning, when Rose was alone in the breakfast-parlour, Harry Maylie entered, and, with some hesitation, begged permission to speak with her for a few moments.

"A few – a very few – will suffice, Rose," said the young man, drawing his chair towards her. "What I shall have to say has already presented itself to your mind; the most cherished hopes of my heart are not unknown to you, though from my lips you have not yet heard them stated."

Rose had been very pale from the moment of his entrance, although that might have been the effect of her recent illness. She merely bowed, and bending over some plants that stood near, waited in silence for him to proceed.

"I – I – ought to have left here before," said Harry.

"You should, indeed," replied Rose. "Forgive me for saying so, but I wish you had."

"I was brought here by the most dreadful and agonizing of all apprehensions," said the young man; "the fear of losing the one dear being on whom my every wish and hope are centred. You had been dying – trembling between earth and heaven. We know that when the young, the beautiful, and good, are visited with sickness, their pure spirits insensibly turn towards their bright home of lasting rest, and hence it is, that the best and fairest of our kind so often fade in blooming."

There were tears in the eye of the gentle girl as these words were spoken, and when one fell upon the flower over which she bent, and glistened brightly in its cup, making it more beautiful, it seemed as though the outpourings of a fresh young heart claimed common kindred with the loveliest things in nature.

"An angel," continued the young man, passionately, "a creature as fair and innocent of guile as one of God's own angels, fluttered between life and death. Oh! who could hope, when the distant world to which she was akin half opened to her view, that she would return to the sorrow and calamity of this! Rose, Rose, to know that you were passing away like some soft shadow, which a light from

above casts upon the earth – to have no hope that you would be spared to those who linger here, and to know no reason why you should – to feel that you belonged to that bright sphere whither so many gifted creatures, in infancy and youth, have winged their early flight – and yet to pray, amid all these consolations, that you might be restored to those who loved you – these are distractions almost too great to bear. They were mine by day and night, and with them came such a rushing torrent of fears, and apprehensions, and selfish regrets, lest you should die and never know how devotedly I loved you, as almost bore down sense and reason in its course. You recovered – day by day, and almost hour by hour, some drop of health came back, and mingling with the spent and feeble stream of life which circulated languidly within you, swelled it again to a high and rushing tide. I have watched you change almost from death to life, with eyes that moistened with their own eagerness and deep affection. Do not tell me that you wish I had lost this; for it has softened my heart to all mankind.”

“I did not mean that,” said Rose, weeping; “I only wish you had left here, that you might have turned to high and noble pursuits again – to pursuits well worthy of you.”

“There is no pursuit more worthy of me – more worthy of the highest nature that exists – than the struggle to win such a heart as yours,” said the young man, taking her hand. “Rose, my own dear Rose, for years – for years, I have loved you, hoping to win my way to fame, and then come proudly home and tell you it had been sought only for you to share; thinking in my day-dreams how I would remind you in that happy moment of the many silent tokens I had given of a boy’s attachment, and rally you who had blushed to mark them, and then claim your hand, as if in redemption of some old mute contract that had been sealed between us. That time has not arrived; but here, with no fame won, and no young vision realized, I give to you the heart so long your own, and stake my all upon the words with which you greet the offer.”

“Your behaviour has ever been kind and noble,” said Rose, mastering the emotions by which she was agitated. “As you believe that I am not insensible or ungrateful, so hear my answer.”

“It is, that I may endeavour to deserve you – is it, dear Rose?”

“It is,” replied Rose, “that you must endeavour to forget me – not as your old and dearly-attached companion, for that would wound me deeply, but as the object of your love. Look into the world, think how many hearts you would be equally proud to gain are there. Confide some other passion to me if you will, and I will be the truest, warmest, most faithful friend you have.”

There was a pause, during which, Rose, who had covered her face with one hand, gave free vent to her tears. Harry still retained the other. “And your reasons, Rose,” he said, at length, in a low voice; “your reasons for this decision – may I ask them?”

“You have a right to know them,” rejoined Rose. “You can say nothing to alter my resolution. It is a duty that I must perform. I owe it alike to others and to myself.”

“To yourself?”

“Yes, Harry; I owe it to myself, that I, a friendless, portionless girl, with a blight upon my name, should not give the world reason to suspect that I had sordidly yielded to your first passion, and fastened myself, a clog, upon all your hopes and projects. I owe it to you and yours, to prevent you from opposing, in the warmth of your generous nature, this great obstacle to your progress in the world.”

“If your inclinations chime with your sense of duty – ” Harry began.

“They do not,” replied Rose, colouring deeply.

“Then you return my love?” said Harry. “Say but that, Rose; say but that, and soften the bitterness of this hard disappointment!”

“If I could have done so without doing heavy wrong to him I loved,” rejoined Rose, “I could have – ”

“Have received this declaration very differently?” said Harry, with great eagerness. “Do not conceal that from me, at least, Rose.”

“I could,” said Rose. “Stay,” she added, disengaging her hand, “why should we prolong this painful interview? Most painful to me, and yet productive of lasting happiness notwithstanding; for it *will* be happiness to know that I once held the high place in your regard which I now occupy, and every triumph you achieve in life will animate me with new fortitude and firmness. Farewell, Harry! for as we have met to-day, we meet no more: but in other relations than those in which this conversation would have placed us, may we be long and happily intertwined; and may every blessing that the prayers of a true and earnest heart can call down from where all is truth and sincerity, cheer and prosper you!”

“Another word, Rose,” said Harry. “Your reason in your own words. From your own lips let me hear it.”

“The prospect before you,” answered Rose, firmly, “is a brilliant one; all the honours to which great talents and powerful connexions can help men in public life are in store for you. But those connexions are proud, and I will neither mingle with such as hold in scorn the mother who gave me life, nor bring disgrace or failure upon the son of her who has so well supplied that mother’s place. In a word,” said the young lady, turning away, as her temporary firmness forsook her, “there is a stain upon my name which the world visits on innocent heads: I will carry it into no blood but my own, and the reproach shall rest alone on me.”

“One word more, Rose – dear Rose! one more!” cried Harry, throwing himself before her. “If I had been less, less fortunate, as the world would call it, – if some obscure and peaceful life had been my destiny, – if I had been poor, sick, helpless, – would you have turned from me then? or has my probable advancement to riches and honour given this scruple birth?”

“Do not press me to reply,” answered Rose, “the question does not arise, and never will. It is unfair, unkind, to urge it.”

“If your answer be what I almost dare to hope it is,” retorted Harry, “it will shed a gleam of happiness upon my lonely way, and light the dreary path before me. It is not an idle thing to do so much, by the utterance of a few brief words, for one who loves us beyond all else. Oh, Rose! in the name of my ardent and enduring attachment, – in the name of all I have suffered for you, and all you doom me to undergo, – answer me that one question!”

“Then, if your lot had been differently cast,” rejoined Rose; “if you had been even a little, but not so far, above me; if I could have been a help and comfort to you in some humble scene of peace and retirement, and not a blot and drawback in ambitious and distinguished crowds, I should have been spared this trial. I have every reason to be happy, very happy, now; but then, Harry, I own I should have been happier.”

Busy recollections of old hopes, cherished as a girl long ago, crowded into the mind of Rose, while making this avowal; but they brought tears with them, as old hopes will when they come back withered, and they relieved her.

“I cannot help this weakness, and it makes my purpose stronger,” said Rose, extending her hand. “I must leave you now, indeed.”

“I ask one promise,” said Harry. “Once, and only once more, – say within a year, but it may be much sooner, – let me speak to you again on this subject for the last time.”

“Not to press me to alter my right determination,” replied Rose, with a melancholy smile; “it will be useless.”

“No,” said Harry; “to hear you repeat it, if you will; finally repeat it. I will lay at your feet whatever of station or fortune I may possess, and if you still adhere to your present resolution, will not seek by word or act to change it.”

“Then let it be so,” rejoined Rose; “it is but one pang the more, and by that time I may be enabled to bear it better.”

She extended her hand again, but the young man caught her to his bosom, and imprinting one kiss upon her beautiful forehead, hurried from the room.

CHAPTER XXXV.
IS A VERY SHORT ONE, AND MAY APPEAR OF
NO GREAT IMPORTANCE IN ITS PLACE, BUT
IT SHOULD BE READ NOTWITHSTANDING, AS
A SEQUEL TO THE LAST, AND A KEY TO ONE
THAT WILL FOLLOW WHEN ITS TIME ARRIVES

“And so you are resolved to be my travelling-companion this morning – eh?” said the doctor, as Harry Maylie joined him and Oliver at the breakfast-table. “Why, you are not in the same mind or intention two half-hours together.”

“You will tell me a different tale one of these days,” said Harry, colouring without any perceptible reason.

“I hope I may have good cause to do so,” replied Mr. Losberne; “though I confess I don’t think I shall. But yesterday morning you had made up your mind, in a great hurry to stay here, and accompany your mother, like a dutiful son, to the sea-side; before noon, you announce that you are going to do me the honour of accompanying me as far as I go on your road to London; and at night, you urge me with great mystery to start before the ladies are stirring; the consequence of which is, that young Oliver here is pinned down to his breakfast when he ought to be ranging the meadows after botanical phenomena of all kinds. Too bad, isn’t it, Oliver?”

“I should have been very sorry not to have been at home when you and Mr. Maylie went away, sir,” rejoined Oliver.

“That’s a fine fellow,” said the doctor; “you shall come and see me when you return. But, to speak seriously, Harry, has any communication from the great nobs produced this sudden anxiety on your part to be gone?”

“The great nobs,” replied Harry, “under which designation, I presume, you include my most stately uncle, have not communicated with me at all since I have been here, nor, at this time of the year, is it likely that anything would occur to render necessary my immediate attendance among them.”

“Well,” said the doctor, “you are a queer fellow. But of course they will get you into parliament at the election before Christmas, and these sudden shiftings and changes are no bad preparation for political life. There’s something in that; good training is always desirable, whether the race be for place, cup, or sweepstakes.”

Harry Maylie looked as if he could have followed up this short dialogue by one or two remarks that would have staggered the doctor not a little, but he contented himself with saying, “We shall see,” and pursued the subject no further. The post-chaise drove up to the door shortly afterwards, and Giles coming in for the luggage, the good doctor bustled out to see it packed away.

“Oliver,” said Harry Maylie, in a low voice, “let me speak a word with you.”

Oliver walked into the window-recess to which Mr. Maylie beckoned him; much surprised at the mixture of sadness and boisterous spirits, which his whole behaviour displayed.

“You can write well now,” said Harry, laying his hand upon his arm.

“I hope so, sir,” replied Oliver.

“I shall not be at home again, perhaps for some time; I wish you would write to me – say once a fortnight, every alternate Monday, to the General Post Office in London: will you?” said Mr. Maylie.

“Oh! certainly, sir; I shall be proud to do it,” exclaimed Oliver, greatly delighted with the commission.

“I should like to know how – how my mother and Miss Maylie are,” said the young man; “and you can fill up a sheet by telling me what walks you take, and what you talk about, and whether she – they, I mean, seem happy and quite well. You understand me?”

“Oh! quite, sir, quite,” replied Oliver.

“I would rather you did not mention it to them,” said Harry, hurrying over his words; “because it might make my mother anxious to write to me oftener, and it is a trouble and worry to her. Let it be a secret between you and me, and mind you tell me every thing; I depend upon you.”

Oliver, quite elated and honoured by a sense of his importance, faithfully promised to be secret and explicit in his communications, and Mr. Maylie took leave of him with many warm assurances of his regard and protection.

The doctor was in the chaise; Giles (who, it had been arranged, should be left behind) held the door open in his hand; and the women-servants were in the garden looking on. Harry cast one slight glance at the latticed window, and jumped into the carriage.

“Drive on!” he cried, “hard, fast, full gallop; nothing short of flying will keep pace with me to-day.”

“Halloa!” cried the doctor, letting down the front glass in a great hurry, and shouting to the postilion, “something very short of flying will keep pace with me. Do you hear?”

Jingling and clattering, till distance rendered its noise inaudible, and its rapid progress only perceptible to the eye, the vehicle wound its way along the road almost hidden in a cloud of dust, now wholly disappearing, and now becoming visible again, as intervening objects or the intricacies of the way permitted. It was not until even the dusty cloud was no longer to be seen that the gazers dispersed.

And there was one looker-on, who remained with eyes fixed upon the spot where the carriage had disappeared, long after it was many miles away; for behind the white curtain which had shrouded her from view when Harry raised his eyes towards the window, sat Rose herself.

“He seems in high spirits and happy,” she said, at length. “I feared for a time he might be otherwise – I was mistaken. I am very, very glad.”

Tears are signs of gladness as well as grief; but those which coursed down Rose’s face, as she sat pensively at the window, still gazing in the same direction, seemed to tell more of sorrow than of joy.

CHAPTER XXXVI. IN WHICH THE READER, IF HE OR SHE RESORT TO THE FIFTH CHAPTER OF THIS SECOND BOOK, WILL PERCEIVE A CONTRAST NOT UNCOMMON IN MATRIMONIAL CASES

Mr. Bumble sat in the workhouse parlour, with his eyes moodily fixed on the cheerless grate, whence, as it was summer time, no brighter gleam proceeded than the reflection of certain sickly rays of the sun, which were sent back from its cold and shining surface. A paper fly-cage dangled from the ceiling, to which he occasionally raised his eyes in gloomy thought; and, as the heedless insects hovered round the gaudy network, Mr. Bumble would heave a deep sigh, while a more gloomy shadow overspread his countenance. Mr. Bumble was meditating, and it might be that the insects brought to mind some painful passage in his own past life.

Nor was Mr. Bumble's gloom the only thing calculated to awaken a pleasing melancholy in the bosom of a spectator. There were not wanting other appearances, and those closely connected with his own person, which announced that a great change had taken place in the position of his affairs. The laced coat and the cocked hat, where were they? He still wore knee-breeches and dark cotton stockings on his nether limbs, but they were not *the* breeches. The coat was wide-skirted, and in that respect like *the* coat, but, oh, how different! The mighty cocked-hat was replaced by a modest round one. Mr. Bumble was no longer a beadle.

There are some promotions in life which, independent of the more substantial rewards they offer, acquire peculiar value and dignity from the coats and waistcoats connected with them. A field-marshal has his uniform, a bishop his silk apron, a counsellor his silk gown, a beadle his cocked hat. Strip the bishop of his apron, or the beadle of his cocked hat and gold lace, what are they? Men, – mere men. Dignity, and even holiness too, sometimes, are more questions of coat and waistcoat than some people imagine.

Mr. Bumble had married Mrs. Corney, and was master of the workhouse. Another beadle had come into power, and on him the cocked-hat, gold-laced coat, and staff, had all three descended.

“And to-morrow two months it was done!” said Mr. Bumble, with a sigh. “It seems a age.”

Mr. Bumble might have meant that he had concentrated a whole existence of happiness into the short space of eight weeks; but the sigh – there was a vast deal of meaning in the sigh.

“I sold myself,” said Mr. Bumble, pursuing the same train of reflection, “for six tea-spoons, a pair of sugar-tongs, and a milk-pot, with a small quantity of second-hand furniter, and twenty pound in money. I went very reasonable – cheap, dirt cheap.”

“Cheap!” cried a shrill voice in Mr. Bumble's ear: “You would have been dear at any price; and dear enough I paid for you, Lord above knows that!”

Mr. Bumble turned and encountered the face of his interesting consort, who, imperfectly comprehending the few words she had overheard of his complaint, had hazarded the foregoing remark at a venture.

“Mrs. Bumble, ma'am!” said Mr. Bumble, with sentimental sternness.

“Well?” cried the lady.

“Have the goodness to look at me,” said Mr. Bumble, fixing his eyes upon her.

“If she stands such a eye as that,” said Mr. Bumble to himself, “she can stand anything. It is a eye I never knew to fail with paupers, and if it fails with her my power is gone.”

Whether an exceedingly small expansion of eye is sufficient to quell paupers, who, being lightly fed, are in no very high condition, or whether the late Mrs. Corney was particularly proof against eagle

glances, are matters of opinion. The matter of fact is, that the matron was in no way overpowered by Mr. Bumble's scowl, but on the contrary, treated it with great disdain, and even raised a laugh thereat, which sounded as though it were genuine.

On hearing this most unexpected sound, Mr. Bumble looked first incredulous, and afterwards, amazed. He then relapsed into his former state; nor did he rouse himself until his attention was again awakened by the voice of his partner.

"Are you going to sit snoring there all day?" inquired Mrs. Bumble.

"I am going to sit here as long as I think proper, ma'am," rejoined Mr. Bumble; "and although I was *not* snoring, I shall snore, gape, sneeze, laugh, or cry, as the humour strikes me, such being my prerogative."

"Your prerogative!" sneered Mrs. Bumble, with ineffable contempt.

"I said the word, ma'am," observed Mr. Bumble. "The prerogative of a man is to command."

"And what's the prerogative of a woman, in the name of goodness?" cried the relict of Mr. Corney, deceased.

"To obey, ma'am," thundered Mr. Bumble. "Your late unfort'nate husband should have taught it you, and then, perhaps, he might have been alive now. I wish he was, poor man!"

Mrs. Bumble, seeing at a glance that the decisive moment had now arrived, and that a blow struck for the mastership on one side or other must necessarily be final and conclusive, no sooner heard this allusion to the dead and gone, than she dropped into a chair, and with a loud scream, that Mr. Bumble was a hard-hearted brute, fell into a paroxysm of tears.

But tears were not the things to find their way to Mr. Bumble's soul; his heart was waterproof. Like washable beaver hats, that improve with rain, his nerves were rendered stouter and more vigorous by showers of tears, which, being tokens of weakness, and so far tacit admissions of his own power, pleased and exalted him. He eyed his good lady with looks of great satisfaction, and begged, in an encouraging manner, that she should cry her hardest, the exercise being looked upon by the faculty as strongly conducive to health.

"It opens the lungs, washes the countenance, exercises the eyes, and softens down the temper," said Mr. Bumble; "so cry away."

As he discharged himself of this pleasantry, Mr. Bumble took his hat from a peg, and putting it on rather rakishly on one side, as a man might do who felt he had asserted his superiority in a becoming manner, thrust his hands into his pockets, and sauntered towards the door with much ease and waggishness depicted in his whole appearance.

Now, Mrs. Corney that was had tried the tears, because they were less troublesome than a manual assault; but she was quite prepared to make trial of the latter mode of proceeding, as Mr. Bumble was not long in discovering.

The first proof he experienced of the fact was conveyed in a hollow sound, immediately succeeded by the sudden flying off of his hat to the opposite end of the room. This preliminary proceeding laying bare his head, the expert lady, clasping him tight round the throat with one hand, inflicted a shower of blows (dealt with singular vigour and dexterity) upon it with the other. This done, she created a little variety by scratching his face and tearing his hair off, and having, by this time, inflicted as much punishment as she deemed necessary for the offence, she pushed him over a chair, which was luckily well situated for the purpose, and defied him to talk about his prerogative again if he dared.

"Get up!" said Mrs. Bumble, in a voice of command, "and take yourself away from here, unless you want me to do something desperate."

Mr. Bumble rose with a very rueful countenance, wondering much what something desperate might be, and, picking up his hat, looked towards the door.

"Are you going?" demanded Mrs. Bumble.

“Certainly, my dear, certainly,” rejoined Mr. Bumble, making a quicker motion towards the door. “I didn’t intend to – I’m going, my dear – you are so very violent, that really I – ”

At this instant, Mrs. Bumble stepped hastily forward to replace the carpet, which had been kicked up in the scuffle; and Mr. Bumble immediately darted out of the room, without bestowing another thought on his unfinished sentence, leaving the late Mrs. Corney in full possession of the field.

Mr. Bumble was fairly taken by surprise, and fairly beaten. He had a decided bullying propensity, derived no inconsiderable pleasure from the exercise of petty cruelty, and, consequently, was (it is needless to say) a coward. This is by no means a disparagement to his character; for many official personages, who are held in high respect and admiration, are the victims of similar infirmities. The remark is made, indeed, rather in his favour than otherwise, and with the view of impressing the reader with a just sense of his qualifications for office.

But the measure of his degradation was not yet full. After making a tour of the house, and thinking, for the first time, that the poor-laws really were too hard upon people, and that men who ran away from their wives, leaving them chargeable to the parish, ought, in justice, to be visited with no punishment at all, but rather rewarded as meritorious individuals who had suffered much, Mr. Bumble came to a room where some of the female paupers were usually employed in washing the parish linen, and whence the sound of voices in conversation now proceeded.

“Hem!” said Mr. Bumble, summoning up all his native dignity “These women at least shall continue to respect the prerogative. Hallo! hallo there! – what do you mean by this noise, you hussies?”

With these words, Mr. Bumble opened the door, and walked in with a very fierce and angry manner, which was at once exchanged for a most humiliated and cowering air, as his eyes unexpectedly rested on the form of his lady wife.

“My dear,” said Mr. Bumble, “I didn’t know you were here.”

“Didn’t know I was here!” repeated Mrs. Bumble. “What do *you* do here?”

“I thought they were talking rather too much to be doing their work properly, my dear,” replied Mr. Bumble, glancing distractedly at a couple of old women at the washtub, who were comparing notes of admiration at the workhouse-master’s humility.