Title: Mad: A Story of Dust and Ashes

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"Mad"

"A Story of Dust and Ashes"

Volume One—Chapter One.

The Thin End of the Wedge.

Septimus Hardon bore his Christian name from no numerical reason, for he was an only child; but his father, Octavius Hardon, Esquire, of Somesham, thought that, like his own, the name had a good bold sound with it—a sonorous classical twang. There was a vibration with it that should impress people in the future life of the bearer and add importance denied by Nature; but Mrs Octavius, during her lifetime, was always in disgrace with her lord for shortening the name into Sep, which was decidedly not impressive; while as for Septimus himself, he too was always in trouble with his father for being what he was—decidedly impressive, but not in the way his father wished; for to look at Septimus Hardon it might have been supposed that Nature, after trying her 'prentice hand on man, and then making "the lasses, O," had had a quantity of rough stuff left—odds and ends, snips and scraps and awkward tags—when, sooner than there should be any waste of the precious material, she made Septimus Hardon. You could not say that he was deformed, but there was an odd look about him; his head seemed too big, and was badly thatched, while, by contrast, his body was too small; then his nose was a trifle on one side, and his mouth too wide, though it certainly disclosed an enviable set of teeth; his arms were long, and swung about too much, while one leg was slightly shorter than the other, short enough to make him limp; but there was mildness written in his pitted face, and honesty peered at you from his clear bright eyes. And there was a true heart too in his breast, a large swelling heart, to which must have been due the obtrusiveness of his breast, and the decided roundness of his shoulders. And while Septimus Hardon had in some things most excellent taste—taste that his cousins sneered at, save when they wanted their music copied neatly, or their drawings touched up—yet dress was not his forte, since he always made the worst of himself by wearing clothes that did not fit him, and bad as his figure was, some tailor could have been found who would have guaranteed fit, if not style. Septimus generally wore shabby faded black coats and vests, trousers of a dead leaf or baker's drab, blucher boots of the pattern known as contract—very bulgy and wrinkly; and a real beaver hat, with a propensity for growing irritated under the brush, and becoming rough and startling.

Born in London, Septimus had lived since childhood with his father at the Grange, a solitary house about a couple of miles from Somesham town; and for years past the amusement and toil of the father and son had been centred in a little amateur printing-office, fitted up in a side-room, where they laboriously printed, page by page, the work that Octavius Hardon called his brother Thomas—the doctor practising in the town—a fool for not appreciating,—a work upon political reform, one that was to astonish the world at large when it was completed; and though Septimus owned to himself that the world would be easily astonished and its state rather startling if it accepted and acted upon the opinions there set forth, yet, at forty years of age, he was still working on day after day at his father's beck and call, obedient as a child, and never venturing an opinion of his own in presence of the irascible old man, who always called him "boy."

It might have been supposed that living so secluded a life himself, and being so strange of aspect, the idle god would have spared him as an object for his shafts; but for long years Septimus Hardon had loved in secret, loved and sorrowed,—for he was not happy in the choice he had made. Mary Phillips was the betrothed of Tom Grey, the mate of an East Indiaman; and Septimus Hardon had been divided between love for the fair girl and friendship for his old schoolfellow, who made him the repository, in his frank, sailorlike fashion, of all his secrets.

So while the sailor had wooed and won, Septimus Hardon had nursed his love for years, hardly realising the passion he had harboured, till one night when, after a woodside ramble, he stood leaning upon a stile, and glancing down with bitterness at his uncouth form. The shadows were growing deeper, when, hearing approaching footsteps, he entered the wood, where before him lay many a dark mossy arcade—fit places for the sighs of a sorrowful heart; and he thought as he entered one that he could wander here in peace for a while; but the next instant the hot blood

flushed up into his face, making his veins throb as he stood with clenched hands gazing through the thin screen of leaves at Mary, leaning lovingly upon his friend's arm, and listening with downcast eyes to his words.

The listener could hardly see the looks of those who passed, but their words seemed to ring through the stillness of the summer eve, each one falling with a heavy impact upon his ear, and vibrating through his frame, as if a sharp blow had been struck upon sonorous metal. For a moment a wild fury seemed to blind him, and he stood trembling with passion till the footsteps died away; when, half wild with agony, he dashed headlong, deeper and deeper into the wood, crashing through the light hazels, tripping over the tortuous roots; and at last, stumbling over a fallen bough, he fell heavily, and lay insensible in the calm depths of the wood. But thought soon dawned upon him again, and he lay and shuddered as the anguish of heart came slowly creeping back; for he now thoroughly understood his fate, and knew that the bright dreamy structures in which his imagination had revelled had crumbled before him into bitter dust.

Time sped on, and after another voyage Tom Grey was back, and standing with his hand upon Septimus Hardon's shoulder.

"Come? Why, of course, my boy; what should we do without you? Mary begs that you won't refuse; and, Sep, old fellow, I shall expect you to be her bodyguard when I'm far away at sea."

Septimus Hardon was standing opposite to a tall pier-glass in his father's drawing-room when these words were spoken; and he glanced at himself, and then, sighing bitterly, wondered whether, had he been as other men, he would have been chosen. But the next moment the thought was crushed down, and he was returning the frank, handsome sailor's honest grasp.

Septimus Hardon nursed his love, but he hid it, buried it in the deepest recesses of his heart; and no one knew of the secret held by the bridegroom's friend, who held by one of the pews when a swimming came upon him in the church, and he would have fallen had not Tom Grey grasped his arm. But that soon passed, and the stricken man added his congratulations to those of the friends assembled to follow the couple, in whose path flowers were strewn—the couple joined together till death did them part.

And that was soon—soon to the loving wife—soon to the husband whose journeyings were upon the great deep; but years passed first, during which quiet, vacillating Septimus Hardon was the faithful friend of his schoolfellow's wife, and the patient slave of her bright-eyed child, at whose bidding he was always ready to attend, even to the neglect of his father's book.

Then came the day when, after whispering of hope, for many months, Septimus learned that his fears were but too well founded, and that his friend's ship had gone down with all on board.

A bitter trial was his to break the fatal tidings to the widow, and he stood trembling as she, the woman he had for long years worshipped in secret, reviled him and cursed him in her madness for the news—the blasting news that he had brought upon her home.

Then two years glided away, when the widow, passing through many a phase of sorrow, sickness, and misery, sat hoping on that he whom she mourned would yet return, and all the while ignorant of the hand that supplied her wants, or of the good friend with so great a love for fancy-work that she sent order after order, liberally paid for by the hands of Septimus Hardon. The beauty of the past slowly faded, so that she became haggard and thin; a lasting illness seemed to have her in its grasp; but still faithful to his trust, true to the love he bore her, Septimus Hardon set at naught the frowns of his father and the sneers of his cousins, while he devoted himself to the alleviation of the widow's sufferings, and kept her from the additional stings of want, for she had been left totally unprovided for by her young and hopeful husband.

And what was the result? Such as might have been expected from such a nature as Septimus Hardon's. Patient and true, the love he bore this woman was hidden for years, and then, when in her hopeless misery the widow turned her head upon the sick pillow and asked his advice, he told her to give him the right to protect her, to be to her child, little Lucy, a second father, and then shrank, crushed and trembling, from the room, affrighted at her look of horror, and the words accusatory which told him of faithlessness to his trust, to his schoolfellow, who she felt yet lived.

But it was only in her hopeful heart he lived, and six months after forbidding Septimus her house, Mary Grey, weeping bitterly over the discovery she had made of the hand that had so long sustained her, wrote these words and sent them to the Grange: "Forgive me!"

Volume One—Chapter Two.

Sep's Complaint.

Octavius Hardon's book was at a standstill, and the world still in the thick darkness of ignorance as regarded political reform upon his basis, for Septimus Hardon was ill, sick almost unto death. He had slowly grown listless and dull, careless of everything, daily becoming weaker, until, apparently without ailment, he had taken to his bed, over which his uncle, Doctor Hardon; his assistant, Mr Reston, a handsome, cynical-looking man, and the rival practitioner of the town, had all concurred in shaking their heads and declaring that nothing could be done, since Septimus Hardon was suffering from the effects of an internal malformation.

They were quite right; the poor fellow had too much heart; and though the wise of this earth declare that people do not die of or for love, yet most assuredly Septimus Hardon would slowly have faded from his place among men, and before many months had passed over his head gone where there is rest.

But there was medicine of the right kind coming, and the very perusal with lack-lustre eyes of the prescription brought to his bedroom sent a flash of light into the glassy orbs, and in the course of a few weeks Septimus disappointed the doctors by getting well, Nature having arranged respecting the internal malformation.

“I don’t think you did him a bit of good, Mr Brande; not a bit—not a bit—not a bit,” said Octavius to the rival practitioner. “He never took any of your stuffs. Now, come and set me up again, for I’m wrong.”

“Better, yes, he’s better,” said the old man to Mr Reston. “Good-morning—good-morning—good-morning.”

Doctor Hardon had sent his assistant over; but in place of seeing the patient he found himself bowed out; and on loudly complaining to the doctor, not on account of missing his interview with the patient, but for reasons of his own, Doctor Hardon now called.

“Well, Tom—well, Tom—well, Tom?” said Octavius, smiling cynically, and looking his younger brother well over from top to toe. “What is it, Tom?”

“O, about Septimus?”

“There, be off; I’m busy. Septimus is getting on, and Mr Brande will physic him if he wants any more. A man who can’t morally physic his own children can’t do other people’s good.”

Doctor Hardon, portly and pompous, rose to speak; but Octavius took hold of his arm and led him to the door, giving him his hat at the same time.

“Good-bye, Tom—good-bye—good-bye. Don’t come till I send for you again. You always were a fool, and an ass, and an idiot, and a humbug, Tom—always—always—always.”

There was a slight storm at Doctor Hardon’s that day, and neither his wife nor daughters ventured much into his presence; but when, some weeks afterwards, the doctor knew of a scene that took place in his brother’s house, he smiled softly, and after a fashion of his own he purred, while that night he was graciousness itself.

Octavius Hardon sat writing, and listening to the words of his son till, as he grew interested, the pen ceased to form letters, and at last he pushed back his chair, overturning the inkstand, so that the sable current streamed across a fresh paragraph of his book. He thrust up his glasses and sheltered his eyes to look at his son—the son who had obeyed his every word and look, who had never seemed to have a thought of his own—the son who was even now, in spite of his forty years, but a boy; and as he looked, he saw that he seemed inches taller, that there was an elate look in his countenance, which it would have been hard at that moment to have called plain.

“Going to be what?” gasped the father.

“To be married,” said the son firmly.

“Married?”

“Married, father.”

“And to whom? One of those hussies, your cousins?”

“To Mrs Grey,” replied Septimus.

“What?” gasped the old man. “To a woman—a widow with a family—a proper inmate for the union—a pauper!”

“Hush, father!” cried Septimus. “I love her;” and he said those simple words with such reverence, such tenderness, that the old man paused and gazed almost wonderingly at the aspect worn by his son; but by degrees his anger gained the ascendant, and a stormy scene ensued in which the father threatened and besought in turn, while the son remained calm and immovable. Once he shrunk back and held up his hands deprecatingly, when the old man spoke harshly of the stricken woman; but directly after his face lit up with a pride and contentment which almost maddened the speaker.

“You cannot keep a wife!” he gasped.

Septimus smiled.

“You were always a helpless, vacillating fool, and you have nothing but the few hundreds from your mother.”

Septimus bowed his head.

“Dog!” roared the old man, “I’ll leave every penny I have to your uncle’s hussies if you dare to marry this woman.”

The son smiled sadly, but remained silent.

“Why don’t you speak?” roared Octavius, foaming with rage.

“What would you have me say, father?” said Septimus calmly.

“Say!” gasped the old man; “why, that you are a thankless, graceless, unnatural scoundrel. But where do you mean to go?”

“To London,” said Septimus.

“To London!” sneered the old man; “and what for? No; go to Hanwell, or Colney Hatch, or sink your paltry money at a private asylum, if they will take you. To London, to leave me to my infirmities, with my book unfinished! But you’ll take my curse with you; and may yon brazen, scheming woman—”

“Hush!” cried Septimus fiercely, as he laid his hand upon his father’s lips, when, beside himself with fury, Octavius struck his son heavily in the face, and then, as he fell back, the old man seized the poker, but only to throw it crashing back into the fender.

Just at that moment, the door opened, a tall, dark, handsome girl hurried into the room, and stood between father and son, gazing in an agitated way from one anger-wrought countenance to the other.

“Septimus! Uncle!” she cried, “what is the matter?”

“He’s a villain, girl—an unnatural scoundrel. He’s going to marry that woman—Grey’s wife—widow—relict—curse her!”

“What, poor Mrs Grey?” said the girl, with the tears springing to her eyes.

“God bless you for that, Agnes!” cried Septimus passionately, as he caught her in his arms, and kissed her affectionately.

“Yes, *poor* Mrs Grey,” sneered the old man, looking savagely at the pair before him. “But there, let him go; and mind *you*, or you won’t have what I’ve got. But there, you will, and your sisters will have something to fleer and jeer at then, and your father will purr in my face, and spit and swear behind my back. Bah! a cursed tom-cat humbug!”

“Hush, uncle dear!” whispered Agnes, laying one hand upon his arm and the other upon his breast, her lip quivering as she spoke,—“hush! you are angry.—Don’t say any more, Septimus.”

“No,” replied Septimus sternly, “I have done.”

“No, *no*, no! you have not,” roared the old man, firing up again. “You have to beg my pardon, and tell me that this folly is at an end.”

“I’ll beg your pardon, father,” said Septimus sternly, “and I do ask it for anything I have done amiss; but I have pledged my word to the woman I have loved these ten years.” And again there was the look of proud elation on Septimus Hardon’s countenance.

“And you are going to London, eh?” said Octavius.

“To London,” said Septimus calmly.

The old man frowned, pressed his lips tightly together, and, holding Agnes firmly by her shoulder, he stood pointing with one hand towards the door.

“Then go!” he said; “go—go!”

“O, Septimus!” cried Agnes in appealing tones,—“uncle!”

“You’re mad, Septimus Hardon,” said the old man coldly. “Mad—stark mad: a private asylum, Septimus—an asylum—mad! You’re mad—stark mad! Go!”

Volume One—Chapter Three.

Further Introductions.

In the faint light of early morning, some ten years after the scene described in the last chapter, at that cold dank hour when the struggle is going on between night and day, and the former is being slowly and laboriously conquered, —when Chancery-lane looked at its worst, and the passed-away region of Bennett’s-rents more sordid and desolate than ever. The gas-lamps still glimmered in the street, while the solitary light at the end of the Rents yet burned dimly, and as if half-destroyed by mephitic vapour, when the door of Number 27 was opened, closed loudly, and a man clattered heavily over the broken pavement, creating an unnecessary amount of noise as he slowly made his way out through the narrow archway into the street, but watching on either side with observant eye the while. It seemed darker when he reached the Lane, where, after glancing hastily up and down for a minute, he softly thrust off his boots,—a pair of heavy lace-ups,—and then, taking them in his hand, he ran lightly back, with the stooping gait and eager hound-like air of some savage beast on the trail of its prey. But the next moment he was at the door he had quitted, had opened it softly and slipped in, ignorant that a face at the third-floor window opposite was watching his movements with looks yet keener than his own.

Holding his breath, the man stood in the passage of the old house for a few seconds; then, passing along softly, he stole down the damp, half-rotten cellar-stairs, starting once and giving vent to a half-suppressed ejaculation as a cat dashed hastily by him, when he paused to wipe the cold perspiration from his forehead with his sleeve. Then he stood at the bottom in front of the cellar-door, in the damp dark place where ashes gritted beneath his feet, and the foul smell of half-decayed vegetable refuse arose. Apparently guided by caution, he now carefully felt around him, letting his hands glide along the wall, while his feet probed every corner to insure that he was alone, before, after listening an instant at the foot of the stairs, he slipped quickly through the door, and stood in the large front cellar.

It was lighter here, for the morning was struggling down through the grating; and now, after a careful tour of inspection, peering into every dim corner, the man passed through a low archway and into a back-cellar, darker and damper than the first,—a place that had once been used for wine, and into every one of whose cobweb-hung and sawdust-floored bins the man looked in turn, as he made his way farther from the light.

He was a big, heavy man; but there was something soft and cat-like in his movements as he passed along the dark cellar. The obscurity seemed to have but little effect upon him, for the way appeared familiar; and when right at the end he stopped to listen attentively for a few moments before, going down upon hands and knees, he crawled rapidly, and more cat-like than ever, into one of the darkest bins. Then there was a low grating noise heard, as if a heavy stone had been pushed aside; there was a deep expiration, as of one moving a weight; a rustling, the grating sound once more, and then for a few minutes silence.

The light descending the grating struggled hard to illumine the obscure place; but this was one of the strongholds of darkness—a spot where it lurked through the bright hours of the day; and the efforts of the light only served to faintly illumine the front cellar, where stood a huge water-butt with a pipe leading to it for the supply of the house; and here now began an echoing drip, drip, drip; while from the tap came a strange, sighing, hissing sound, as the air was forced by distant pressure along the pipe.

Now came the sharp crack of a stair, the very faint rustle of a dress, and then slowly and cautiously appeared, coming forward, as it were, out of the gloom like one of the phantoms of a nightmare, the face that had been gazing from the opposite window, an old, eager, hawk-like, pinched woman’s face, peering through the opening of the ajar door, and followed directly by the shabbily-clothed body.

Cautiously, and with eyes peering in every direction, the woman advanced into the cellar, her head thrust forward, with her thin grey hair pushed behind her ears, which twitched and seemed on the alert to catch the faintest sound. Close behind her followed a cropped poodle-dog, which now ran forward, when at a menacing gesture it half stood up, but the raised hand made it shrink down instantly, and crouching to the earth it crawled for a few moments and then lay motionless, while its mistress, as if walking in the steps of the man, nimbly examined the cellar, even peering behind and in the great butt, which her thrust-in hand showed her was nearly full of water.

She then softly made her way to the dark arch, and with one hand holding by the side leaned in and tried to penetrate the darkness, but without avail; when, muttering softly to herself, she stepped in, but only to pass out the next moment shaking her head, as with one hand she busily searched her pocket, from which she drew forth a box of matches. Stepping once more beneath the arch she struck a match upon the damp wall, and a long phosphorescent line of light shone feebly out, but the match did not blaze.

Impatiently throwing down the splint of wood, the woman tried another and another, but without effect, till she rubbed one upon the outside of the box, when it ignited silently, and illumined the place for a little distance round, when eagerly catching up the tiny splints thrown down she lit first one and then another, and as they burned their brief span a hasty examination was made. Everywhere the same features: old cobwebbed wine-bins, damp and fungoid growths, and though the woman peered even into the bin where the man had so lately crawled, nothing presented itself to her hurried gaze more than in the others, and as her last lit splint burned out she stepped lightly back to the entrance.

As she stood within the front cellar she turned once more to gaze down the dark place she had quitted, when a low grating noise struck her ear, and starting back she was about to run to the steps; but, making an effort over herself, she stood, trembling, and listened.

The noise continued for a few seconds, then came the sound as of clothes rustling against a wall, then the heavy breathing, the grating once more, and then silence as, turning her back to both entrances, the woman stole softly to where her dog lay crouching upon the damp floor.

The next moment a sharp yelp and a succession of howls came from the stricken dog as the woman caught it by the thick curled hair of its neck, and beat it savagely.

“Ah, then, *méchant chien*, bad tog, how I have looked for you!” she cried. “Why do you steal down here? There, there, there!” and each word was followed by a blow, while the wretched little animal lay cowering and yelping on the ground, till, lifted by its ears, the skin seemed drawn out of place, the eyes elongated, and the poor brute, now silent, the most abject specimen of canine misery imaginable.

There was a quick step behind the woman, and, as if surprised, she started, and turned to gaze at the evil face behind her, for the man had stepped close to the entrance-door.

“Ah! Meester Jarker, but you did frighten me. My bad tog he runs away. What shall I do wis him?”

The man looked keenly at the speaker, and slowly drew a large clasp-knife, which he opened, and the woman could hardly repress a shudder as there in the dim light she saw him run his thumb along the edge.

“Ah, yes!” she said with a half-laugh; “he deserves, but I cannot spare him; I must teach him better than to come into uzzer people’s house. I look everywhere before I think of dis cellar.”

The man did not speak, but glanced first at the mistress, then at the dog, and then at his knife and the great butt, and then involuntarily his suspicious looks turned to the dark arch of the inner cellar, when once more their eyes met in a long penetrating stare.

“I once knowed somethin’ as got its throat cut for coming into this here cellar. I ain’t sure, but I think that ’ere was a dawg,” growled the man.

“O yes, he must not come any more, Meester Jarker; but you will not cut my troat. O, no,” laughed the woman jeeringly, as sending her dog on first, and fixing her eyes upon the man, she slowly backed out of the cellar. “O, no, for we will both be good and come no more.”

As she slowly made her way to the cellar-stairs, the man stood looking after her; but as she mounted them he followed softly, and listened till he heard her rustle along the passage, when he slipped through the cellar and caught sight of her from the rusty grating as she crossed the court, when he once more went back to the dark arch and looked about him.

All at once his keen eye caught sight of something upon the floor—a newly-burned scrap of match, and snatching it up, he held it to his cheek to try and detect whether it was dry or damp. It seemed to be dry, so after once more going to the door, and from thence to the stairs, to make out whether he was sure to be free from interruption, he returned hastily, drew forth a tin match-box, lit a scrap of wax-candle from his pocket, and then shading the light with his cap and carefully examining the floor, he picked up three more tiny pieces of half-burned match, lying here and there amongst the blackened dirt and sawdust. These scraps he carefully placed in his pocket along with the piece of candle, and then hurried out, with his lips drawn away from his teeth, and his face wearing a diabolically savage aspect. But the next moment he gave his head a shake, and stole softly up the stairs muttering:

“It must have been arter the dawg.”

Mr William Jarker walked out into the court with his boots on now, and his hands very far down in his pockets, and then made his way into the Lane, where he paused in doubt as to whether he should go to the right or to the left; but as in the latter direction there was a policeman, Mr Jarker betook himself to the right, and made his way into the Strand, now nearly empty, while church-spire and chimney-pot stood out clear in the unsmoked morning air. But the street-sweepers were busy, the butchers’ carts from westward came rattling along, bound for Newgate-market; watercress-girls tramped by from Farringdon, making up their dark-green bunches as they walked; while every now and then a red newspaper-cart dashed by with its universal budget for the various railway termini. London was waking again, the great heart was beating fast, and the streams of life beginning to ebb and flow through the street-veins of the City.

But all this affected Mr Jarker very little, he only seemed interested at times during his walk, being apparently in a very contemplative mood. Once he half-stopped as a tall, dark, fierce-eyed woman walked hastily by in company with a slightly-formed girl; but they noticed him not, and were soon out of sight, while Mr Jarker continued his walk, with eyes directed at the ground, as if he thought that being an early bird he must get the first peck at the worms—worms that might take the form of some valuable waif. However, not meeting with any reward from the earth he turned his eyes heavenward, where he could see no waifs, but an occasional stray in the shape of a pigeon, darting across the clear strip of atmosphere above his head, or settling upon the housetop, and so much did these gentle birds attract his notice, that he would now and then stop, and inserting a couple of tolerably clean, soft, unworked fingers in his mouth, whistle to them.

For the pigeons are many in London, and at early morn single birds may be seen darting in swift flight like airy messengers; flocks may be seen in circle round their home, or cooing in company upon the tower of some lofty church—one of the many hidden amidst the labyrinths of bricks and mortar—cooing softly sweet notes, heard plainly now, but soon to be drowned in the roar of the busy streams of life ebbing and flowing through the streets; now but a gentle hum as of a honey-seeking bee, but soon increasing in intensity as the bees swarm.

There was no help for it this time, for suddenly turning a corner, Mr Jarker come upon a sergeant and a dozen policemen walking with measured step, on their way to relieve those who had been on duty through the night.

“I’m gallussed!” muttered Mr Jarker, trying to look unconcerned, and slouching on; and it was observable that though Mr Jarker looked straight before him and whistled, the policemen, one and all, looked very hard at Mr Jarker, as if they knew him and felt hurt at his pride; while one man was even seen to wink to himself, and smile a very peculiar, hard smile—the kind of smile only seen upon policemen’s faces, and one that means so much that its interpretation would be a task of difficulty.

“I’m gallussed!” muttered Mr Jarker again, when he was well past the men in uniform, and then, apparently satisfied with the length of his morning walk, he took a short cut to make his way back to Bennett’s-rents, while, upon thus once more having his thoughts directed homeward, he again muttered—“It must have been arter the dawg.”

Volume One—Chapter Four.

With the Dragon’s Teeth.

In the gloomiest part of that gloomy street called Carey, and in the darkest corner of his printing-office, sat Septimus Hardon. The dragon’s teeth and their appurtenances lay around, but all thickly covered with that strange black dust peculiar to the region; the dust compounded of who can tell what, as it rests on every ledge, and settles thickly upon every article in room or workshop, office or chamber. Business had not prospered with Septimus, though his place looked business-like, save for the animation that a few moving figures would have lent to it, while for position it was all that could be desired. But the star of Septimus Hardon was not in the ascendant. With the knowledge full upon him that he must work to keep the wife and child he had taken to his breast upon leaving Somesham, he had adopted the trade which seemed most congenial from the little knowledge that he possessed; but as the years passed on, leaving him poorer, and with increased expenses, he grew hopeless, helpless, and, if it were possible, less fitted than ever for fighting his way amidst the busy throngs of the great city. At times, almost in despair, he would go forth into the streets of the busy hive and canvass for work; but he always carried with him an atmosphere of his own, so quiet, strange, and retiring a manner, that his very appearance invited either pity or rebuff, and often and

often, when tired out, he would return to his wife for the comfort that she, grown more sickly than ever, could ill afford to give.

But Septimus seldom complained, and there was always a pleasant smile for Lucy Grey, now grown a blooming girl, the mainstay of the family for cheerfulness, and the constant attendant of her invalid mother; and, in spite of her years, almost taking the place of parent to the two children, the fruit of Septimus Hardon's marriage.

And now, after long years of straggling, Septimus sat thinking of the state of his affairs, of the rent he had to make up, and the silence of his father in spite of the many humble appeals that he had made to him for help. Mattering and calculating, with a piece of paper and a pencil, he suddenly stopped short, for he saw that he was not alone, and shuffling off his high stool he hurried towards the new-comer, in the hope that some solicitor had sent orders for some large amount of work, or that, better still, an estimate was wanted for a new magazine.

"Any chance of a job, sir?" said the new-comer, who might have been Septimus Hardon twenty years older, and more shabby. There was 'old compositor' oozing out of him at every corner, and the corners in his person were many; he smelt of stale tobacco-smoke, and he was taking almost his last pinch of snuff out of a dirty piece of paper, with his long, lithe, active fingers as Septimus Hardon approached him. A shabby black frock-coat was buttoned tightly to his chin; his shiny black trousers had the gloss of age thick upon them; Wellington boots were upon his feet that rivalled his tall hat for dilapidations; old, sallow, dirty, and wild-looking, he was not the man a master would have employed unless from some latent idea that he suited the district. "Any chance of a job, sir?"

Septimus Hardon shook his head and sighed, which was, to say the least of it, unbusiness-like.

The old man echoed the sigh, leaned one hand upon the case of type at his elbow, and began to finger the letters, bringing up the bright unused types from the bottom of the boxes. He then sighed again, took in at one glance the fittings of the office, and ended by fixing his eyes upon the owner.

"Might do a deal of work with all this, sir."

Septimus Hardon nodded drearily, and sighed again, instead of promptly ordering the man off his premises.

"Yes; should be glad of an hour's work or so, sir. Seems hard here in this world of ours that when a man's ready and willing to work he can't get it to do, sir; don't it?"

Septimus nodded, and looked hard at the man, thinking how his was after all the worse lot.

"I'm faint, sir," continued the old printer, "and hungry, and hard up;" and then he looked down at his clothes with a dreary smile upon his grim, unshorn face.

"I would give you work with pleasure," said Septimus; "but I might as well close the office for all that comes to my share."

The man scraped the last of his snuff out of the shabby piece of newspaper, and lost it all beneath his long dirty finger and thumb-nails; when, not to disappoint his itching organ, he ran a lean finger along a ledge where dust lay thick, and administered it to his nose in an absent way, snapped his fingers loudly to get rid of the residue, and then slowly turned to go; but, on reaching the door, he faced round again:

"If you'd stand an advance of a shilling, sir, I'd come honestly another time and work it out; for I *am* hard up, sir, and no mistake."

Mistake there certainly was none; but shillings were then scarce things with Septimus Hardon. A shilling, the sum tossed carelessly to the cabman for a few hundred yards' ride, meant, perhaps, the dinner of himself and family; and he knew in his heart that the odds were very long against his ever seeing man or shilling again; but there was so great a knowledge of want in his heart that he could not bear to see it in others, and almost the last shilling in his pocket was slipped into the visitor's hand.

The old printer took the money with his trembling fingers; looked at it, then at the donor; tried to speak, but choked over it; and then, with something like a maundering tear in each eye, he shuffled out of the office, taking with him: The solicitor's work; The magazine estimate; and, most needed of all, Septimus Hardon's shilling.

There was so little weight in the pocket before, that the shilling was not missed; and in spite of the black look of his affairs there was something in the act which made Septimus Hardon's heart feel light as his pocket, as, thrusting his papers into the desk and locking it, he went and stood before a piece of looking-glass and stretched his face to take out the care-wrinkles, smiled two or three times to give a pleasant tarnish to his countenance, and then, loudly humming a tune, he hurried up to the first-floor, where Mrs Septimus, Lucy, and the children, were located.

Carey-street was a most desirable place for residence or business, as any landlord would have told you in the old days, before the houses I write of were carted away by contractors, and huge law-courts threatened in their stead. Lucy Grey knew the place now by heart. There was generally something out of the common way to be seen there, in spite of the place being so retired and its echoes so seldom disturbed by carriages, unless by those of the judges, when coachman and footman thought it advisable to wash down the legal dust of the place by copious draughts of porter at the Barley Mow or the Blue Horse. The dust-cart—that hearse for bearing off the remains of many a dancing, merry, cheery fire—might be seen there in the morning; and at every cloud of dust raised by the emptying of the fantail man's basket, scraps of parchment and torn folios of cold, bitter cold crabbed writing, were caught up by the fierce winds of the place, and away they went scudding down the street, to the amusement of Septimus Hardon's children; for the mocking wind tossed the scraps on high, as if to show how light and empty they were. Interesting words they were too, mostly about "our client" and his "heirs, executors, administrators, and assigns;"

while of a morning the man whom Septimus Hardon himself knew well as a class, “our client” himself, might be seen in the streets; now early in his suit—Chancery suit, perhaps,—wrapped in it and looking busy and important, glossy and shiny, and, on the whole, apparently liking it. Now with the suit old and shabby, with the pocket-holes frayed and worn with the passage in and out of papers—papers always without end, while the owner crept along, dejected and dismal as Septimus himself, ready at times to enter his office, and sit down and make him the repository of the fact that he hoped the Lord Chancellor or his Vice will give judgment next week. Now he went along, silent and thoughtful; now he brightened up and became energetic, and gesticulated to an audience composed of the apple-woman at the corner, who sat there beneath the lamp summer and winter, like some dowdy old hen in a nest, for her lower extremities were all tightly tucked in a worn sieve-basket.

“Our client” generally went into Carey-street to eat his sandwiches; now looking crumby, now crusty, as the case might be, while he paced irresolutely up and down, or round into the Lane or Portugal-street, or even into the Fields for a change, to gaze at the trees beyond those railings, upon every spike of which a disappointed or broken heart might be stuck by way of ornament. As before said, “our client” had generally plenty of papers with him; some yellow and frayed, some new, but all carefully tied with red tape, which by its friction has a wonderful effect upon black-kid gloves, soon wearing out the fingers, as the papers are untied in doorways for reference while the tape-string is held in the mouth.

“Our client” was decidedly the principal object of interest in Carey-street; but there were thin, clever, cold-looking lawyers; thin, cold, and underpaid clerks, blue-bag bearing; portly thick clerks, warm, glossy, and gold-chained, red-bag bearing—bags gasping and choking fearfully with their contents—choking horribly with the papers thrust into them, sticking out of their very mouths; long-headed barristers, whose eyes seemed to have turned cold and oysterish—meaningless, and as if gazing within—men upon whose long heads briefs rained incessantly; men in gowns, men bewigged, and with the insignia of their rank put on all ways—straight, crooked, here awry, and there awry, with the frontal apex descending upon the nose, and the caudal beauty behind raised at right angles to display the undergrowth, black, brown, grey, or sandy, or perhaps resting upon the nape of the wearer’s neck, with the tails beating a white powdery tune upon his back, like a hare’s feet upon a tabor; shabby witnesses, shabby porters, shabby inhabitants; dirt everywhere, and a sharp, gritty, pouncey dust flying before the wind to bring tears into the eyes.

Lucy Grey knew all this by heart, and so did Septimus Hardon’s children—lessons learned from the windows, or during their walks, when Lucy showed them the wonders of the shops at hand, and that ever-banging, restless door where the shabby law-writers went in and out, night and day; the three wigs resting upon as many blockheads—wooden blockheads—new, fresh, and cool for their future wearers; the works in the law-booksellers’, all bound in dismal paper, or Desert-of-Sahara-coloured leather—law-calf—Tidd on this, Todd on that, Equity Reports, Chancery Practice, Common Law, Statutes at Large, Justice of the Peace, Stone’s Manual. Law everywhere: Simson, tin deed-box manufacturer; Bodgers, deeds copied; Screw, law-writer; Bird, office-furniture warehouse—valuations for probate; S Hardon, legal and general printer; while, like a shade at the end of the street, stood the great hospital, where the wan faces of patients might be seen gazing up at the sky, towards where the clouds scudded before the wind, hurrying to be once more in the country. Away they went, each one a very chariot, bearing with it the thoughts of the prisoned ones—captives from sickness, or poverty, or business. There were faces here at the hospital that would smile, and heads that would nod to Septimus Hardon’s little golden-haired children when Lucy held them up; when perchance the patient went back to sit upon some iron bedstead’s edge, and tell some fellow-sufferer of the bright vision she had seen,—a vision of angels in the legal desert.

With such surroundings, no one upon entering Septimus Hardon’s rooms would have been surprised to see Mrs Septimus careworn, and lying upon a shabby couch, and the children slight and fragile. The rooms were close, heavy, and dull, heavy-windowed, heavy-panelled, earthy-smelling, and cryptish, as though the dust of dead-and-gone suitors lay thick in the place. There was but little accommodation for the heavy rent he paid; and Septimus Hardon looked uneasily from face to face, crushing down the sorrowful thoughts that tried to rise; for in that close room there was not space for more than one complaining soul. Mrs Septimus told of her troubles often enough; and Septimus felt that his task was to cheer. Still, it was hard work when he had to think of the landlord and the rent; the landlord who, when he complained of this said rent, told him to look at the situation; which Septimus Hardon did, and sighed; and then, by way of raising his spirits, took down and read the copies of the letters he had from time to time sent to his father, unanswered one and all; and then he sighed again, and wondered how it would all end.

Volume One—Chapter Five.

A Pair of Shoes.

This is a world of change; but the time was when you could turn by Saint Clement’s Church, from the roar of the waves of life in the Strand, and make your way between a baked-potato can—perspiring violently in its efforts to supply the demands made upon it—and a tin of hot eels, steaming in a pasty mud; then under a gateway, past old-clothes shops and marine-store dealers; thread your way along between crooked tumbledown houses in dismal fever-breeding lanes, which led you into the far-famed region of Lincoln’s-inn, where law stared you in the face at every turn. It will doubtless behave in as barefaced a manner to you at the present day; but you will have to approach it by a different route, for the auctioneer’s hammer has given those preliminary taps that herald the knocking-down of a vast collection of the houses of old London; and perhaps ere these sheets are in the press, first stones will be laid of the buildings to occupy the site as law-courts. But take we the region as it was, with its frowsy abodes and their tenants. They are clipped away now; but in every direction, crowding in upon the great inns of court, were dilapidated houses pressing upon it like miserable suitors asking for their rights, or like rags of the great legal gown. But it is a rare place is Lincoln’s-inn—a place where the law is rampant, and the names of its disciples are piled in monuments upon the door-posts—a place where you may pick your legal adviser according to the length of your purse. The doors stand open, and the halls are cold, cheerless, and echoing, while the large carven keystone looks

down at the entering client with its stony eyes, which seem to wink and ogle as the sly, sneering, tongue-thrusting image apparently chuckles at the folly of man. The cold shivers are always out in Lincoln's-inn, and they attack you the moment you enter the precincts; probably they are spirits of past-and-gone suitors, in past-and-gone suits, wandering to avenge themselves upon the legal fraternity by freezing the courage of litigants and turning them back when about to perform that wholesale shovelling of an estate into the legal dust-cart known as "throwing it into Chancery." Cold stone posts stand at intervals along the sides of the square, looking, in their grey, bleak misery, like to stripped and bare clients waiting for redress at their legal advisers' doors. A dreary place for an assignation, if your friend possesses not the virtue of punctuality; for the eye wanders in vain for some pleasant oasis where it may rest. You have not here in autumn those melancholy, washed-out flowers—the chrysanthemums of the Temple, but you may gaze through prison-like bars at soot-dusted grass—verdure apparently splashed with ink from the surrounding offices; at the trees, adapted by nature to the circumstances of their fate; for, as in the arctic zone the thinly-clad animals grow furry as a protection from the cold, so here, in this region of law costs and voluminous writing, the trees put forth twigs and sprays of a sharp spiky nature, a compromise between porcupine penholders and a *chevaux de frise*, to enable them to set attack at defiance.

Enter one house here, and you would have found upon the ground-floor your QC or Serjeant—Brother So-and-so as he is so affectionately called by the judge; upon the first-floor, your substantial firms of family solicitors, deep in title, lease, covenant, and tenancy in every form or shape—men who set such store by their knowledge that they dole it out to you at so much per dozen words—words adulterated with obsolete expressions repeated *ad nauseam*; while upon the second-floor you would probably find firms of sharp practitioners, ready for business in any shape; and, as elsewhere through the house, the names of the occupants were painted upon the doors—black letters upon a parchment ground.

But the house in question was not entirely legal in its occupants, for if you had been ascending the stairs, before you had gone far, a loud sniff would have made you raise your head sharply towards the skylight, beneath which, sitting, or rather perched, upon the top balustrade, would have been visible the doughy, big, baby-like face of Mrs Sims, strongly resembling, with the white-muslin wings on either side, a fat-cheeked cherub, freshly settled after some ethereal flight.

Mrs Sims was the lady who did for those gentlemen of the house who wanted doing for, took in parcels, answered bells, and was also well-known in the neighbourhood as a convenient party in times of sickness, being willing to nurse a bachelor gentleman of the legal profession, or one of the poor fraternity of the rags around. She had stood at many a bedside had Mrs Sims, and seen the long sleep come to many a weary, broken-hearted suitor, and she had sniffed and sobbed at the recital of their miseries, offering the while such consolation as she could from the depths of a very simple but very honest heart.

After another loud sniff, and a curtsey performed invisibly, except that the cherubic head was seen to bob out of sight, and then apparently re-perch itself upon the balustrade, Mrs Sims would say "At home," or "Not at home," as the case might be. Then, as you left the staircase, the head would disappear, and, summer or winter, Mrs Sims might be heard refreshing herself with a blow at the fire by means of a very creaky, asthmatic pair of bellows.

Mrs Sims was busy, and had made visible the whole of her person, as standing at the door she pointed out into the square, calling the attention of one of *her* lodgers, as she termed them, to a passer-by.

"Here, you sir; fetch a cab—a four-wheeler," shouted the lodger. "No; confound your bird—I don't want birds, I want a cab."

The person addressed was the inhabitant of Bennett's-rents—the big, slouchy, large-jawed gentleman, in a fur cap and a sleeved-waistcoat, already known to the reader. He carried a small birdcage, tied in a cotton handkerchief, beneath his arm, while another spotted handkerchief wrapped his bull-neck, where it was pinned with a silver-mounted Stanhope lens, which was apparently regarded as a rare jewel. Upon being first called, he commenced expatiating upon the qualities of the bird, whose cage-envelope he began to unfasten, until so unceremoniously checked by the gentleman who summoned him.

"You're a fine sort, you are," growled the man as he went off in search of the cab; "and if I warn't as dry as sorduss, I'd see you furder afore I'd fetch your gallus cab, so now, then. My name's Jarker, chrissen William, that's about what my name is, stand or fall by it—come, now."

As nobody seemed disposed to "come, now," Mr Jarker hastened his steps, and soon returned with the cab, placed his cage behind the hall-door, and then, under the direction of Mrs Sims, fetched down portmanteau and bags groaning and sighing beneath their weight, and raising up a smile of contempt upon his employer's face as he watched the fellow's actions, and scanned his powerful development and the idleness written so plainly upon his countenance. But soon the task was ended, the cab-door banged, Mrs Sims had turned on a little more of her laughing-gas to brighten her features by way of valediction to the departing lodger, and then, as she sniffed loudly, the cab drove off, leaving Mr Jarker spitting upon that curiosity, an honestly-earned sixpence in his hand.

"How's the missus? why, she's okkard, and I don't s'pose you a-coming would do her any good, and she's a-going to spend a shillin' in ankerchers for someone as has a cold in her head, that's what she's a-goin' to do," said Mr Jarker, with a grin at Mrs Sims, and then he watched the affronted dame as she sniffed her way upstairs; but before she had reached the second flight, Mr Jarker had grinned again, drawing his lips back from his white teeth with a smile that more resembled a snarl.

Mr William Jarker, birdcatcher, fancier of pigeons, and of anything else which came to his net, stood listening to the sniffs and receding footsteps of Mrs Sims, placed the sixpence he had earned in the pocket of his tight corduroys, pulled off his large, flat, fur cap, and gave his head a scratch, thereby displaying a crop of hair which it would have been useless to attempt to brush or part, for it was decidedly short, and the barber who had last operated had not

been careful, but left the said hair nicky and notchy in places. However, the style gave due prominence to the peculiar phrenological development of Mr Jarker's bumps, while his ears stood out largely, and with an air that suggested cropping as an improvement to them as well, more especially since there was a great deal of the bull-dog in his appearance.

Mr Jarker replaced his cap, took his little birdcage from behind the door, and was just moving off, when a barrister came out of one of the lower rooms in full legal costume, muttering loudly, and evidently reciting a part of the performance he was about to go through.

Upon hearing the door open, Mr Jarker turned his head, and then gave an involuntary shudder as he moved off, while the counsel followed closely behind, wrapped in his brief, and at times talking loudly:

"Instead, m'lud, of the case being tried in this honourable court, m'lud, devoted as it is to civil causes, the defendant should be occupying the felon's dock at the Old Bailey, m'lud; for a more shameful case of robbery—"

"I'm gallussed!" muttered Mr Jarker, quickening his steps, and perspiring profusely, as he gave a furtive glance over his shoulder at the barrister, still rehearsing; "I'm gallussed! It didn't oughter be allowed out in the public streets."

Mr Jarker felt his nerves so disarranged in consequence of low diet, that after making his way out of the Inn, across Carey-street, and into the rags of the legal cloak, that is to say into Bennett's-rents, he resolved to take advantage of there being a "public" at either end of the rents, and regardless of the whooping children who dashed by him, he went in and had "three-ha'porth" of the celebrated cream gin advertised outside upon a blue board with golden legend. After which enricher of his milk of human kindness, Mr Jarker wiped his mouth with the back of his hand as he passed through the swinging doors, hugged his cage against his ribs, muttered, "Didn't oughter be allowed in the public streets," and then forcing a way through a noisy tribe of children, he paused at Number 27 in the Rents—a dismal-looking old house, worse perhaps by broad daylight than in the early dawn, when some of its foulness had remained concealed. It had been a mansion once, in the days of the Jameses probably, when fresh air was a more abundant commodity in the City, and was not all used up long before it could penetrate so narrow a thoroughfare.

Mr Jarker slowly tramped up flight after flight of stairs till he came to the attic-floor, when, without removing his hands from his pockets, he kicked open the badly-hung door, and entered the bare room.

"O, you're here agen, are yer?" he said sulkily to a dark, well-dressed woman, in black silk and fashionable bonnet, strangely out of place in the wretched room, whose other occupant was pale-faced, weary-looking Mrs Jarker, whose crimply white hands betokened a very late acquaintanceship with the washtub by the steamy window. "O, you're here agen, are yer?" said Mr Jarker.

"Yes, Bill," said Mrs Jarker timidly, every word she spoke seeming to flinch and dart out of reach of hearing almost before it was uttered. "Yes, Bill, she's come again, and we've been talking it over—and—and—and—if you wouldn't mind, Bill, I'd—"

"How much?" growled Mr Jarker.

"Five shillings," said his wife timidly; "five shillings a-week."

"'Tain't enough," said Mr Jarker; "it's worth six. Look at the trouble."

Mrs Jarker looked from her husband to the stranger and back again, and was about to speak, when her lord exclaimed roughly, "Shut Up!"

The visitor's eyes flashed for a moment, and then she glanced hastily round the room, her gaze resting for a moment upon the ruffianly, bull-dog face of Jarker, and she hesitated; but another glance at the timid, gentle countenance of his wife seemed to reassure her, and she said hoarsely, with her look fixed upon the flinching woman, "I'll give you six."

"And if 'tain't paid up reg'lar, I'm blest if I sha'n't chuck it outer winder, or somethin'; so look out," said Mr Jarker.

The visitor's lips quivered, but, still gazing fixedly upon the woman, she said in the same hoarse voice: "I shall bring the money once a-week."

"In advance, yer know," growled Mr Jarker.

"Yes, yes; only be kind to it," exclaimed the visitor with something like a sob, but without removing her eyes.

"O, ah! in course we will. We're the right sort here, ain't we, Poll?" growled Mr Jarker.

"Yes, Bill," said his wife in a husky whisper.

"And now," said Mr Bill Jarker, with what was meant for a pleasant smile, but which consisted of the closing of his eyes, and the display of his teeth,—"and now as we've made it all snug, you'll stand somethin'; that's what you'll do, ain't it now?"

Still without removing her eyes from the pale-faced woman before her, the visitor drew a shilling from a little bead-purse, and laid it upon the table, her lips now moving as if trying to form words for Mrs Jarker to understand.

"Go away now, Bill," whispered she to her husband.

"What for?" growled Bill, untying the knots of his handkerchief with his teeth, to set his cage at liberty, and nearly

frightening the soul out of the tiny, fluttering, panting body contained therein. Then, by way of reply to a whisper, he sullenly took the shilling from the table, bit it, spat upon it, and spun it up, before depositing it in his pocket; made his way to the back part of the attic, where birdcages and the paraphernalia of his profession lay thick; ascended a ladder to a trap in the ceiling, and then, only his legs visible as he stood upon one of the top rounds, Mr Jarker, with half his body above the tiles, busied himself amongst his pigeons, and started them for a flight over the houses.

The next moment, after a hurried glance at the ceiling, where the light streamed down past the ruffian's legs, the visitor's face was seen to work, and, rising from her seat, she went down upon her knees before poor Mrs Jarker, kissing her work-worn hands, and bathing them with the tears that streamed from her eyes.

"God—God bless you!" she whispered passionately. "O, be kind to it!"

But Mrs Jarker could not answer for something swelling in her throat; and the next minute she too was weeping, with her hand resting upon her visitor's shoulder.

This paroxysm of tears seemed to have its effect upon the visitor, for, forcing back her own emotion, she appeared more at ease within herself, as, gazing once more into the pale, worn, common face of the birdcatcher's wife, she kissed her in so loving and sisterly a way, that the tears flowed faster from Mrs Jarker's eyes. And yet, knowing full well who was her visitor, Mrs Jarker did not shudder, but rose from her choir, glanced timorously at the open trap, and then drew the stranger towards a box—a common deal-box, with the blue-stained paper that had once covered it hanging here and there in rags. She went upon her knees now, and raised the creaking lid, when an impatient movement of the feet upon the ladder made her start up hastily, and close the lid again. But a long, loud whistling from above showed her that Mr Jarker was still busy with his birds; so once more raising the lid, the poor creature thrust her hand down to a well-known spot beneath the few rags of clothes the box contained, and brought out a pair of little, stained red boots, which she pressed passionately to her lips, the tears gushing from her eyes the while, and a broken hysterical wail burst from her overladen breast. But it was checked instantly, for Jarker's feet scraped on the ladder, and the boots were hidden beneath the woman's apron; then the whistling was heard again, and the little boots were brought forth once more.

A pair of tiny red boots, the only relic she had of something that was not—something that she had once warmed within her breast—the breast before now bruised and blackened by a ruffian hand, but beneath which was the same warm, God-implanted love for her offspring that glows in the bosom of the noblest of her sex.

For a moment or two the younger woman gazed in the other's eyes with a soft, tender, pitying look—a look in this case of true sympathy; and the hand of the lost rested lovingly upon Mrs Jarker's breast as she whispered softly: "How old was it?"

"Only a twelvemonth," was the reply, followed by a moan. "But perhaps it was best—perhaps it was best."

The visitor's hand still rested upon the other's breast, and she was about to speak, when an impatient shuffle startled both, for it seemed that Mr Jarker was about to descend; but he came not. And now a look of ineffable sweetness and content came over the well-moulded features of the visitor. She was satisfied now respecting the step she was about to take; for Mrs Jarker's heart had been laid open to her. A true chord of sympathy existed between them, and she could feel that her little one would be taken to a motherly breast, and protected—protected; but who, she asked herself, would injure one so tender and frail?

But there was no time for further communion between these motherly hearts, for a loud rasp on the ladder told that Mr Jarker was descending, and the visitor prepared to leave.

"You've been a-pipin' again," growled Mr Jarker to his wife, who had hastily concealed the boots—"pipin' about that 'ere kid as has gone; and a good thing too. Wot's the good when here's another a-coming?" and he looked menacingly at the shivering woman. "I say," he continued to the visitor, who now stood at the door, "you'll pay up reg'lar, and in advance!"

"Yes, yes!" she said hoarsely, almost fiercely, as she turned to him with a steady contemptuous look, which made the great brute shuffle about uneasily—"yes, yes, so long as I live;" and the next moment the door closed upon her retreating form.

"Long as you live? Yes; I should just think you will, or else there'll precious soon be a kid found at somebody's door, with the perlice, cuss 'em, taking the brat to the workus.—And don't you pipe no more," he snarled to the trembling woman, who slowly retreated to the washtub. "A taking of it to the workus, cuss 'em," muttered Mr Jarker again, removing his fur cap and passing his hand over his cropped head, as if the name of the police, and their probable future duty, had reminded him of former injuries. "Now then, you!" he shouted, as if calling his dog, and he threw the shilling upon the table—"d'yer hear?"

"Yes, Bill," said the woman meekly, and hastily passing her hands over her dull red eyes before she turned to him the face from which all that was attractive had long since fled.

"Tripe!" said Mr Jarker.

"Yes, Bill," said his wife.

"Pipe and screw," growled Mr Jarker.

"Yes, Bill," said the woman, hurriedly tying on a miserable bonnet.

"And here, you!"

“I wasn’t going, Bill,” said the woman meekly.

“Who said you was?” growled the ruffian; “don’t you be so sharp, now, then. Now, where’s that money?”

“What money, Bill?”

The next moment the ruffian had seized her by the front of her dress and dragged her to him, so that she went down upon her knees. “Don’t you try to put none of your games on me. What did she give you when I was out of sight?” And he put his black face down close to hers, as, half from fear, half from bitterness, her lower lip worked as she tried to keep back the tears, and to answer; but no words would come.

“D’yer hear? What did she give yer?”

“Nothing, Bill,” whispered the woman.

He looked at her fiercely; but though faded and lack-lustre, her eyes blenched not, but gave him back the same true steady look that had always shone for him since—young, ignorant, ill-taught, weak—she had believed he cared for her, and she could be happy with him: not the first of Eve’s daughters that has made the same mistake.

“Get up!” snarled Jarker, loosing his hold; and his wife rose hastily without a word.

“Pint of porter, with half-a-quartern of gin in it.”

“Yes, Bill,” she whispered, and drew on a washed-out shawl.

“And no fiddling, you know; put all the gin in.”

“Yes, Bill,” said the woman, hastily taking the shilling, and descending the creaking stairs to procure her lord’s refreshments; tripe stewed, and gin and beer, being special weaknesses of his when in funds.

“Don’t let her forget to bring some inguns, that’s all,” he muttered as he listened to the retreating steps. He then crushed down the fire with the heel of his heavy boot, and, putting his hand in his waistcoat-pocket, his fingers came in contact with two or three scraps of burnt match, which he took out, looked at thoughtfully, and then burned. “She must have been arter the dawg,” he muttered, and walking to one of the lattice-windows, he opened it and framed himself as he leaned out with his arms resting upon the rotten sill, a splinter of which he picked off to chew. Then he gazed steadfastly across the court at the opposite window, which was hung round with birdcages, whose occupants twittered sweetly, while one, a lark, seemed to fill the court with his joyous song.

This reminded Mr Jarker of his own birds, and, stepping back growling, he looked to see if the little cages hung over his nets all contained water, which they did.

“And a blessed good job for her as they do!” he muttered on finding that his wife had performed this duty. Then walking again towards the front he watched the opposite window, where he could see a pale, sallow face eagerly looking at the birds, while from behind came the sharp sound as of the lash of a whip striking the floor, followed by the shrill yelp of a dog.

Mr Jarker stood thoughtfully watching and listening, as if in doubt upon some particular subject; and as he watched he pulled out that ugly clasp-knife of his that he had opened a short time before in the cellar, and now opening and closing it again, his brow lowered—that is, a trifle more than usual. But he seemed to grow easier in his mind, for he shut the knife with a snap, and thrust it into his pocket; and now he appeared to be moved by that spirit which prompts so many people who can hardly keep themselves to have dumb animals about their homes, probably for the reason that the dumb brutes are faithful, and friends are few—who knows?

“I think I shall have a dawg,” said Mr Jarker to himself, as a louder yelp than usual rang across the court; when he shut the window, and went and stood gazing into the fire once more, till he heard the returning step of his wife, when he roused himself:

“Yes,” said Mr Jarker half-aloud; “I’ll have a bull-pup.”

Volume One—Chapter Six.

The Sorrows of Septimus Hardon.

With a pleasant smile upon his countenance, and a bunch of watercresses in his hand, Septimus Hardon hummed loudly, like some jocular bee, as he entered his rooms one day, when he ceased, for there was a visitor gazing with sympathising eyes upon the flush-cheeked child lying upon Mrs Hardon’s arm.

“I think you had better have advice, Mrs Hardon,” said the visitor, the Rev. Arthur Sterne, the calm, earnest, quiet-looking curate of the neighbouring church.

Lucy Grey, now budding into womanhood, was seated upon the floor by the couch, with a little boy in her lap, and letting the hands of the child on her mother’s arm stray amongst the glossy tresses of her hair.

“Advice? What? doctor?” said Septimus, gazing in his wife’s anxious face; “is Letty really ill, then?” and then in a bewildered way he began rubbing his hands together as if washing them in emptiness, and afterwards drying them upon nothing.

“Let me send in a doctor,” said Mr Sterne kindly, as he took his hat to leave; “there are symptoms of fever, I think. Don’t let it get too firm a hold before you have advice.”

“Thank you, thank you; do send him, please,” said Septimus helplessly. “But—” He was about to alter his request, for just then his hand came in contact with the light leather purse in his pocket, but the curate had hurriedly left the room. Then taking his step-child’s place by the sofa the father parted the golden hair upon the sick girl’s forehead, and anxiously questioned Mrs Septimus respecting the illness.

As the night came on the little one grew wild and restless, and what the mother had taken to be but a slight childish ailment, began to assume a form that added anxiety where it was hardly needed. The doctor had been, and spoken Seriously, and the medicine he had sent had been administered; but the fever seemed to increase, for the child grew worse, starting from fitful sleeps, and calling for sister Lucy to take something away from her. Septimus looked weakly from face to face for comfort, and then wandered about the room, wringing his hands and trying to think this new trouble some horrible dream.

And so days passed—days of trouble and anxiety—during which Mrs Septimus forgot her own ailments, and watched and nursed in turn with Lucy. The doctor had talked as so many doctors will talk, in an indefinite strain, which left the anxious parents in a state of doubt and bewilderment, though it never occurred to Septimus Hardon that so great an affliction could fall upon him, as that he should lose his little one.

About a week after the seizure, Mrs Septimus was watching by the child, who, after partaking eagerly of some tea, had apparently dropped off to sleep.

“Take little Tom down into the office,” whispered Mrs Hardon, “perhaps she will sleep awhile if we keep her quiet.”

So Septimus Hardon, looking dazed and worn with mental anxiety, took his boy in his arms, and Lucy being asleep after watching nearly all night, he left Mrs Septimus with the sick child, and carried the little fellow down into the dusty, unused office, where, taking advantage of his father’s abstraction, the child proceeded to make a heap of type upon the floor, thoroughly covering himself with the black dust, and even going so far as to try the flavour of some of the pieces of metal.

At last the little one began to grow tired, and tried to gain the attention of its father—no light task, for with his face buried in his hands he was seated at his desk trying to see his way clearly through the future—a task so many of us attempt, and some even fancy we have achieved, but only to find the falseness of our hopes when the days we looked forward to have come upon us.

But the child was at last successful, and as Septimus raised his head from the desk, he became aware of the presence of the old man of a few days before, and apparently as far from prosperity as ever.

“Nothing doing; no work,” said Septimus.

“Any little job will do, sir,” said the old man. “Just come to get out of debt, that’s all. What’s it to be, sir?”

“Another time,” said Septimus. “I’ve—”

A loud cry from above cut short his words, and darting to the door, forgetting his customary indecision, he bounded up the stairs, while, finding himself left with a stranger, the little fellow burst into a dismal wail.

“O, Sep, Sep, Sep!” cried his wife, throwing herself into his arms, “is it always to be sorrow; is there always to be a black cloud over our lives?” then tearing herself away she frantically caught the child from Lucy, who, pale and frightened, sat nursing.

“Run, run, Lucy!” cried Septimus hoarsely as he caught a glimpse of his blue-eyed darling’s face; “the doctor, quick!” and then, as the frightened girl ran from the room, he threw himself upon his knees beside his sobbing wife, praying that they might be spared this new sorrow. But before the doctor could reach Carey-street the agonised couple had seen the little weary head cease its restless tossings from side to side, the blue eyes unclose, dilate, and gaze wildly, as if at some wondrous vision; then a plaintive shuddering sigh passed from the pale lips, and Septimus Hardon and his wife were alone, though they knew it not.

The Rev. Arthur Sterne was at the door as Lucy returned, overtaken by the doctor’s brougham at the same moment; but to the agony of all the man of medicine gave one glance at the little form in its mother’s lap, shook his head, and left the room on tiptoe.

“O, sir, Mr Sterne,” cried Lucy, turning with quivering lips and streaming eyes to the clergyman, “tell me, tell me,” she sobbed, clasping one of his hands in hers; “tell me—is it, is it death?”

There was silence in the room for a few moments, and then placing his disengaged hand upon the fair head of the weeping girl, the curate, in low reverent tones, but loud enough to thrill the hearts of the living, said, “No, it is life—the life eternal!”

And now, amidst the bitter sobs of those who mourned, the curate stepped softly from the room, and left the house with bended head. Then there was silence, till a step was heard upon the stairs, which stopped by the partly-closed door, where stood the old compositor with little Tom asleep in his arms, the bright, soft, golden locks mingling like dashes of sunshine with the old man’s ragged, grizzly whiskers. For a few moments the old printer stood gazing into the room, when, waking to the consciousness of the affliction that had befallen its inmates, he turned, and with halting step descended to the office.

At last the recollection of the living came to the stricken mother’s heart, and wildly sobbing as she clasped Lucy in

her arms, she asked for her boy.

Half-stunned with this new shock, Septimus Hardon staggered down to where he had left the child, having till his wife spoke forgotten its very existence; but when he reached the office, stricken as he was, he could not but stop to gaze at the group before him. Seated upon a low stool, beneath the dingy skylight of the back-office, where the light that filtered through the foul panes looked dim and gloomy, was the old man with the child in his lap, gazing, too, intently down at the little fair face which so wonderingly looked up into his own—not fearfully, but with a puzzled expression, as if some problem were there that the little brain could not solve; while the biscuit the tiny fist held was hardly touched, but told its own tale of how the old man had carried the child to the nearest baker's for its purchase. The printer's back was towards Septimus as he stood in the doorway, and as he listened the old man was apostrophising the child:

"Why, God bless your little innocent face, this is me, old Matt—Matthew Space—old Quad, as they call me; a battered, snuff-taking, drinking old scamp; and here have I been these two hours drinking innocence, and feeling my heart swell till it cracked and the scales fell off. Why—save and bless his little heart, sir!" he cried, for the child saw its father and sprang up—"see how good he is! Work's slack, sir; let him stop, for it seems to do one good—it does indeed, sir. Why, how rich you must be!"

Septimus Hardon thought mournfully of the treasure he had just lost, and, taking the child, he hurriedly bore it to its mother, telling the old man to wait.

Matthew Space, compositor, waited until the owner of the office came down, when, friendless as he was, Septimus Hardon was glad to turn even to this rough old waif of the streets in his helplessness.

"Why, I wouldn't do that, sir," said the old man, after listening for some time in silence; "you may want it to-morrow."

"But I want money to-day," cried Septimus fiercely. "Will you give me money? will the world outside? will anybody here in this city of wealth trust me the money to bury my child? Would you have me go to the parish?" He stopped, and the animation that had flashed into his face began to fade again, to leave it dull and despairing.

"Why, as to the first, sir," said the old man, "I would, upon my soul, if I had it,—I would indeed; but as to the people outside—" and he began to shake his head grimly. "Poor men have no friends, sir—as a rule, you know—as a rule."

"None!" said Septimus bitterly; "none!"

"But it would be a pity," said the old man; "such a new, well-cut letter too; and you'll get next to nothing for it. Gave 'most half-a-crown a pound for it, I dessay?"

Septimus nodded.

"Thought so, sir, and—well, if you must, sir, I'll help you all the same, and gladly—only too gladly; but I don't like to see it pawned or sold. You helped me, sir, when it was harder with me than ever it was in my life before, sir; and damme, sir, I'll sell my shirt, sir, to help you, if it will do any good. In the morning, then, sir, I'll be here with a barrow."

"A barrow?" said Septimus.

"Yes; you know, type's heavy stuff."

"Matthew Space," said the snuffly old fellow, screwing his face up as if with disgust, when he stood once more in Carey-street, "Matthew Space, follower of the profession of noble Caxton, as a rule, sir, I respect you. I don't despise you for your poverty, or your seedy coat, for you are a man of parts and education; but at the present moment, sir, I'm disgusted with you. You have been drinking innocence from the tiny prattling lips of that little child—God bless it!" he cried earnestly, dashing a maundering tear from one eye—"God bless it! a child like that would have made another man of me; and now that poor fellow has lost one like it. But there, sir, I'm disgusted with your ways: a man does what nine hundred and ninety-nine men out of a thousand wouldn't do—lends you almost his last shilling—and now, sir, that an opportunity offers of helping him in his trouble, you make empty professions, false promises, and offer to sell your shirt, you humbug, you—to sell your shirt, sir, when you haven't got a shirt in the world!"

"That's true enough," said the old man, after walking a little way, "true, if it ain't decent; but it's a kind of poverty that buttons will always conceal, which they won't if it's a coat; while if there is anything that looks beggarly, it's the want of boots. I'd sooner be without a hat any day in the week. But you're taking fresh copy, Matt Space, before you've finished the old, and leaving out your points."

The old man cocked his hat very fiercely over the left ear, stuck his hands into his coat-tail pockets, and walked on for some distance, muttering, "Poor fellow—good sort—trump." All at once he stopped short before a lamp-post, drew his hands from his pockets, and took a pinch of snuff; he then slapped the cold iron upon the shoulder, and, as if addressing the post confidentially, he exclaimed:

"His name's Hardon, sir; but he isn't a hard un. He's as soft as butter, sir, easy as a glove, sir, deep as a halfpenny plate. You might turn him inside out like a stocking. He'd never get on here, he's too honest. Business! why, he's about as business-like as—as—as—well, sir, as I am. He'd never any business to be in business; but after all, what's the good of being a business man, and sharp, and knowing, and deep, if it's to be hammering on, beating out money day after day to make a hard case for a man's heart, so as there ain't room for a kind thought to get in, or a gentle word to come out?"

Old Matt stuck his hat a little more on one side, and giving the post a parting slap, he left the freshly-lit light,

quivering and winking down at him as he gave it a nod, and then he crossed the road diagonally to the next post, which he favoured as the last.

“Damme, sir,” he cried, “don’t tell me. I ought to know what the world is, and I think I do. That man’s a trump, sir, if I know anything of character. Soft? well, suppose he is. Don’t tell me: men were never made to be sharp-edged tools, chiselling and cutting one another as hard as ever they can, while the keenest ones chisel the most. They weren’t meant for it; but that’s what they are. And what’s worse, they do so much under the cloak of religion, and snuffle and cant, and tell you to do the same. Things are all wrong, sir, all wrong; and I’m wrong, and according to some people, I’m I don’t know what; but there, sir; there; I’ve done.”

Old Matt walked to another post, to prove he had not done, and began again; but someone coming along the pavement, he shuffled off to the public-house he frequented in Bell-yard, where he discoursed for long enough upon human nature in general, to the great delight of his audience, till his pint of porter was finished, when he hurried off through the wet streets to his lodging.

Volume One—Chapter Seven.

The Doctor and his Dame.

“A tom-cat, smooth-coated, purring rascal,” said old Octavius when he heard the news. “*Doctor* Hardon, indeed; *doctor*, bah!” And many of the townspeople of Somesham, though they did not use Octavius Hardon’s language, agreed with him in spirit, and sneered at the new doctor’s visit to Scotland, and the paragraph that by some means found its way into the paper, congratulating the people on the acquisition to their town of a physician. Of course the doctor himself did not know of its existence until it was pointed out to him at one of the public meetings, when he looked perfectly astonished, and declared that it was a matter that he meant to have kept a profound secret from everybody. However, as it was made so public, and in such a manner, of course he felt himself bound to take steps to inform his friends and patients that the fact of his being a physician should make no difference, that he looked upon the degree merely in the light of an honour; and hoped for many years to come to be the simple country apothecary, in whose humble skill his fellow-townsmen would have confidence. Guinea-fees and prescriptions had never been in his thoughts, the honour having been completely thrust upon him, so he said, for he knew that he could command a practice as a country apothecary while he would have starved as a physician. For he had practised for many years in Somesham, while he was greatly annoyed that his brother Octavius would reside there, as the doctor told his lady, to quarrel with him and lower him in the eyes of the people. Doctor Hardon had stood at many sick-beds in the district; spoken smooth nothings respecting the various increases in families which took place beneath his watchful eyes; when in every case, whatever the sex, the child was sure to be the finest he had ever seen in the whole course of his career as a medical practitioner. But the doctor had also worn a great many pairs of black-kid gloves, and many a long-flowing silk scarf upon those other occasions—at those stopping-places of the journey of life; and ill-natured persons had been known to declare that one of Mrs Hardon’s dresses had been composed of these long black-silk strips sewn together. But then people will be ill-natured.

“Thomas Hardon, Esq, MD,” sat at his breakfast-table in his dressing-gown, but his black frock-coat lay upon a chair at his side, ready brushed, and the rest of his costume was of the correct doctorial black. He did not even allow himself to sit down in slippers, but wore boots of the most lustrous black until bedtime. Of an imposing presence, with fine grey hair, a good complexion, sufficiently stout, he was the very acmé of a quiet family doctor; and even if he was not so skilful as he might have been, there was that in his quiet ease and assumption which often gave confidence, and insured faith in trembling patients—matters which had before now worked wonders when the doctor’s medicine alone would have failed. The world is much given to taking people at their own value, and undoubtedly by those who merely looked at the surface, a much higher price would have been set upon the doctor in that imposing suit of black, and that stiffest of stiff white neckcloths, than upon friend Matthew Space in his black shabbiness. But then, of course, the doctor’s double gold eyeglass, gold-chain, studs, diamond ring, and the shape of his repeater seen through the soft black kerseymere waistcoat, added weight in people’s estimation, without taking into consideration that air of profundity, and shake of the noble grey head, which implied so much at so little expense of thought. People at Somesham shook their heads with the doctor, and declared him to be a man of worth; while other people there were who shook their heads with his brother Octavius, and considered him a sham.

But people joined in speaking well of his wife—downright, blunt, plain-spoken Mrs Hardon—who now sat, pale-faced and anxious, opposite to her husband, supplying his wants, while she waited for an answer to her last question, her hand slightly trembling as it held a letter the doctor had lately passed to her.

“You will let me answer this, Tom, won’t you?” she said gently, with all the motherly woman in her tones, and the hard, business, doctor’s wife, who often made up his medicines, and even prescribed in simple cases in his absence, gone. “You will let me answer this, Tom?”

The doctor kept his paper before his face, and read on without condescending to reply.

“Tom,” she repeated, leaning towards him, “Tom, be tender and gentle now, Tom; and—”

Mrs Hardon stopped; for a maid had entered the room with a note, which she handed to Mrs Hardon.

“Confound you!” hissed the doctor as soon as the door was closed; and then, instead of the mild, beaming doctorial countenance, there was his brother’s angry face scowling on his wife—“Confound you! how many times have I told you not to ‘Tom’ me before the servants? No, no, no! if you will have an answer,” he shouted; “let her starve—let her die—let her jump off one of the bridges if she likes; she left me, and she may suffer for it. She sha’n’t come back here to disgrace me in my profession.”

Mrs Hardon was not at all afraid of her husband, and in many of their little matrimonial differences she had been known to come off the better. The blood rose to her cheeks, and she was about to answer angrily, but she checked herself, and, crossing over, laid her hand upon her husband's shoulder.

"Tom!" she whispered.

"Damn! I tell you I won't have it!" roared the doctor.

"Hush!" said Mrs Hardon sternly, but with a touch of softness in her voice. "You know I was ill, Tom, when I came back from town last week."

"Well?" said the doctor, shuffling impatiently in his seat.

"I did not tell you the reason, Tom."

"Well, what of that?" said the doctor savagely.

"O, Tom!" she said, her voice breaking as she sank at his feet, "I saw her; I met her. She passed me as I was going to my cab, wild-eyed, pale, worn-looking; and O, Tom, if you had seen her too—seen her as I saw her then, when I held out my arms to her and she fled away shamefaced before me—you would have felt, as I did, as I do now, something tugging at your heartstrings, and whispering to you that it was your child that you did not use well, and telling you that if you had done your duty by her she would never have gone to Octavius, and then fled with that base villain. Tom," she continued softly, "I feel all this. We are getting old, Tom, and what are we to say at the last hour, what forgiveness can we ask for, if our own child is driven from us? She hurried from me then; but see now how it has made her write. Look at the address here; where is it? some horrible part of—O, Tom!"

The exclamation was hardly shrieked from Mrs Hardon's lips before the letter the doctor had snatched from her hand was blazing upon the fire, he fiercely dragging off his dressing-gown, and preparing to put on his black coat; while, the softness gone from her face, Mrs Hardon stood before him frowning and hard; but far from noticing her husband's acts, she was gazing introspectively, and trying to recall the address she had so lately read; an address which the more she tried to bring back, the more it seemed to glide from her mind; first a number, then a word, then the whole, and it was gone.

The doctor pulled on his coat by snatches, ejaculated, and went through many of the evolutions favoured by persons who wish to impress others with the fact that they are in a tempestuous passion; but he had resisted the advances made by his wife when she had thrown off the mask that years of worldliness had fixed there, and now she was ready to engage him with his own weapons. As to his real or simulated anger, she valued it not in the least, holding it in the most profound contempt, while a stranger would hardly have believed her to be the same woman who a few minutes before had kneeled at the doctor's feet.

"I want some money before you go out," said Mrs Hardon coldly; and the doctor started with surprise at the change the conversation had taken. "I want some money," said Mrs Hardon in a louder key.

"How much?" said the doctor, calming down as his wife seemed disposed to take the upper hand.

"Twenty-five—thirty pounds," said Mrs Hardon.

"What for?" said the doctor.

"What for?" said Mrs Hardon fiercely. "Not to send away—not for *that*, but for the tradespeople's bills; since you are so proud of your reputation—your professional reputation—have them cleared off. Richards has sent twice, and threatens proceedings;" and she held out the note the maid had brought in; "and now I insist upon knowing how you stand. I will not be kept here in the dark over these speculations. I know matters are going wrong; and do you suppose that I will sit by like a child and see ruin come upon my home; I who was always trusted to keep your books and purse, until you became a physician? There is something wrong, Thomas Hardon, or there would not always be this pinching and holding back of every sovereign. You drive me from your side—me, the wife of five-and-thirty years—when I would be the loving woman. Now, then, I will be the firm woman of the world, and be satisfied upon these points at issue. You had better write me a cheque at once; for I will not be disgraced by the tradespeople, since we are to stand so upon our dignity."

Doctor Hardon looked viciously at his wife, spoiling his generally placid countenance to a degree that, had one of his best patients seen him then, it would have been a serious loss to the doctor and a gain to the rival practitioner; but he made no movement towards drawing the cheque for which Mrs Hardon stood waiting, till, seeing that nothing was to be gained, she left the room in anger; but the next minute she had returned, to once more lay her hand gently upon the doctor's arm:

"Have you a heart, Tom?" she whispered. "Is our old age to be an old age of regret? Think of Octavius and his son; look at his desolate, wretched life, and don't let ours be quite the same."

Mrs Hardon had had a hard battle with self, and crushed down the angry feelings that had been fighting for exit; for there was the thought of her child in her heart—maternity asserting itself and thrusting aside in its greatness all that was petty and contemptible; but as she stood there appealing to the doctor the struggle grew harder. Obstinate, bitter, cruel, the doctor masked all beneath his cold, calm, professional aspect, treating the weeping woman with a cutting indifference that roused her indignation thoroughly at last; and to conceal her anger she hurried from the room, but this time not to return.

The doctor may have had a heart, but it was thoroughly unmoved by all that his wife had said; in fact the appeal had

come at a wrong time, since the same post which brought the letter he had passed over to Mrs Hardon had given him other letters whose contents he so thoroughly knew that he had not even opened them, but, glancing at their directions, thrust them hastily into his pocket, where they acted as so much fuel to feed the fire of his wrath. There was something so unmistakable in the particularly-distinct handwriting upon the envelopes—something so very blue about the paper—that, expecting unpleasant communications, the doctor detected them at a glance, and mentally he went over the contents.

The fact was the doctor was short of cash, and that through more than one unfortunate speculation in which he had embarked. Like a great many more men of moderate income, he had been bitten with the desire to increase it, though the bite came in the first instance from his wife, who scolded him fiercely when, after the MD honour had been thrust upon him, he gave up the union practice, which entailed the loss of the regular salary of one hundred pounds per annum. The doctor said that it was not becoming for a physician to be the medical attendant of the parish; and Mrs Hardon, who was then in a worldly, everyday phase, declared that it was “all fiddlesticks’ ends,” when there was his cheque regularly at certain times, while the greater part of the work could be done by the assistant, who would do very well for the poor people. It was a sin and a shame, she declared, though how connected with fiddlesticks’ ends was best known to herself. There was, however, something relating to the musical science in the matter, for Mrs Doctor Hardon kept harping upon the same string until the doctor snapped it by furiously threatening her if another word was said about it—threats which Mrs Hardon noticed so much that she certainly held her tongue; and she held her hand too, and tried to annoy the doctor by keeping a bad table, which she said so great a loss every year necessitated. Poor woman! she little knew that the time would come when such economy would be forced upon her. What, she asked the doctor, was honour without money? What was the use of her being a physician’s wife if they had nothing to support it with? And, then, too for him to be such an ass—the doctor started and puffed out his cheeks at this—“Yes, ass,” said Mrs Hardon, “as to play into your adversary’s hand like that, when he was on the verge of ruin, as everybody said, and could not have kept on another six months; for you to throw the union practice and a hundred a-year into his lap, and supply him with the material for carrying on the war!”

Mrs Doctor Hardon spoke of the rival practitioner, a poor, gentlemanly man, who had set up some years before in the dusty town of Somesham, and had been fighting ever since with difficulties; for, as in all small country towns in this land of liberty, every new-comer was looked upon as an intruder—a foreigner—and one who will probably interfere with the fine old conservative notions of the place. They don’t want him, and they won’t have him if they can help it. He is clever, perhaps; but they don’t want clever people, and they would prefer being half-killed by the old practitioner to being cured by the new. Trade or profession, it is just the same; and perhaps the acts of the town are only the acts of the country in miniature. Hospitality we have in plenty, and our share of the virtues, no doubt; but truly we English have most strongly in us the propensity for turning our backs upon those who are trying to fight their way on, until they can manage to do without help, when we turn round, smiling with the features that frowned before, pat the successful man upon the back, and say, “Well done!”

Mr Brande, “the new man,” as he was called, had found all this, and had been ready to despair again and again through the many years he had been trying to make a practice; but now the turning-point had come in the honours of Thomas Hardon, Esq, MD; not that he had reaped much present advantage, and it was doubtful if he would have had the practice at all if Doctor Hardon had not had immediate want for a hundred and fifty pounds, and, trusting to Mr Brande’s honour as a gentleman, offered to throw up the parish work on condition of receiving that sum, which Mr Brande gave him in bills, and, what was more, screwed, economised, and met them as they fell due. But Mrs Doctor Hardon did not know this, nor yet the extent of the liabilities her lord had incurred; while the deeper he sunk in that black, clinging mire of debt, the more reticent he grew.

Volume One—Chapter Eight.

Mr Pawley’s Performance.

“Such a beautiful, well-cut letter too!” said old Matt Space, as he stood looking at the empty type-rack from whence the cases had been taken to furnish money for Septimus Hardon’s present expenses. “In such good order too. Puts me in mind of being so low down that I had to sell my own stick. Fellow always seems so badly off when he gets selling his tools.”

A tap at the door, following the sound of wheels, interrupted the old man’s soliloquy, and going to the door he admitted the undertaker, who had just arrived with his shabby Shillibeer hearse and mourning-coach in one, with which he performed the economic funerals so frequent in his district.

“Here you are, then,” said old Matt, grimly surveying the new-comer.

“Yes, here we are,” said the undertaker, in a subdued, melancholy tone; and then he drew out a pocket-handkerchief and wiped his eye, as if to remove a tear—in fact, he did remove a tear—though not sorrow-shed, for Mr Pawley was in very good spirits just then; but he had an eye afflicted with a watery weakness which necessitated the constant application of a handkerchief, and this had passed with a certain class of people for the manifestation of sorrow for their griefs. Some said that this eye had been a little fortune to him. Perhaps it had, but doubtless the crowded courts clustering round Lincoln’s-inn had done more to keep up the incessant “rat-tat-tat-tat” heard in his shop, a sound as if grim Death were tapping with those bony fingers of his at the door.

“Such a feeling man!” said Mrs Sims, who was always at home upon such occasions as this, and had now come to mind Septimus Hardon’s boy, and help; “if she could be of service leastways, for it’s few berrins take place about here, mom, that they don’t send for me,” she said with a sniff, and the corner of her apron to her eye.

“Here you are, then,” said old Matt to the undertaker.

“Yes, here we are,” said Mr Pawley; “but you ain’t a-going, are you?”

“Well, who said I was?” said Matt gruffly. “You’re a-going, ain’t you? and that’s enough for you.”

Mr Pawley took so much pride in his funerals being properly performed, that going himself did not seem enough for him, and he continued to gaze doubtfully over a very uncomfortable white cravat, one of which the bow was supposed to be tied behind, giving him a good deal the aspect of a man who had been decapitated, and then had his head secured in its place by a bandage.

But old Matt did not give the undertaker an opportunity for a long inspection of his shabby black clothes, for having announced the grim functionary, that gentleman went up the creaking stairs upon the points of his toes to proceed with the duties he had in hand; while, as old Matt stood in the passage watching his long black body it seemed to him that the stairs cracked and creaked mournfully, as if resenting the feet laid upon them, in anticipation of a heavier descent.

But there was to be no heavy load for them to bear this time, for it was but a little coffin—a little white coffin that had been gazed into for the last time, where the gentle waxen features seemed to wear a smile, so sad, speaking such a tender farewell in its sweetness, that Lucy Grey sobbed aloud with the parents, until Mrs Sims entered the room, whispered to Septimus, and then they all slowly passed out to give place to Mr Pawley. And then standing in the next room, Mrs Septimus, weak and ailing, almost fainted as she heard the harsh noise of the driver as it slipped first in one and then another of the screws.

But now the last screw had been tightened, the light burden placed in the receptacle, and Mrs Sims, quite a regular aid to Mr Goffer, arranged the scarf upon Septimus Hardon’s hat; pinned and tied the hoods and cloaks upon mother and daughter; and then, in a simple but feeling way, wept many a salt tear into her black-alpaca apron, sniffing terribly the while Mr Pawley, satisfied in his mind that the respectability of his performance was not to be damaged by so doubtful a character as the old compositor, stood holding open the door of the carriage with one hand, wiping his eye with the other, and awaiting the mourners’ descent.

For this was no grand funeral; there had been no mutes standing with draped staves at the door; there was no squadron of men with scarves and brass-tipped truncheons; no tray of black plumes to be carried in advance; no high-stepping, long-tailed black horses, with velvet housings and tossing heads; nothing to make a funeral imposing and attractive. But there were spectators even for this: inhabitants of Carey-street were stealthily watching from door-steps, or from the corners of windows, as if afraid of intruding upon the mourners’ sorrow; a knot of dirty children from Bennett’s-rents had collected, many of whom toiled beneath shawl-wrapped burdens of heavy babies almost equal to themselves in bulk; two women stood upon the opposite side with arms wrapped in their aprons; a ticket-porter, in apron and badge, leaned against the nearest lamp-post; the apple-woman at the corner did something unusual, she left her basket, knocked the ashes out of her short black pipe, and then rubbed a tear—a bright, gem-like tear—off her poor old cheek, withered as one of her own pippins, before placing her pipe in her pocket, and leaning with arms akimbo against the railings to see the hearse pass with a little customer of hers, for whom she had always picked out the best lot, and in her simple homely way called down heavenly favour with a hearty “God bless you!” An old law-writer, a man who reckoned life as a long brief in so many folios, old and snuffy, and shabby almost as Matt himself, walked by house and hearse to the office where he worked, pretending to whistle; but no sound came, and he blew his nose in a way that raised an echo in the silent street as soon as he was a few yards past the place; even the policeman, beating his Berlin gloves together, quietly sent off the children gathered in the way, and posted them at a distance, that they might not annoy the sad party so soon to leave the house.

And now a tall dark woman, carrying a child, appeared upon the scene, and stood with dimmed eye watching till the mourners descended, when, catching sight of Septimus Hardon’s bent form, she stepped forward eagerly, but only to shrink back shivering as she clutched her babe to her breast, pressing her lips upon its plump cheek, while an air of wonderment came into the woman’s face as the announcement above the door now caught her eye:—“S Hardon, Legal and General Printer.”

For there was sorrow in Carey-street that day—sorrow of a novel kind. All the neighbourhood knew why the blinds were down at Hardon’s; for all knew the tall graceful girl who led about the two golden-haired children that seemed so out of place in the legal region; all knew that one of these little ones had passed away—that the little flower, sweet and fragrant, so lately blooming in the cold harsh place, and raising its heaven-whispering head amongst them, had been cut down by the cold winds that swept the weary waste. “Our client” had stopped at this oasis in the desert he was crossing, for he had often paused to look up at the golden head at the upper window, gazed at it awhile, and then passed on, refreshed and gladdened in heart. Every dweller in the neighbourhood had had a kind word or look for Lucy’s charges; and there was a sun in those golden tresses, a warm light, that would often melt the icy frost of some old lawyer’s countenance, and bring there a smile of pleasure. But a month before, two men were passing Carey-street with Punch, bound westward to the district where there is less constraint and mind-engrossing; and the man who bore the show, following the usage which to him was second nature, looked up at the dirty windows with wandering eye, caught sight of the blue-eyed fairy, looked at her with doubt for an instant, and then pitched his theatre, to the astonishment of his drum-and-pan-pipe “pardner,” who would as soon have thought of playing in the cloisters of Westminster Abbey.

“Jest five minutes,” whispered his mate, pointing upwards; when, as if by magic, the pipes squeaked, the drum rolled, raising up the wondering ghosts of echoes from amidst the pouncy dust of ages, while the yellowy, torn green baize fell, to conceal the motive power of the puppets; and then for “jest five minutes” “our client” was startled, the parchments in the offices crackled, dust floated from ledges out upon the murky air, and the sanctity of the place was broken by the ribald jokes of our old friend. Then, just as an astonished troop of children came with a rush out of Bennett’s-rents, up went the green curtain; there came a friendly nod from one of the men, who placed himself Atlas-like beneath his drum, a broad grin from the other at the child’s delight, and then off due west.

And now the change had come; the cold blast that sweeps down Carey-street had been colder and keener; the fragile flower-stalk was broken; the white coffin was in its place, the mourners in the coach; the door banged gently, for the wood had warped. Mr Pawley had climbed beside his red-nosed driver, and sat wiping his eye; while the poor old broken-kneed black horse ambled and shambled off with its head down, as if ashamed of the false tail that it knew was fastened to the crupper of its harness.

Then the rest,—the sad rite, the solemn words, the swelling hearts aching to leave so sweet a form in so cold and damp a bed, loth to believe that what they had loved could turn to corruption, and then to the dust of the earth. Then back to the shabby carriage, whose driver had refreshed himself with gin, which attacked his nose; while the horse yet twisted an obstinate wisp of hay that hung sideways in his bit, and would not be ground into nutriment. Once more the banging of the door, and Mr Pawley up beside the driver, with his grief still unassuaged; while as the poor beast that drew the carriage shambled back, his load was so little lightened that he knew not the difference.

The house in Carey-street had looked sad and gloomy for days past, for even the lodgers had drawn down their blinds, and ascended the stairs carefully and even stealthily, speaking, too, in whispers; but now the light was freely admitted, and Mrs Sims had blown up a good fire, only stopping to sniff, and drop a tear or two upon the bellows now and then, the last being a domestic implement that she had run home to the Square and fetched for the occasion. The tea was prepared, and she had made what she called the most of the place,—not that that was much,—ready for the mourners' return; while old Matt was ruining the knees of his trousers by making himself a horse, and crawling up and down the dirty printing-office floor with the little boy upon his back. The rooms looked almost cheerful now, for, save in the returned mourners' hearts, all was over, and the solemn scene, the dark, damp grave, the catching of the breath as the first earth fell, the long last look at the white coffin—all things of the past.

Old Matthew Space was a wise man in his way; and as soon as he thought that there had been time for the changing of habiliments,—that is to say, about a quarter of an hour after Mr Pawley had presented his account, been paid, and taken his departure, offering old Matt sixpence, which he indignantly refused to take,—he put on a bright face, and took the little fellow in his charge upstairs, crowing and chattering with delight at riding upon the old man's shoulders.

"No, thankee, sir," said the old man, in answer to Septimus Hardon's invitation to stay to tea; and as he declined he glanced down at his clothes.

"I did not ask the clothes," said Septimus warmly, "but the man who has shown sympathy in this weary time of trouble; and God knows I did not expect to find friends where I have," muttered the dejected man, who looked ten years older; while at times his eyes wandered in a weary abstracted way about the room, and his hands were wrung together, till Lucy came to his side and spoke to him, when the lost, helpless look would pass off, and he would brighten up for a few minutes.

"Such a beautiful, well-cut letter, though!" muttered old Matt as he took the chair placed for him by Mrs Sims, when the little fellow forced himself off his mother's lap, and climbed upon the old man's knee.

"You must hold up, mum," whispered Mrs Sims to poor, broken-down, invalid Mrs Septimus. "I know what it all is; for when I lived in the Rents, mum, I lost four; and all within three year."

"*You* did!" said Mrs Septimus, laying a tender hand upon the poor woman's arm.

"O yes!" said Mrs Sims. "It was before I went to mind the house in the Square, and used to wash; but it was sich work, mum! nowhere to dry except a bit of leads, and the strings tied across the room, and the blacks allus a-coming down like a shower, while every drop o' water had to be fetched from right at the bottom of the house. One was obliged to do it, though, for times were very hard just then; but having so much washing ain't good and healthy for children, let alone being stived up so closte. You see, 'm, it's a bad place to live in, them Rents, there's too many in a house, and there's so much wants doing; but then, when you're a bit behind with your rent, you can't grumble, or there's your few bits of sticks taken, and plenty more glad to have your room. But the way the poor little children is snatched off there, mum, 's terrible, though I do sometimes say, as it's a happy release. Mr Pawley, mum, he 'ave told me that them Rents is as good as an annuity to him; for you see, though it isn't a big place, there's a many families in each house; and where there's families, mum, there's mostly children."

Mrs Septimus sighed bitterly at the last word, while, poor woman, she was too much intent upon her cares to notice the wisdom of the speech.

"But you hold up now, mum, there's a good creetur. I know it's very hard, but then we all has to suffer alike, and you've got to recklect what you owes to that poor dear child there, and young miss, and the master."

As for Septimus Hardon, he was talking in an abstracted way to old Matt, who was discussing business matters, and urging energetic measures in the office; but talking to Septimus Hardon was a difficult matter, and put you much in mind of catching a grazing horse: you held a bait before him, and then gradually edged him up into a corner, when, just as you thought you had him, he was off and away full gallop to another part of the mental field; and so the work had to be done all over again. Old Matt found it so, and after several times over waking to the fact that while he was talking upon one subject Septimus Hardon was thinking upon another, he rose and took his departure.

Volume One—Chapter Nine.

Old Matt on Manners.

Old Matt Space came daily to Carey-street in search of a job, and generally made an excuse for seeing little Tom, for

whom he had a cake, a biscuit, or some small penny toy, purchased of one of the peripatetic vendors in the street.

“I always like to support honest industry,” said the old man; and when in work, and with a few shillings in his pocket, he would take a walk along the busy streets, and perhaps spend a couple of his shillings with the people whose place of business is the edge of the pavement. “Well, suppose I am a fool for doing it, what then?” said Matt one day. “Ain’t ninety per cent of the inhabitants of this precious country of ours what you call fools; and if I, in my folly, help twenty or thirty poor folks up a step in getting their bit of a living, where’s the harm? Don’t tell me,” old Matt would say to his fellow-workmen, beginning to unload the pockets which made his coat-tails stick out almost at right angles; “I don’t buy the things because I want them, I do it to help them as wants it; and their name, as it says in the Testament, is ‘legion.’ Now, that’s a jumping frog, made of wood, a bit of paint, a bit of string, and a bit of my friend Ike’s wax. That’s an ingenious toy, that is: who’ll have it? whose got a youngster?”

Speaking in a large printing-office, amongst twenty or thirty men, there was soon a market for the jumping frog; and then the old man drew out a scrap of something soft and flabby, and held it up.

“You wouldn’t tell what that is in a hurry,” said Matt. “All to encourage industry, you know; that’s a big indy-rubber balloon, that is, only I couldn’t pocket it, so I made it collapse first; so that’s no good to nobody—pitch it away. Here we have—ah, this is an out-and-out toy, this is, only I’ve broke the stick, and it wants a bit of glue—who’ll have a climbing monkey?”

And so the old man would pull out perhaps twenty toys, balls, dolls, gelatine cards, to the infinite amusement of his companions, who laughed on, but without discomposing Matt in the least, who practised his humble philanthropy as long as he had money, and often, in consequence, went without a meal; for saving was an utter impossibility with the old man—a feat, he said, he had often tried to accomplish; but how, he said, could a man keep money in his pocket when he saw others wanting? “It is done,” said Matt; “but old as I am, I can’t quite see it.”

But there had been no toy distributions lately, for old Matt had found times very hard, and even if they had been better, there would have been no more such amusements for the denizens of the offices he worked at, for there was another way for Matt’s philanthropical purchases to go, namely, to Carey-street, to Septimus Hardon’s little boy, for whose special benefit the old man had made several purchases on credit, which was freely accorded by those to whom he was known; but as to work at Septimus Hardon’s printing-office, there was none for him, further than that of disposing of type and materials at one or another of the brokers’, which duties he performed without recompense, grumbling sorely the while at the wretched sums he obtained for the goods.

“You ought to find fault then, sir,” he would say to Septimus; “I can’t help it; but I’m ashamed, that I am, to think that people will give such a beggarly price. It grieves me, sir, to see the stuff go like that.”

But Septimus did not find fault, only smiled feebly; for in this time of his sore distress he had so aged, and grown so helpless and wanting in reliance, that he trusted to the old compositor in almost everything.

“Might rob him right and left, sir,” said old Matt to a favourite lamp-post in Carey-street. “He’s no business up here at all. I could quarrel with him sometimes for being so simple, if it wasn’t that he’s such a thorough good sort at bottom. What’s to become of them when the things are all gone, goodness knows; for he’ll never do what I’ve done, sir—lived two days upon a large dose of sleep, a penn’orth of snuff, and three back numbers of the *London Journal*.”

For troubles now came thickly crowding on Septimus Hardon’s horizon. His wife’s health failed fast, and the means were wanting to procure her the necessary comforts. But there is always light behind the darkest cloud; and now it was that Lucy, young in years, but a woman in self-reliance, proved a stay to the family. Ever busily plying her needle, ever cheerful, she was a ray of sunshine in their sad home, shedding her brightness in the darkest hours. And though Septimus Hardon querulously complained of his standing so friendless in the world, there was another who watched anxiously the failing fortunes of the family, and was always ready with counsel and aid—the Reverend Arthur Sterne, who became more constant in his visits as the affairs of Septimus grew darker. Old Matt and he, too, often met, but somehow not without feelings of distrust on either side—distrust perhaps excusable on the side of the clergyman; for the ways of Matthew Space shed no softening lustre upon his outer man.

One day old Matt went into Carey-street to find the broker in possession; for Septimus was far behind with his heavy rent, and the landlord was alarmed at seeing his tenant’s worldly possessions shrinking at so rapid a rate; while, when the old man made his way into the sitting-room, he found weary-looking Septimus waiting with aching heart for a reply to the appealing letter he had sent to his father.

Old Matt went again, day after day, asking himself how he could be such an old idiot as to care for other people’s affairs to the neglect of his own; but there was always the same weary shake of the head, and the same answer—“No letter, Matt.”

At last there was a cart at the door, and Septimus Hardon, roused up into something like energy for the time being, busily helped old Matt to remove the remnants of his furniture to the rooms the old man had secured for him in that salubrious court, Bennett’s-rents.

“’Tain’t the nicest of spots,” old Matt had owned; “but then look at the convenience; and for what you are going to do, sir, you must be right on the spot; for though law’s very slow work for them as goes into it, it’s very quick, sharp work for them as does the copying.”

That evening Septimus Hardon looked dolefully round the front room of the two the old man had secured for him; then he glanced at his wife, who tried to smile; at Lucy, busily arranging; and lastly at old Matt, who looked very cheerful and happy as he helped Lucy in her arrangements, and was now lustily polishing a table that did not require it with a duster.

“Good luck to you, sir, don’t look like that; why, you’re fetching the tears into Miss Lucy’s eyes—as is quite bright enough without,” muttered Matt to himself. “Don’t be down, sir, the wheel’s always going round—bottom spokes to-day, top spokes to-morrow; and not the best place neither, for folks often knocks their heads through going too high. This ain’t nothing, bless you; this is riches, this is—cheerful prospect of ten foot in front; pigeons on the roof; birds a-singing upstairs; children a-rollicking in the court; orgin three times a-day; writers popping in and out at the corner this side, public at the corner on t’other—brown stout threepence a pot in your own jugs; side-view almost into Carey-street, through the alley. Why, you’re well off here, sir; and I’ve known the time when a ha’porth o’ snuff and a recess in one of the bridges has been board and lodging to me; and—Servant, sir.—Anything more I can do for you to-day, Mr Hardon? If not, I’ll go, sir,” said the old man, suddenly becoming very distant and respectful; for a new-comer appeared upon the scene in the shape of Mr Sterne; when, after a very stiff bow all round, old Matt departed, stumbling more than once as he descended the worn stairs.

Matthew Space’s cheerfulness was gone as soon as he left the court, and it took him some considerable time to reach his resting-place—a neighbouring public-house; for he was troubled and anxious, and had to stop every now and then to think; but he could not think aloud to his old friends the lamps, on account of its being daylight; though after an hour or two’s sojourn at first one and then another of his places of resort when making his way homewards, he paused frequently and long.

“Now I tell you what it is, sir!” he exclaimed, on stopping at the corner of Carey-street once more, and slapping a favourite post on the shoulder, “things are coming to a pretty pass; here we are sending our thousands to prison and penal servitude for dishonesty, robbery, and petty theft; and out of those thousands no end wanted to be honest, and we would not give them the chance. There are thousands wanting to get an honest living, and we won’t let them. Rogue, sir!” he cried, excitedly slapping the cold iron with such energy that his hand ached, “don’t tell me; you may talk of your charity and benevolence till all’s blue; but I mean to say that, in the eyes of the world, sir, there isn’t a greater rogue than a poor man. Beat him, kick him, turn him out, off with him—a vagabond, what business has he to be poor?”

Old Matt was out of breath, and strode on to another post.

“What business has he to be poor—a villain? What do we want with a Septimus Hardon, legal and general printer, and poor man? ‘Nothing at all,’ says the world, and it won’t go to his shop; ‘see him starve first,’ says the world; ‘we’ll go to the people who don’t want help, who keep their carriages and country-seats; and if the little men fail and become bankrupt, serve ’em right, too, what business had they to aspire? why weren’t they content as shopmen or journeymen? Too many already! Pooh! then let them get out. Let them plod and crawl, or turn agricultural labourers, and earn eight or nine shillings a-week. Won’t they get premiums, sir, for bringing up their families without parish help, eh? And what more can they want in this great and glorious land? Won’t that do? Well, then, let ’em go to the workhouse, where there’s every convenience for letting ’em die off out of the way.’”

The old man crossed the muddy street to another lamp, chuckling to himself the while, when, laying both hands upon the post, he began again: “It’s a strange thing, sir, a wonderful thing, how lonesome a man may be here in this great city of London: he may work till he drops for a living, and not get it; and he may then go and lie down and die, and all that, while nobody has known him or helped him; but when he’s found there’s a fuss in the papers for a few hours, and then—on we go again. We’re all wrong, sir. What’s the use of our spending our hundreds of thousands, sir, in converting a few Indians, or Africans, or Australians, sir, and then holding our meetings, with the Bishop of Somewhere-or-another coming home to hold forth upon the benefits that have followed the missionary enterprise, but saying nothing about the miseries that have followed wherever the white man has set his foot? Very fine, sir; very fine, this civilisation, and town and village and church springing up; but what has become of the Indian? what has become of the Australian? and what will become of the New Zealander? It’s aggrandisement from beginning to end, sir,—dead robbery; call it conquest if you will; but there, it’s all for the extension of our glorious empire. Let’s see, sir,” said Matt, stopping; “I’m getting it into a knot; what was I going to say? How dare we go on so busily cleaning other people’s houses when our own is in a state that we ought as a nation to blush for? Convert savages, benighted heathen! Why, I can take you, sir, where, here in the heart of this Christian city, London, you shall see savages ten times worse than any you shall find in Africa—more cruel, more licentious. There, hang it, sir, if it warn’t for the fear of being eaten, I’d sooner trust myself amongst the blacks ten times over than the whites, hang me if I wouldn’t! I know what you’ll say to me, sir! ‘Go and preach the Gospel to every creature!’ Ah, but oughtn’t we to be fit to do it first? oughtn’t we to look at home first? I say yes, sir, yes; and what we’re doing now, sir, ’s playing the Pharisee and whitening the outside of the sepulchre; and there’s no mistake about it, sir, some parts of this London of ours make a very foul sepulchre indeed.”

Another fifty yards brought Matt to the next post, where he again stopped.

“I’m a leveller, am I, sir? P’r’aps so; but we levellers make the way smooth for those poor folks who are to tramp the road of life in days to come. I’m very sorry for the blacks, sir; and no doubt here and there you may find one who, under proper management, would turn out bright; but they can’t be much account, or else they would have made some progress among themselves, whereas they’re just where they were hundreds of years ago. It’s a good job slavery is done away with; but you’ll never make white men of ’em, never, sir; and they all look just as if, when their father Ham was cursed, he scowled like a naughty boy, and was cross and pouted his lips, and so all his children have looked thick-lipped since. But there, sir, that’s neither here nor there, as you may say; though I’ve begun here in Carey-street and got right over into Africa; and that’s the way I always do go on when I’m speaking in public. Now look here, sir; now what am I, eh? a battered, worn-out, seedy old stamp—good for nothing. ‘Whose fault is that?’ you say. ‘Halves!’ I cry, with the world: we share the blame between us. I’ve been foolish: I’ve given way good-humouredly in the squeeze for place, and everyone has pushed by me and got in front. Now, sir, what ought I to have done, eh? Why, told the world that I was a big man; caressed those who believed me, and kicked and bullied those who did not. I ought to have shoved my way through the crowd; and what would have followed, eh? why, people would have pushed again and grumbled; but they would have given way until I got a good standing. Now look at that man, sir,—Hardon, sir, a gentleman every inch of him, but as helpless and unbusiness-like as a baby. Why, he’ll

starve, sir, before he'll ask for help, if his father don't send. 'More fool he,' says the world. To be sure: what business has he with a heart and feelings and nerves, that make him flinch because he has got an ugly shell over his beautiful works, and so feels every slight put upon him. Why, he's just one of those men who would go in despair and make an end of himself; and then you have your inquest, and people say 'How shocking!' and never stop to think that such things keep on happening every day; and will, too, so long as the world goes round; and I'm blest sometimes if I believe that it does go round, sir, or else things would come right in time for everybody. But they don't, for they mend worse every day. Here we are, with one man rolling in riches he never did a stroke to gain, and don't even know the value of; and here's Septimus Hardon, with a sick wife, and with hardly common necessaries. I might have introduced myself to your notice, sir, but present company is always excepted. The fact of it is, sir, that things are all wrong; and though I've been studying the matter these twenty years I can't see how to put 'em all right."

Old Matt drew a long breath, for he had been speaking loudly and with vehemence; and now, upon reaching another post, he began gesticulating fiercely, for he had warmed to his subject.

"But if I had time, sir, I'd go into the matter, sir. I'd take the poor man as he stands, and the rich man as *he* stands; and I'd—"

"Now, come; that's about enough for one night, anyhow. I don't mind a little, now and then, but they'll be hearing of you acrost the square d'reckly."

"I'd take him, sir," continued Matt, "and hold him up for the whole world—"

"O, ah! all right," said Matt's interrupter, the policeman on the beat; "I dessay you would; only the world wouldn't look at him. For why? 'cause the world's too busy. Good-night, old chap."

"Good-night," said Matt, cooling down suddenly, and shuffling off in a quiet spiritless way, the fire out, and his head bent as he thrust his hands in his pockets. "Ah, he's about right; so he is. 'The world's too busy!' so it is; and I ain't got a morsel of snuff left."

Volume One—Chapter Ten.

Brotherly Love.

"There, there, there; sit down, sit down, sit down!" croaked old Octavius Hardon as he cowered over a miserable fire in his paper-strewn room. "Sit down, sit down, sit down," he kept on repeating, after just glancing over his shoulder as his brother, sleek, pompous, and black-clothed, entered the room—"such a gentlemanly man," as the old women of Somesham declared over cups of tea. "Sit down, Tom," croaked the withered, dry old man, pulling his black skull-cap close down to his yellow ears, and peering sideways from under his shaggy grey eyebrows at the chair he meant his brother to take. There was a dry, mocking sneer upon his thin lips, while the grey unshorn beard wagged and twitched about as he spoke, as, without taking further notice of his visitor, he made his chair scroop on the worn carpet as he dragged it closer to the fire and warmed his lean shins.

Doctor Hardon slowly subsided into a seat, giving a hasty glance round the cheerless room as he did so, and then finishing with a long curious look at the lean figure before him, with its wrinkled bony face and attenuated form showing through the faded dressing-gown drawn tightly round him, and tucked-in between his knees, while the trembling hands were stretched out over the fire.

"How are we?" said Octavius after a long silence, broken with an effort by his brother; "how are we? Shall I put out my tongue, Tom? Would you like to feel my pulse, Tom, and sound my chest, eh, Tom? Come and try, Tom, and perhaps I shall knock you down—you humbug, you; for I'm sound as a roach yet, Tom, and shall live a score of years. Only seventy-five, Tom; that's boyish, isn't it? Better than being sixty, and fat, and a humbug like you, ain't it? 'How are we?' Ugh! drop that professional cant, or else stand up and rub your hands together softly, as you ought. What did you come for? Did you come to quarrel?"

"I came because you sent for me, sir," said Doctor Hardon with dignity, settling his chin in his voluminous white neckcloth and using a gold toothpick as he leaned back in his easy-chair.

"Sent for you—sent for you? Well, yes; so I did—so I did, Tom," chuckled Octavius; "but not to doctor me, Tom, nor to send 'the mixture as before,' nor to send 'the pill at bedtime and the draught in the morning.' No, Tom, no. How long would it take you to kill me decently, Tom, eh?—decently and respectably; eh, Tom, eh?"

"Fond of your joke as ever, Octy," said the doctor with a sickly smile.

"Just so, Tom; just so," croaked and chuckled Octavius; "but you are no joke, Tom. I'm not fond of you. Brande's bad enough, but you're a devil, Tom."

"I've been thinking of coming over to see you several times," said the doctor, trying to change the conversation; "and I should have called when passing, only you will misconstrue my ways, Octy."

"Me? misconstrue? No, no, Tom, not I," chuckled Octavius; "I don't misconstrue. I believe you want to come, that I do. Now what's up, Tom, eh?" said the old man, fixing his keen grey eyes upon the doctor. "You want money, Tom, don't you? But, there, you won't own to it like a man, but be indignant and offended. You've a soul above money, you have, Tom; and you wouldn't stoop to borrow money of your poor brother, Tom, even if he'd lend it to you."

The doctor moved uneasily in his chair, glancing again and again round the room, while his brother continued to watch him with his keen unflinching eyes.

“Yes, I sent for you, Tom,—I sent for you,” continued Octavius; “but not to doctor me. I should be afraid of your not thoroughly understanding my constitution, Tom, and overdosing me. But look here, Tom,” chuckled the old man, leaving his seat and coughing drily, as, bent and failing, he crossed the room to a bureau and brought out a silver teaspoon and a bottle containing some dark liquid. “Look here, Tom,” he said, reseating himself, and then pouring with trembling hand a portion of the liquid into the spoon, and in the act spilling a few drops over the side. “There,” he said, smacking his lips after swallowing the fluid, and then stooping fumbling about in the fender for the stopper, that had slipped through his fingers.

“There, Tom, there; that’s nectar, Tom; that’s son, and daughter, and wife, and brother, and doctor, and friend, and everything but lawyer. That’s how I doctor myself, Tom; that’s how I doctor myself. ’Tain’t lawyer, Tom; but I can manage that myself and arrange about my few bits of things. You’d like my mourning-ring when I’m gone, wouldn’t you now, my dear brother?”

Doctor Hardon did not speak, but again shuffled in his chair, glancing uneasily at the sneering face before him; and as he thought of the goodly lands lying fallow, and the tenements in ruins, belonging to his brother, he recalled a case where he had been one of the certifiers respecting the sanity of an elderly lady; and then he wondered whether his brother had made a will, and what it specified.

“That’s how I doctor myself, Tom. That’s a cure for every kind of ache, Tom; try it. It’s good for runaway scoundrels of sons, and it’s good for runaway daughters, Tom, and runaway nieces, Tom. It’s good for everything, Tom; and I live on it,” chuckled the old man. “I didn’t want you for that, you see. You all left me; Septimus, and your jade of a girl, and you keep away; so I have it all to myself.”

“You are not going to take any more of that now?” said the doctor, as his brother once more drew the stopper from the bottle.

“No, no; not yet, not yet, Tom,” said the old man, placing the bottle on the chimney-piece. “Not yet, Tom, till after business. I wanted you about my will, Tom. D’ye hear? about my will.”

Doctor Hardon could not conceal the start he gave at hearing this last sentence; but he made an effort, and began to take snuff from a massive gold box.

“Ha, ha! I thought that would interest you, Tom,” chuckled the old man, watching his brother narrowly, and shading his keen eyes with his hand. “My will, Tom, my will, and what I shall do with my money; for I haven’t a soul belonging to me; not a soul, Tom. So you were coming to see me, Tom, were you, eh? Then you want money, don’t you? What have you been at, now? Mining-shares, eh? Just like one of your fool’s tricks.”

“Hadn’t you better refer to your solicitor?” said the doctor with assumed nonchalance, and not noticing the latter part of the speech.

“What for—what for, eh? No, no; I can do what I want with little help; and I have had nearly all I want done; and you can do the rest. It’s about money, Tom; and you always worshipped it—always—always. Now look here, Tom,” he continued, going back to the bureau and taking out a large envelope; “that’s my will, Tom, and I want it witnessed; d’ye hear, Tom?—witnessed. I’ve had it made for years; and it only wants another signature and then I think it will do, and it will be off my mind and be at rest; for I want to finish my reform work, Tom,—reform—reform—reform. Now look here, Tom; but see first that there’s no one listening at the door.”

Doctor Hardon rose and went across the room upon the points of his toes, peered out into the passage, closed the door silently, and then returned smiling, without having made a sound. But the smile of self-satisfaction at his successful management gave way the next moment to a look of astonishment, and then of anger, as Octavius exclaimed, “You sleek-looking, tom-cat humbug, you! I almost wish I had not sent for you—you treacherous-looking, smooth-coated rascal!”

Doctor Hardon turned almost purple with rage, but by an effort he choked it down.

“So you are, Tom; so you are,” snarled the old man, watching him keenly, and enjoying his discomfiture; “but you can’t afford to be affronted, Tom, can you?”

The doctor tried to laugh it off. “You always did love to tease me, Octy,” he said, with a twist of his whole body, as if the mental torture shot through every nerve.

“Tease!” snarled the old man—“yes; call it teasing if you like; but look here,” he said, drawing out the will, and folding it back so that only the bottom was visible—“bring that pen and ink, and come to the table here and sign;” and then he placed both hands tightly upon the paper, holding it down upon the table, and just leaving room for his brother to sign his name, all the while watching him suspiciously.

Doctor Hardon took the inkstand from a side-table, and placed it beside the will, glancing as he did so at the paper, but only to gaze upon the blank space. He then drew out a morocco case, and set at liberty an elaborate pair of gold-rimmed spectacles, ignoring for the time being the hand some double eyeglass hanging by a black ribbon from his neck. The glasses were wiped upon a delicately-scented cambric handkerchief; there was a soft professional cough given as they were fitted in their place; and then, taking a fresh dip of ink, the doctor again advanced majestically towards the table.

All this while Octavius Hardon had been watching his every action with a cynical smile upon his withered face, apparently deriving great pleasure from the ostentatious performance of his brother.

“Why don’t you purr, eh, Tom?” he snarled; “why don’t you purr, eh?”

Doctor Hardon tried to laugh pleasantly, but it was only a fat copy of his brother's snarl; and then, once more dipping the pen, he leant over the table, placing a hand upon the paper, while at the same moment Octavius slid one of his own on one side, to give more room—perhaps to save it from touching the doctor's plump, white, beringed digits.

The lamp was shaded, and cast a light full down upon the paper; and as the doctor stooped to write, he suddenly started as if he had been stung, and then stood trembling and wiping the perspiration from his forehead.

"Humbug, Tom! humbug!" snarled his brother; "that's your baggage of a girl's name; but it don't upset you like that? What did you act like a brute for, and drive her away, eh? You did, Tom; you did!"

"But I cannot sign the paper without knowing its contents," stammered the doctor.

"Bah, fool! tom-cat! humbug!" snarled the old man, snatching up the paper, and trying with trembling hands to force it back into the envelope. "It's my will, I tell you. There, be off!" and he began to shuffle back again to his chair.

"I'll sign," said the doctor reluctantly.

Octavius took not the slightest notice, only reseated himself.

"I'll sign the paper, Octy," said the doctor, in a tone of voice that seemed to prove his brother's words—that he could not afford to offend him.

"You can do as you like," croaked Octavius, shuffling the envelope into the breast-pocket of his dressing-gown, where it stuck out tantalisingly before the doctor, who would have given a week's income to have known its contents. "You can do as you like, Tom—as you like."

"I know that," growled the doctor, in an undertone; but the old man heard him.

"There, go!" he shouted, in a harsh, cracked voice.

"Don't I tell you I'll sign?" said the doctor, in a lachrymose, injured tone.

The old man looked at him from beneath his hand for a few moments, with a cynical grin wrinkling up his eyes, and then, slowly leaving his seat, he took out and replaced the paper upon the table, jealously holding it down with both hands; and then the doctor signed his name just beneath the fair, clear characters of his daughter's writing, while he ended with a flourish and a ponderous "MD."

"Ha, ha, ha!" chuckled Octavius, snatching the paper up hastily, and then holding it over the lamp, and afterwards to the fire to dry the ink.

"MD! Ha, ha, ha! Got your diploma framed and glazed, Tom? you purring, sleek, tom-cat humbug, you!" Then, without waiting to double the will in its original folds, the old man hastily replaced it in the envelope, took the shade and globe from the lamp, an old gold signet-ring and a stick of wax from the bureau; and then with his half-palsied hand he sealed the great envelope, and stamped the sprawling, blotchy patch of wax with the crest in the ring.

"There, Tom; that's done!" chuckled the old man, replacing the will in the bureau, turning the key, and dropping it on the carpet as he tried to place it in his pocket. "Now, look here, Tom," he said, taking the poker, and making a hole in the fire, "that envelope isn't to be opened till I'm gone, Tom; and I'll tell you this—you're one of the executors, and then you'll know what's in it, eh?—what's in it. Now, I won't tamper with it any more, and no one else shall." As he spoke he dropped the fine old ring into the hot pit he had prepared for its reception, and sat down, chuckling at his brother.

Doctor Hardon sat down breathing heavily, with strange thoughts in his heart, as he looked upon the weak old man before him, and thought of his possessions.

"Now, Tom," said Octavius, chuckling and placid, as he took the little bottle and spoon from the chimney-piece, "there's a decanter with some old port in that sideboard cellaret, and a glass with it. Help yourself, Tom; help yourself; this is my wine."

"But you took a quantity of that laudanum just now," said the doctor.

"You're a fool, Tom! You're a purring, sleek-coated fool!" chuckled the old man, hastily filling the spoon again, and swallowing its contents, "Help yourself—you like port, Tom—and then go, and don't come here any more till you're sent for."

Doctor Hardon drew himself up to display his offended dignity, but the old man only watched him and chuckled sneeringly; so he slowly rose, and with his professional roll walked to the sideboard and back, filled his glass, and then placed the decanter upon the table. He then sat down, curiously watching his brother, who lay back in his chair, apparently gazing into the fire. The doctor raised the glass to his lips, lowered it once more, and then his fat white hand played nervously round his mouth, for there were strange thoughts in his heart again—strange, undefined thoughts that did not take any particular shape, though there was the glint and chink of money in them all, and its uselessness to the wreck before him; while the hints he had wanted to give him respecting a loan had been passed for want of opportunity.

The doctor sighed, and seemed relieved; and then he wiped his forehead, which had turned damp; performed the same operation upon his hands, till the neat white cambric handkerchief was reduced to a miserable wisp; when, apparently further relieved, he took up his glass and drained it, but only to fill it again directly.

The port was good, certainly. The doctor played with his glass amorously, touching the rim with his lips, sipping at the bell of the ruby flower like some mammoth bee; held it before the light, and closed one eye to get a more concentrated look at the deep, rich, tawny hue of the fine old wine. Soon he sipped again—largely this time—and rinsed the generous liquor round his mouth, assuming all the airs of a connoisseur; and then he finished the second glassful, and sighed gently, for the effect was decidedly mollifying.

All this while Octavius Hardon never moved, but lay back in his chair. The doctor drew out his watch, and found it was ten; but he felt in no hurry to move, for he was accustomed to being late, and it would cause no uneasiness at home; besides, something might come of this, he thought; and as the idea crossed his mind, his forehead again turned slightly moist, and he glanced uneasily at the motionless figure before him. Then he started, for there was a rustle in the passage, and a tap at the door, which was directly after opened, and the housekeeper brought in a chamber-candlestick.

“Shall I wait up till you go, sir?” she said to the doctor.

“O, no; not for me,” said he. “My brother will let me out. Good-night, Mrs Berry!” And the doctor’s voice was soft and amiable.

“Good-night, sir!” said the woman, and then the door closed. There was once more the rustle in the passage, the sound of a chain and bolts being shot somewhere in the back, the closing of a door, which sent a hollow echo through the deserted house; and then there was silence—a stillness that was quite oppressive; for Octavius lived with but one servant here at the Grange, a middle-aged woman, who attended to the whole of his simple wants. And now the wind sighed mournfully through the trees, a few spots of rain pattered against the window, and the doctor thought uneasily of his long walk home, but not for long, for, softly rubbing his hands, he now turned once more to the decanter.

“A good glass of wine, brother. I think I’ll take another,” he said unctuously; but there was no reply. So the doctor took another; and then, after thoroughly enjoying that glass, another; when now feeling decidedly comfortable, and that the awkward, sharp-cornered, acid crystals his brother’s words had caused to form in his nature were dissolved by the good wine, he rose, smiling, put the decanter carefully away, and began to don his overcoat, which lay across a chair.

It is possible that had the doctor been less intent upon his thoughts and the wine, he might have heard something more than the pattering of a drop or two of rain upon the window, the soughing of the wind, and the regular “tick-tick” of his own large gold watch—a something that sounded like the working of a sharp gimlet boring through the panel of a door, cautiously and softly, to render that door pervious to a sharp, bright eye; but the doctor heard no sound, and turning towards Octavius, he said, “Good-night, Brother Octy!”

There was no answer, and the doctor repeated his valediction, but still without effect; so he knocked the glass over, making it jingle loudly against the lamp, and still Octavius did not move.

Doctor Hardon’s forehead grew damp again, but very slightly now; he drew out his watch—it was half-past eleven, and he was surprised to see how the time had gone. He walked round in his soft, silent way, in those boots of his that never creaked, to the fireplace on the other side of his brother; took the phial, removed the stopper, and smelt at the contents; replaced the bottle, and after looking in the withered face for a few moments, he lightly rested a finger upon the uncovered wrist before him.

Apparently satisfied, he leaned over the fire where the signet-ring had been cast; then stooped to pick up the tongs, but shook his head, rose again, and stepping silently towards the door, he gave one glance at the bureau, when his toe struck something, kicking it along the carpet.

The doctor stopped and stooped again, feeling about the floor; took the lamp from the table, whose glass jingled loudly, so that he stopped to gaze at his brother, who, however, never stirred; while, after a moment’s search, the doctor picked up the bureau-key, and then replacing the lamp, stood beside the table quite irresolute. He glanced at his brother, then at the door and window, and lastly at the bureau; sighed, laid down the key beside the lamp, said “Good-night” again, stepped softly to the door, passed through and closed it after him; when, for the space of five minutes, there was a silence in the room, broken only by the sighing of the wind, and the tinkle of the cinders falling into the ash-pan.

Did Octavius Hardon, in his opium-produced sleep, dream of his son struggling with sorrow and despair in the desolation of his heart; of the son who had appealed to him again and again for the help the father’s obstinacy refused? Perhaps so, for more than once he moaned, but so softly that it might have been but the wind with whose sighs the sound was strangely mingled.

The lamp burned brightly, shedding a well-defined halo for a certain space around; but the shadows that it cast in the distant parts of the room were wild and grotesque. The motionless figure of Octavius Hardon, with the light full upon the skull-cap, was thrown in strange relief upon the ground in the semblance of a sleeping goblin; chairs were elongated, while the easy *prie-dieu* that the doctor had occupied seemed turned into some strange beast stooping for its spring upon the sleeping man. The corners of the room were full of dark moving shades, as the lamp-flame danced; while the tall bureau and bookcases looked in their black solemnity the repositories of mysteries untold.

Suddenly the door opened again very softly, and Doctor Hardon’s face appeared. His brother had not moved—he was satisfied of that before he entered. He came in, closed the door, and stepped softly up to the chair, and touched the sleeping figure; but there was no pretence, as far as he could tell—it was the heavy stupor produced by laudanum. The doctor paused for a few moments irresolutely, then, taking up the key from beside the lamp, crossed to the bureau, when, turning the key in the lock, the bolt flew back with a loud snap, while, starting round, the doctor stood gazing with pallid face at the sleeping man, who, however, did not move. To cross to where the wine stood in the

sideboard cupboard was the next act, and, removing the stopper, the doctor drank eagerly from the decanter's mouth. This gave him fresh courage; and, replacing the wine, he crossed once more to the bureau, opened it quickly, stepped back again, and walked over to his brother, still motionless; then once more to the door, to open it and peer out.

All silent; and he returned to the bureau.

There was the large blue envelope with its great seal; and now, with his forehead covered with big drops, where before it had been but damp, the doctor, trembling visibly, put the paper to the light, when a sharp cry as of pain from his brother made him drop it upon the table, and turn as if to flee. But the old man only moaned the word "Septimus" in a bitter tone of voice, and then all was silent.

Assuring himself once more that all was well, the doctor again took the envelope and held it to the light to see if it was transparent enough for him to make out anything of its contents; but no: all was firm and close—close and secret as Octavius himself: the folds would not give way, nor bulge so that he could look inside, the great seal was fast, and nothing was to be seen but the words, "My Will—Octavius Hardon," scrawled in a large hand upon the front.

The doctor stood irresolute. There was the fire, with its warm glow; and he thought of how soon it would devour the will; and how that if there was no will he would be the next of kin; and—but about Septimus? Perhaps Septimus was dead; for he had not heard of him for years; and besides, possession—and—yes—that would do, if he should ever show himself. Then Doctor Hardon smiled bitterly, for he had been Castle-building, and thinking of the matter as if his brother were past away; while now, even if the will were destroyed, Octavius would suspect him and make another. But why wish it destroyed? It might contain all he could desire! Could he but have seen inside—and the paper crackled as his trembling hands bent the envelope here and there. Should he break the wax and reseal the envelope? He looked in the fire, but could not see a trace of the ring; while, upon comparing his own massive seals with the impression upon the wax, there was not one that bore the faintest resemblance, so as to give him a chance of deception.

Sighing, he replaced the will, locked the bureau, and threw the key upon the carpet, and had once more reached the door, when a sudden thought struck him. He darted almost, in spite of his weight, to the bureau, the slow ponderous motions giving place to an eager activity.

He tried to open it with his nails inserted beneath the lid, forgetting that it was locked; but he soon had the key again, opened the flap, and seizing the will, stood with it by the lamp, whose shade and glass he removed with trembling hands.

Holding lamp in one hand and envelope in the other, he turned the lamp sideways, so that the oil began to flow, and the light to sputter, and go out on one side of the wick; but out flowed the clear oil—drip, drip, drip—upon the envelope, till a tiny pool was formed upon the paper. This he spread lightly over the front with his finger, and held the envelope to the fire for a few minutes, when, returning to the lamp, he could distinctly trace, in faint characters, through the now transparent paper, "Son Septimus Hardon the whole of houses, lands, hereditaments—" then the paper was folded, so that no more was visible, but he knew enough now: he knew that Septimus was forgiven, and if living, that he would be in possession of his father's property. But would he if there were no will? Could it be managed that he should not succeed? Doctor Hardon apparently thought it could, for there was a strange smile upon his countenance. But what should he do? replace the soiled envelope in the bureau? or should he burn it? How it would burn now, soaked in oil as it was! And what if his brother thought he had destroyed it? What mattered? he had evidently left him nothing. But he was not sure of that; he might have left him something—something pitiful—a mourning-ring, as he hinted; or a watch, or suit of mourning. Better play the bold game, and burn the will; he might never make another—he might not live; and as his thoughts took this bent, the doctor shudderingly gazed at the laudanum-bottle.

Once he advanced towards the fire, and then shrunk back; a second time he advanced and receded, trembling visibly, for it was an act of felony he thought of performing; then, fiercely crushing the envelope in his hand, he stepped forward, when the lamp was dashed over, and as he started round a cold chill struck through him, for he was forced upon his knees, while, ever tightening and crushing down even the gurgling cry he half uttered, there was a bony set of fingers at his throat.

Volume One—Chapter Eleven.

Hard Times.

Times were hard with Septimus Hardon, and too often he was quite in despair. There was that difficult problem before him, always waiting to be solved, and he not able to solve it: given so many mouths to feed, how to do it. It was a problem that many a better man had failed over, and those who knew him, while commiserating, saw how weak and helpless and unfitted he was for the task. But times might have been worse; for he learned now that even in the lowest depths of poverty, whatever may have been written to the contrary, there are such people as friends, any one of whom, in his genuine truth of heart, is worth a score of the parasites who cling to a man in the hours of his prosperity. Old Matthew Space, oddly as his acquaintanceship had begun, was such a friend; and so, to a certain extent, was Mr Sterne; but there was, and he knew it too, a tinge of selfishness in the latter's friendship towards Septimus Hardon, and though he battled with it, and thought again and again that he had beaten it down, there it still was in spite of all. The mistrust he had felt for old Matt had somewhat softened down, after seeing his disinterested attention towards the Hardon family; while the curate argued, upon seeing the old man with Septimus Hardon's child, that no man could be bad at heart who had so true a love for innocence as embodied in a child, almost fresh and pure from the hands of its Maker. But somehow, he and Matt never seemed to get a jot nearer to each other.

Difference of position had nothing to do with it, for Arthur Sterne was ready to extend the hand of friendship to the humblest dweller in the court, and aid and teach to the best of his ability. But Matt said he daresay it was all right, but somehow he was one who did not like to be patronised; while as to being taught, the clay had grown too stiff, and hard, and cracked, to submit to the moulding of the potter's hands. "And you see, sir, to be able to do anything with me, you must moisten my clay with beer, which softens me a little; and it isn't likely as a clergyman is going to supply me with my malt liquor, and all for the sake of giving me a few lessons. I respect him, sir, and always shall, but we don't seem the sort to mix." This to Septimus Hardon.

Mr Sterne, finding his advances of no avail, ceased to make any; and soon he and old Matt were upon a friendly neutral ground, while the extent of their communications was a bow upon either side. Their visits to the first-floor in Bennett's-rents were frequent, and in time they so arranged their calls that they should not clash; while, for further convenience, by a tacit understanding, it was come curate, go printer; and *vice versâ*.

"I much wish you had chosen some better neighbourhood," said Mr Sterne one day, "for your wife and child's sake; and this is not a nice place for Miss Grey."

Lucy looked up in the curate's subdued face with a grateful smile; and then there was a faint blush upon her cheek as she looked down again.

"No, it's not a nice place—not at all nice," said Septimus drearily; "but then it seemed right in the thick of the law-writing, which I'm trying to acquire; but it's very hard work—it's so crooked and crabbed and hard to make out. One ought to have begun young. I've been trying for weeks now; but they all find fault with my hand."

"It is too good—too flowing and clear," said the curate, looking at some sheets of foolscap Septimus laid before him. "But patience, and you will do it. Keep your elbow more away from your side—so." And he leaned over the paper, and wrote a couple of lines so rapidly, and exactly in the style required, that Septimus looked on in admiration, but only to sigh directly after for his own want of skill.

"Never mind," he said, "I shall manage it some day;" and he smiled cheerfully, for he had just caught sight of the worn face of his wife. "'Tis a bad neighbourhood this, sir," he said, to change the conversation; "but it's cheap for London, I suppose."

"Doubtless—doubtless," said the curate; "but it is a sad place; and I know it well, as you may easily suppose. And now, Mr Hardon," he said as he rose to leave, "do not let me be so great a stranger to you. Ask my advice on matters, and take me into your counsels at all times. Come; you promise?"

Septimus Hardon did not speak, but wrung the curate's hand; and in the future he did precisely what might have been expected of him—let matters get from bad to worse, and never once spoke to the visitor upon his dreary prospects—prospects that from delicacy the curate forbore to inquire into, while to old Matt, Septimus was openness itself.

One day Septimus sat gnawing his nails in despair, for some law-copying that he had hoped would bring him in a few shillings had been thrown back upon his hands, with some very sharp language from the keen, business-like law-stationer who, after many solicitations, had employed him.

"Don't grieve, papa," whispered Lucy, looking up from the paid warehouse needlework she was employed upon —"don't grieve, papa, they will pay me for this when I take it home;" and the words were spoken in a sweet soothing strain that comforted the poor fellow in his trouble.

"He said I must be a fool to undertake work I could not perform," said Septimus lugubriously; "and I suppose I must be."

"Don't, don't talk so, dear," whispered Lucy, glancing uneasily at the door of the back-room. "Don't let her hear you."

"Well, I won't," said Septimus, rousing up and crossing the room to kiss the soft cheek held up so lovingly to him—"I won't, pet Lucy; and I'll try again, that I will;" and he returned to his seat.

"Yes, do; yes, do!" cried Lucy, with smiles and tears at one and the same time. "Don't mind what they said; you are so clever, you must succeed."

Septimus screwed up his face, but Lucy shook her head at him, still busily stitching, while, with his head resting upon his hand, Septimus gazed on that budding figure before him, growing fast into the similitude of the woman who had first taught him that he had a heart; but she looked up again, and Septimus turned to his papers.

"Were there many mistakes, dear?" said Lucy.

"Well, not so many," said Septimus; "only the writing I copied from was so bad; and I've put in the contractions where I ought not, and altered them where they should have stayed; and you see, my child, I don't know how it is, but I do get so wild in my spelling. I know when the worst of it was, it was when Tom would sit on my knee and put his fingers in the ink-bottle; and that is distracting, you know, when one copies crabbed handwriting. But the worst fault was what I didn't see—and how I came to put it in, I'm sure I don't know, but it was a part of that line of Goldsmith's, 'But times are altered, trade's unfeeling train.' I don't know how it came there, only that it was there, and I must have written it when I was half-asleep. Let me see, it was—ah, yes, here it is, in folio 15, and I began that at half-past two this morning. I couldn't say anything, you know, my child, could I? for of course it didn't look well in amongst a lot about a man's executors and administrators, and all that sort of thing. It's a bad job, ain't it?"

Poor Lucy looked up at the wretchedly-doleful face before her, hardly knowing whether to smile or be serious; and

then, in spite of the trouble they were in, and perhaps from the fact of tears being so near akin to smiles, they both laughed merrily over the disaster; and Septimus set to work to try and remedy the wrong doings, by rewriting several of the sheets—a task he was busily engaged upon when old Matt came with his tap at the door and entered.

“And how’s Mrs Hardon, sir?” said Matt respectfully.

A faint voice responded from the back-room, for Mrs Septimus spent much of her time in a reclining position.

“Busy as ever, miss, I see,” said Matt; “and bright as a rose.”

Lucy, bright as a rose truly, but only as the pale white blossom that shows the faintest tinge of pink, looked up from the hard sewing which made sore her little fingers, and smiled upon the old man.

“And how’s the writing, sir?” said Matt.

“No good—no good, Matt,” said Septimus wearily. “I’m out of my element, and shall never do any good at it, I’m afraid.”

“Don’t have nothing to do with it, then, sir; come and finger the types again. I’ve no opinion of copying, only as a combination of law-stationers to do honest printers out of their work. Try setting again, sir, and I’ll give you grass first time I get a chance.”

“Grass!” said Septimus absently.

“Well, yes, sir; put you on a job instead of doing it myself; first chance I have.”

Septimus shook his head, went and thrust some sheets of paper into the fire, and then walked to the window, where his apathetic air passed off for an instant, as he seemed to recognise the face of a woman who passed quickly from the opposite house, and then hurriedly made her way out of the court.

“Strange!” muttered Septimus to himself; “but there, it couldn’t be her.”

“And where’s my little di’mond?” said Matt to Lucy.

“Asleep by mamma,” replied Lucy.

“Bless him! I’ve brought him a steam-ingin,” said Matt, bringing a toy-model, with a glorious display of cotton-wool steam, out of his pocket; “and I don’t know what this here’s meant for,” he continued, drawing a wooden quadruped from the other pocket. “Stands well, don’t he, miss? Wonder what it’s meant for! ’Tain’t a horse, nor a halligator, nor a elephant—can’t be a elephant, you know, because they haven’t got these Berlin-wool-looking sides; no, nor it ain’t no trunk neither. Let’s call it a hippopotamus, and see how he’ll tie his pretty little tongue in a knot, bless him! a-trying to say it when he wakes. You’ll tell him Uncle Matt brought ’em, won’t you, miss?” he said, holding them behind his back.

Lucy nodded, while Matt blew out and arranged the cotton-wool steam as carefully as if it was a matter of the greatest importance, or a jewel for a queen; and who shall say that the old printer’s task was not of as great importance, and that the pleasure of the child is not of equal value with that of the greatest potentate that ever ruled; while as to the amount of enjoyment derived, there can be no doubt.

“And what time is the work to go home, miss?” said Matt, after contriving with great difficulty to make the wild quadruped use his four supports in the way intended by his manufacturer—the beast’s idea being that its nose was the proper front rest for its body, and that by rights it was a tripod.

“I’m afraid I shall not be ready before eight,” said Lucy, bending to her task.

“I’ll be here to the moment, brushed up and smart,” said the old man. “Why, how proud you ought to be of having such a bodyguard, Miss Lucy!”

The girl looked up and smiled, half sadly, at the old man as she held out her hand, which he took in his own for a moment, kissed respectfully, and then he shuffled from the room.

Ten minutes after, old Matt’s step was again heard upon the stairs, and he directly after appeared with a pot of porter in one hand, and something tied up in a cotton handkerchief in the other; while, as he entered, he glanced stealthily from face to face to see what effect his proceedings would have before he spoke.

“You see, Mr Hardon, sir, it’s a busy morning with me, and as I’m so far from my lodging—what a fib!” he thought to himself—“I thought I’d ask the favour of being allowed to have a bite here.”

Of course there was no objection raised, and the old man’s roast potatoes were soon warming, while Lucy left her work to frizzle the large portion of prime steak over the fire.

“No, no, miss; none of that,” said Matt, taking the fork out of Lucy’s hand; “I’ve cooked hundreds of bits of steak, miss, and I’m too particular to trust you; and, besides, you’ll be keeping me waiting to-night when it’s time the work was taken home; and my time’s the only valuable possession I’m worth.”

Here old Matt directed a very knowing wink at Septimus Hardon; but he was deep in thought, with his head resting upon his hand. However, Lucy understood the old man’s quaint kindness, and resumed her work; but there was a tear twinkling in her eye.

“Lord, Miss Lucy,” said Matt, turning the steak upon the gridiron, and distributing a most appetising odour through the room, where more than once of late hunger had sat gaunt and staring,—“Lord, Miss Lucy, how I should like to see you with one of those new machines; stitch away they do, and the work comes running out by the yard.”

Lucy sighed, and pressed a sore finger to her rosy lips.

“’Spose I may put the cloth on, miss, mayn’t I?” said Matt, who was quite at home in the place.

Lucy nodded; and the old man soon had the cloth spread, and the steak done; when, pulling a long face, he groaned heavily.

“There!” he exclaimed, “that’s always the way. Who’d be troubled with a complaint? Thought I could just pick a bit; but now it’s all nice and ready, and as prime as can be, I’m done. Such a steak as that is, too, juicy and done to a twist, and the very best cut out of the whole beast. But there, don’t let it be spoiled, miss, please;” and before anyone could stay him the old man was shuffling down the stairs, chuckling to himself as he made his way into the court, while Septimus, stung to the heart by his poverty, and overcome by the old man’s kindness, left his chair, and began to pace the room wringing his hands.

“O, that it should have come to this! O, that it should have come to this!” he groaned; but the next moment Mrs Septimus had forgotten her own trouble, and was weeping upon his breast, while Lucy had work enough to pacify the frightened child.

“Don’t, don’t, darling,” whispered Mrs Septimus in a supplicating voice. “I know it is all my fault, and I’m thinking of it constantly; but don’t let me think that you reproach me, or it will kill me outright.”

There was such agony of spirit in Mrs Hardon’s words that Septimus forgot his own wounded pride and misery by turn, in busily trying to soothe the poor invalid, who gladly took her seat at the table, while Septimus, with a smile upon his countenance, kept on vowing how hopeful he would be, as, casting pride to the winds, he distributed old Matt’s much-needed steak, not hesitating to partake himself of the old man’s bounty.

A gleam of hopeful sunshine seemed to have darted into the room that afternoon as Septimus sat busily writing, and the sharp click of needle upon thimble could be heard from the back-room, where Mrs Septimus was busy helping Lucy, so that the work might be finished in time, though every now and then it fell to someone’s lot to amuse the little boy, who, a very spoiled tyrant, seemed bent upon being as capricious and unreasonable as children can be at times. But ever and again the wrinkles would deepen upon Septimus Hardon’s forehead, and he would lay down his pen, in dread lest he should include some of his busy thoughts in his copying. What should he do to better his condition? Time back it had seemed so easy a task, that of keeping his wife and children; but, put to the proof, how difficult. Some that he saw were almost without trouble; wealth poured in upon them in return for their bright thoughts. And why should not he be rich when schemes in plenty came flashing to his brain? There were scores of fortunes to be made had he but capital—that golden key that should open the treasure-house; but he was poor—a beggar, as he told himself again and again, when, to drive away the thoughts, he stooped over his copying, but only to lay it aside once more and sigh.

Old Matt came again that evening, vowing that he was much better, for he had been trying a favourite remedy of his —abstinence. “A first-rate thing, sir, for indigestion,” said Matt; “rather lowering, certainly, but surprisingly efficacious as a medicine, while it costs nothing, and saves at the same time. A good walk helps, too, but then that requires what the shoe-shops call a pair of ‘stout walking,’ and my old feet want an easy style of boot. I wouldn’t use a new boot on any consideration,” said Matt, stretching out a dilapidated and crushed Wellington, polished to the highest pitch of lustre by a scarlet-coated brigadier. “I study comfort, sir; ease before appearances.”

Lucy was soon ready, and then, with a couple of inches added to his stature, the old man proudly escorted her through court, lane, and street, to the warehouse; and then patiently waited till her business was transacted. Many a glance was directed at the strangely-assorted couple, but he would have been a bold man who would have insulted the poor girl, who leaned so trustingly upon the old printer’s arm till they reached the court, where he allowed her to go first, stopping and scratching his cheek viciously as he saw Lucy tremblingly hold out her hand to a woman who hurriedly passed from the house opposite that occupied by Septimus. They seemed to have met before; but old Matt looked vexed and undecided. Once he closed up, but a glance from Lucy sent him back, when he passed the rest of his time in returning with interest the bold, inquisitive stare of Mr William Jarker, who stood with a couple of friends in the entrance of the court, watching Lucy and the stranger with some degree of interest, till Mr Jarker caught Matt’s eye, when he turned to his companions, said something, and they walked off together, Matt’s quick ear catching the words, “9:30,” and a click or two as if one of the men carried tools in the pocket of his shooting-jacket.

Directly after, the stranger passed old Matt with a quiet appealing look, to which he replied with a nod of a very undecided description, half civil, half angry; and then, still scratching his silver-stubbled cheek, he wished Lucy good-night, shaking his head the while, to which she replied, “Please don’t be angry,” in a way that brought a smile into the old man’s countenance; a sunny smile that began at one corner of his month, and then spread through stubbly whisker, and over wrinkle, till it was all over his face, clearing away the shadow that had lain there; but as old Matt turned away, his head began to shake, and the shadow that had been lurking in the farther whisker crept back again, slowly and surely, as night crept down over Bennett’s-rents to hide the sordid misery that chose the court for its home.

“What’s ‘9:30’?” said Matt to himself, as passing out of the court his thoughts took a fresh direction. “Nice-looking party that. ’Spose I button up my coat over my gold repeater. They were thinking about what’s o’clock, they were, hang ’em.”

Old Matt Space suited the action to the word, bursting off a button in the operation, and then carefully picking it up and saving it, as he strode off muttering.

Volume One—Chapter Twelve.

Friends from Town.

"For God's sake, Octy," gurgled Doctor Hardon almost inaudibly, so tightly were the fingers clutching his throat, —"don't! don't! I was only looking."

"Turn on the glim, Joe," croaked a harsh voice; when a bright light flashed in a broad, well-defined, ever-widening path right across the room, leaving the untouched portion in a darkness of the blackest; but the light shone where the doctor could see his brother upon the floor, with a rough fellow kneeling beside him, while a coarse, big-jawed ruffian, the upper portion of whose face was covered with crape, held on tightly by the doctor's throat with fingers whose bony force he had at first taken for his brother's. It was evident that another man was present holding the lantern; but from the position of the light he was in the shadow, and so invisible.

"Light that there lamp again," croaked the same voice; and at the same time the doctor felt himself dragged at until he rose to his feet, when he was backed into a chair, one hand being loosened from his throat. Directly after a heavy blow fell upon his head, causing the light to dance and sparkle before his eyes.

"There," growled the voice; "that's jest a reminder, that is. That didn't hurt, that didn't; but it's jest to show what we could do if yer get to be troublesome. Now, then," growled the ruffian to his companion, who was stooping over the fire, "light that lamp, d'yer hear? You're gallus sharp, you are."

"Who's to light the butcherly thing when hain't got no ile in?" growled the ruffian addressed.

"I wish you'd got a little more ile in you," croaked the first speaker in a voice that seemed to ascend through a tubular rasp. "Hang on here, will yer, and give us holt."

The doctor felt himself delivered over into another pair of hands, the change not being for the better; for the new gaoler seemed to be experimentalising, and trying to find out the best place for holding on by when doing a little modern Thuggee, consequently the doctor's was not a pleasant situation.

Directly after, a little oil was spilt upon the fire, causing it to blaze up and illumine the room, displaying to the doctor's starting eyes the three costermonger-like figures of the men in the room; when, seeing his quiescence, the one acting as gaoler called attention to a couple of candles in old bronze-holders upon the chimney-piece, and, loosing his hold of his prisoner, leaned forward to reach them down.

It was a tempting moment for the doctor, and, without pausing to think of its uselessness, he seized the bell-rope within his reach, and dragged at it heavily. But the next instant he had fallen back in his chair from a well-planted blow between the eyes, and then, half-stunned, he listened to the faint tones of the bell as the men produced what seemed to be so much clothes-line from a small carpet-bag, with which they dexterously and firmly bound him to his chair.

"You improves, you do," growled the first ruffian to the man lighting the candles. "Been all the same if that there jangler had alarmed the whole blessed country."

"How was I to know as he'd jump up like so much watchworks?" said the other, placing the lighted candles, whose tops were encrusted with ash from the fire, upon the table.

"Know! not you; but you knows how to claim yer share of the swag."

Then the poor old man upon the floor, whose wild, staring eyes seemed to betoken some violent seizure, was lifted into a chair opposite his brother, and bound after the same fashion, when the spokesman of the party shook the heavy leaden knob of that misnamed article a life-preserver in the doctor's face, saying: "Don't you try no more games, my kiddy, or else"—a playful tap illustrated his meaning. "She's safe in bed, and tied up so as she won't answer no ringing nohow. She's tucked up all right, she is; d'yer hear?"

The preserver-handle was very elastic, and the knob tapped playfully upon the doctor's forehead as the ruffian spoke; but the bound man was too confused to answer, and though what followed seemed to him like a wild dream, yet his heart leaped once as he saw the fellow snatch the will from the floor, where it had fallen, tear open the seal, and hold the paper to the light.

"What's in it, Bill?" growled another of the gentry.

"Gallussed if I know," said the other; "but 'tain't no good;" and the doctor saw it crushed together and thrown upon the fire, where it blazed up and was soon consumed. But confused as the doctor was, the next proceedings of the ruffians produced groan after groan from his breast, as they attacked his vanity, and metaphorically rolled him in the dust; for removing a fur cap that he wore, so as to cool his brain perhaps, and displaying thereby a very closely-cropped bullet-head, the leader of the gang, as he seemed to be, first snapped the doctor's gold-chain, and set it and watch at liberty; for the doctor's bonds would have impeded their being taken off in the normal fashion. Then followed, one after the other, to be placed in a small carpet-bag with the watch and chain, the spectacle-case and gold eyeglass; the handsomely-chased gold snuff-box from one pocket, gold toothpick from another. The set of studs were dragged from the cambric front; a massively-set diamond ring from the doctor's right hand, and a signet from his left; while as the various ornaments were passed from one to the other, and deposited in the bag, a broad grin followed each groan from the doctor.

“Where’s his puss, Bill?” said Number 8 ruffian, who was the Judas Iscariot of the party, and carried the bag.

“Here it is,” growled Bill, whose hands were wonderfully active for so heavy, burly-looking a man, diving in and out of pocket after pocket, and now drawing forth a very handsome, elaborately-gilt, russia-leather portemonnaie—half purse, half pocket-book—and grinning as he opened it, he drew out and laid upon the table, first a railway insurance ticket, next a lancet, then a crooked sixpence, and lastly a threepenny-piece.

“Here, lay holt o’ this ’ere, and slit it up,” said Number 2 ruffian, handing his companion an open clasp-knife.

The gentleman called Bill took the knife and ripped the purse all to pieces, tearing leather from lining everywhere; but no notes fell out, no secret pocket was disclosed; and throwing the remains of the purse upon the fire with an aspect of the most profound disgust upon his face, the fellow exclaimed, “I’m gallussed!”

“Let’s wet it, Bill, afore we goes any further,” said Number 8, and as he crossed silently to the sideboard, and brought out the port and another decanter, the doctor saw that the men were without boots, which accounted to him for their sudden attack.

The wine and glasses were placed upon the table, and the burglars very coolly proceeded to refresh themselves—one seating himself upon the table, another upon a chair, and the last taking his place upon the coal-scuttle—treating it as if it were a saddle.

“Here’s towards yer, old un!” growled the big-jawed gentleman called Bill, tossing, or rather pouring, a glass of wine down his bull throat as he looked at the doctor—his companions paying the same compliment to Octavius, who, however, seemed to be perfectly insensible.

All at once a faint scream was heard from another part of the house, when one of the men rose.

“She thinks as we’re gone, Bill,” said ruffian Number 2, with a grin. “Just go and show her that mug of yours, and she’ll soon shut them pipes.”

Bill of the big jaw rose, displaying his teeth so that the lips seemed to assimilate with the gums; and he, apparently taking his comrade’s remark for a compliment, walked out on the points of his toes, in a peculiar fashion of his own; when, winking to his companion, Number 2 stole softly to the sideboard, looked about a bit, and then seizing a small silver salver, doubled it by main force, and slipped it into the pocket of his velveteen coat. He then darted back to his place, whispered “halves” to his companion, and began helping himself to more wine, just as Bill hurried in again, glancing suspiciously about him with his peculiarly restless, chameleon-like eyes, which seemed to be on the watch for plunder, trickery, and Nemesis, at one and the same time, and now it was evident that he suspected a march to have been stolen upon him.

However, a few more glasses of wine were drunk, and then the men proceeded to methodically ransack the place, finding a tolerable booty of old-fashioned plate in the sideboard; while from the bureau, another gold watch, with its old-fashioned broad chain and seals; a ring or two, some quaint jewellery, and a few sovereigns and small change were obtained.

The cords which bound the brothers were then carefully examined, and a knot or two tightened, so that the doctor winced; then the candles were extinguished, and the big-jawed man growled in the doctor’s ear, “Now, jest you move, that’s all; and I’m gallussed—”

The fellow did not finish his speech verbally, but again illustrated his meaning with a tap of the life-preserver.

“We ain’t a-goin’ yet,” growled Number 8; “so don’t you think it. I *have* used this ’ere, and I ain’t used it,” he said, showing his clasp-knife; “but it’s a sharp un—so I tell you; and where it does go, it goes—so look out.”

“This one’s been a-drinkin’; smell his breath,” said Number 2, nodding at old Octavius, as he cast the light from the lantern upon his wild face.

Just then the doctor gave a loud groan, for his cords hurt him.

“Shove a bit in his mouth, Bill, or he’ll begin to pipe, p’r’aps,” growled Number 8.

“He’d best not,” said Bill savagely; “but how-so-be he shall have it; there’s some knives in that there drawer.”

Doctor Hardon’s eyes rolled in their sockets as he saw one of the men go to the sideboard drawer and bring out a large table-knife. Then the head of the party took it from his companion’s hand and held the blade between the bars, where the fire yet glowed, when the effect in a few minutes was to loosen the handle, for the resin melted, and the blade slipped out. The man then took the handle, untied and slipped off the doctor’s white cravat, and then turning his back, rolled the knife-haft tightly in its folds; while, wondering what was to follow, the horror-stricken captive began to groan dismally.

“Now for it,” cried Bill sharply, seizing the bound and helpless man by the throat, when, fancying that his last hour had come, the doctor opened his mouth to cry out, when the knife-handle was thrust between his teeth, and the cravat tightly tied behind his head, keeping the gag securely in its place, and thoroughly robbing him of the power of even crying out.

“Now t’other,” said Bill. “Get another knife out.”

“Ah! he’s all right,” said Number 2. “I’d leave him.”

“P’r’aps you would,” said Bill; “but we two don’t want to be blowed on, if you do.”

“But he’s a-most dead now,” said Number 2; “and if you stop his mouth that way, I’m blessed if I don’t think he will be quite afore morning.”

“And what then?” said Bill contemptuously; “what if he is? What’s the good of an old cove like him? Yah!”

However, that part of the ceremony was left undone. The doctor heard the door close, open again, for the key to be dragged out of the lock and replaced in the other side; when once more the door was closed and double-locked. Then followed the sound as of a whispered dispute, and again silence, till it was broken by a faint scream from upstairs; while, with every nerve on the stretch, the doctor listened for the next movement, as, still somewhat confused in mind, he kept fancying that the stertorous breathing of his brother was that of one of the ruffians on guard at the door.

An hour must have passed, during which time the doctor still fancied there was a man on guard, and dared not move, though at that time the three visitors were coolly taking their tickets of a sleepy porter, the only one of the railway company’s servants in charge of the station, and soon after they were being whirled up by the night mail which called at Somesham for the letter-bags at two o’clock. But at last, as the doctor’s mind became clearer, he made out that the breathing must be that of his brother; and rousing himself, he tried to free his hands. The cord only cut deeply into his plump flesh, though, and a sharp pain was the sole result, though he could tell that his arms and legs were swelling, and that the circulation was almost stopped. He tried to get rid of the gag in his mouth, but only made it press the harder upon his false teeth, so that the gold setting seemed almost to crush his gums. Then he waited awhile, to gain strength, and as his head grew clearer, he recalled how that the will had been destroyed, and thought of how, had he known what was to happen, he would have opened and read it. If now Octavius would neglect to make another! He was old and helpless, and no doubt getting to be imbecile—at least, in his doctorial eyes; and if he would but neglect to make another! Then he remembered how the villains had denuded his person, and he writhed with fury so that his chair cracked.

Back to the thoughts of the will and of Septimus Hardon; and for a time so deep was his musing, that the doctor almost forgot his own position till the pain recalled him, and he found he was fast growing numb and cold.

All at once a terrible shudder ran through his frame, for a rustling and squeaking behind the oak wainscot startled him.

“Rats!” he thought to himself; and he recalled how the house was said to swarm with them, and how that they had once attacked a child in bed. Started upon that train of thought, there were plenty of anecdotes to startle him with the reputed courage of the fierce little animals when hunger-driven.

Another hour passed in the darkness, as regularly and slow came the stertorous breathing of Octavius, interrupted at times by the fierce scratching of the rats behind the wainscot, or their scampering beneath the floor in their many galleries; and again and again the doctor shivered with fear, as he sat listening and longing for help.

But no help came—neither was it likely to come, since the lonely house might have been passed again and again without there being a suspicion excited of anything being wrong. Besides, late in the night it was a great chance if a soul passed. He knew, from his professional habits, that no surprise would be felt at home because of his absence, and he had not said where he was going.

Another hour passed, and the doctor sat listening eagerly for his brother’s breath, which, from being loud and stertorous, had now become so faint as to be hardly perceptible; indeed at times it appeared to have ceased, and in his then excited condition he began to dread that the overdose of laudanum, or the shock, had been too much for the old man, and that he was to pass the remainder of the night with a corpse. He dreaded the corpse horribly, but did he dread that such was the case—that his brother was dead? He was old and useless certainly, but he was rich, and his will was destroyed; and were there no Septimus, or could he be put aside, that property would come to him. But was his brother dead? Death was nothing new to him; he had stood by hundreds of deathbeds; but under these circumstances, bound down there, with nerves unstrung, numbed, cold, and in agony, Doctor Hardon had at times a difficult matter to contain himself, and he trembled fearfully with a new horror lest he should lose control over himself.

He listened, and the breathings had ceased; the only sounds he could hear were the horrible gnawings of the vermin. At last, though, he heard a breath; but he shuddered again, for his excited fancy told him that it was the harsh, rattling expiration that he had often heard—that last effort of the lungs ere stilled for ever.

The tearing and scratching of the vermin now grew louder, and the doctor asked himself why? as, beside himself with horror, he sat listening. His temples throbbed, the cold sweat stood upon his face, and he struggled again and again to free himself, but only to tighten the well-tied knots. At times he could hardly breathe, while at last a thrill ran through him—a thrill of indescribable terror—such a shock as would have made him yell, had he been able; for quickly, and with a sharp scratching, he felt something run up one of his bound legs, across his lap, and then he heard the soft “pat” as a rat leaped upon the carpet.

Doctor Hardon could bear no more; horrible, stifled groans burst from his breast, as, mad with dread, he leaped and bounded spasmodically in his seat, making the cords cut deeply into his flesh till, in one of his agonised convulsions, the chair went over backwards with a crash; when, stunned and helpless, the wretched man lay in a wild dream of horror, from which he only awoke to relapse again and again.

Volume One—Chapter Thirteen.

At the County Arms.

The people of Somesham, whom Doctor Hardon regulated as to their internal economy, were of opinion that there was not such another town as theirs in the whole kingdom; and no doubt they were right. It was situated at the foot of a range of chalky wolds, and in dry weather always gave the visitors an idea that its inhabitants were a slovenly race, and had not dusted their town lately. There was a long, white, dusty road that led to it on one side, and a long, dusty road that led to or from it on the other side; there was one long, dusty street, with shops and private houses mixed up anyhow; there were a few dusty cross streets which led nowhere; a market-place where pigs squealed and butter was sold on Tuesdays; a town-hall, combined with a corn-exchange and an assembly-room, forming an ugly dust-coloured building, which was like the memoranda and papers in people's pocket-books when they are advertised as lost—of no value to anyone but the owners; and the sole use it would have been to them was to sell it for old building-materials. There were public-houses, and, above all, a commercial inn, kept by one Mrs Lower, a stout, elderly lady, who had formerly occupied the post of nurse in Octavius Hardon's house until such times as a nurse was no longer required, when she did needlework, and helped in the domestic concerns till her mistress died, and then acted as housekeeper up to the advent of Agnes Hardon, when one John Lower, keeper of the County Arms in Somesham market-place, persuaded her to say "Yes" to the question he had so many times asked her, and she became landlady of the goodly inn; nurse again to the failing old man her husband; and lastly, sole owner of the goods, chattels, and tenements of the said John Lower, who went to his long sleep with a blessing upon his lips for the good woman who had smoothed the last hours of his life.

Mrs Lower made a very comfortable widow—one whose hostelry was much frequented by commercial gentlemen, and those given to running down from town once or twice a week for the purpose of having a turn with the Low Wold hounds; stout, as a matter of course, for no woman could be expected to make a good landlady who was angular or pointed in her person. Mrs Lower was stout, but not uncomfortably so, and this stoutness she kept in its proper proportion by a comfortable diet, and by being a woman without one of those unpleasant parasites known as cares. Doubtless she had plenty of the little troubles of life to encounter—those little three-cornered affairs that bother everyone—matters that to some people would be cares; but in her case, being a mild, cheerful, and amiable woman, they made but little impression, the consequence being that these acidities of life never ate into her countenance, running down it in wrinkles, and puckers, and channels; and at an age one never dare mention in her presence, or out of it either, for fear of not being believed, she was plump of face, rosy, and comfortable-looking, to an extent that made more than one well-to-do farmer, and tradesman too, make her an offer that she would not accept.

Mrs Lower sat very comfortably enjoying her breakfast in the bar of the County Arms, which bar was a pleasant-looking glass bower, with a view one way of the sawdusty passage leading out into the market-place, and in the other direction a prospect of divers pendent articles of consumption—to wit, a turkey, joints of mutton and beef, poultry, and a couple of long-tailed pheasants. There was a cozy air about Mrs Lower's bar, for everything in it looked snug, from the big-stomached bottles to the great tom-cat blinking on the hearth-rug. No fireplace ever shone to such an extent as Mrs Lower's, for it was a very race between black-lead and flame which should glow most, the result being a warm combination, in which the fender, copper tea-kettle, and fire-irons joined, and which every bottle, glass, and object with shine in its composition laughed over and reflected. Everything in Mrs Lower's cozy bar seemed in keeping, and as if belonging to it—beginning with the principal object animate, Mrs Lower herself, and descending through the blind, fat spaniel and the black, blinking tom-cat, to the stout bullfinch in the cage hung in the window—a finch so fat that he very seldom hopped, while there was a general aspect about him that his feather jacket was too tight, for it never seemed smooth. There was a tradition that this bullfinch used to pipe "God save the King;" but that when William the Fourth died, he went into mourning for him, and had never opened his beak to honour the successor. True or not, Mrs Lower believed it; and at all events, if people doubted the bird's age, she could declare the part of the story to be true which related to its never opening its beak to pipe the anthem in its altered form.

Mrs Lower mostly had "a snack," as she termed it, for her breakfast; such snack being generally something very savoury and appetising, and frequently taking the form of mushrooms, devilled drumsticks, or kidneys; while Hides, the butcher in the market-place, had been known to tell fibs, his wife said, on Mrs Lower's account, and to deny that he had any sweetbreads when even aristocratic customers had wanted them, so that Mrs Lower might not be disappointed. But then Mrs Lower was no mean customer; and Hides said, with a wink to his wife, her money was always there when he wanted it, and that was more than some people's was who held their heads very high. Mrs Hardon had been heard to say that she believed Hides' calves never had any sweetbreads—a remark conveyed, per the cook, to Hides himself, at a time when that gentleman evinced very little pleasure in supplying the Hardon house, and always made a point of sending in dry beef and mean tough mutton.

But Mrs Lower could always have sweetbreads, and she was enjoying one cooked to perfection, sipping too, from time to time, a fine rich cup of tea, with an odour of a great-many-spoons-to-the-pot power, when Charles, head—and foot—waiter, made his appearance at the bar-door, with his head on one side, and a sharp cocksparrow-look about him, from his beaky nose, prominent chest, and thin legs,—his tail-coat aiding the simile.

"Heard the news, mem?" said Charles, raising the napkin he carried over his arm, and nearly wiping his nose upon it by mistake.

"No, Charles," said Mrs Lower, peeping into the pot by raising the lid.

"The whole town, mem, 's in a—"

"Take that pot out, Charles, and put in one cupful,—not more, the tea-kettle's low, and the water's all furry."

"Yes, mem; town's in a fermin, mem, and—"

"One cupful mind, Charles," said Mrs Lower, interrupting him.

“Fermin, mem,” continued Charles, “and—”

“Bless the man, go and fill the pot!” exclaimed Mrs Lower. “No—no! not fill it—one cup, Charles;” and the waiter disappeared.

“And now what’s the matter?” said Mrs Lower blandly, as, somewhat ruffled and reticent, Charles brought back the pot, having forgotten that the most important matter to Mrs Lower at meal-time was the meal itself.

“Matter, mem—why, everything’s the matter—burglary and robbery, and murder almost; and all sorts, mem,” said Charles, again making a dash at his napkin, but recollecting himself in time in favour of a red-silk handkerchief.

“Nonsense!” said Mrs Lower, thoroughly enjoying a piece of the very brownest sweetbread outside, rich in glorious osmazome; “nonsense, Charles!” and so far from being startled, she cut two or three dice-shaped pieces of bread, soaked them in the rich gravy, and went on enjoying her breakfast.

“Fact, mem, I assure you,” said Charles. “That’s what Keenings sent for our fly for, mem.”

“What for? the burglars or the murderers, Charles?” said Mrs Lower composedly.

“No, mem; neither, mem; but ordered it at eight, mem, to go to the Grange, to fetch the doctor, mem.”

“What, Mr Brande?” said Mrs Lower, taking a little more interest in the matter.

“No, mem; old Hardon, mem,” said Charles.

“But he never goes to the Grange, Charles; it’s all a mistake.”

“No, mem, not a bit,” exclaimed Charles. “Jem’s in the yard now, mem, just come back from Hardon’s, and he helped the doctor in and out, too; and Mrs Hardon coming flying down in her dressing-gownd as soon as they got him down home, and a-going on dreadful, and saying it was all a judgment for not forgiving Miss Hagniss; and the doctor taking three men to carry him, being heavy and cold, and almost dead; and Mr Brande’s with him, mem, they say now.” Charles paused for breath.

“But what was it all? what does it mean?” cried Mrs Lower, stirring her tea with her knife.

“Why, mem, that’s what I’m a-telling you: it’s a burglary, you know,” said Charles excitedly. “The Grange attacked by robbers, and the doctor tied in a chair with the clothes-line, and laid down on his back, as Mr Keening and Doctor Brande found him, with a knife stuck in his throat.”

“But not dead?” exclaimed Mrs Lower.

“O, no, mem, only stuck so as he couldn’t speak.”

“And where was Squire Octy?” cried Mrs Lower, quite forgetting the remains of her sweetbread.

“Why, didn’t I tell you, mem? Tied down in another chair, and Mrs Berry, the housekeeper, tied down in her bed, with a blanket over her head, and she got loose at six o’clock this morning, and came over and alarmed the town. Says she’ll never go back any more. Gang of ten ruffians with black faces, and the police are on their tract.”

“But about Squire Octy, Charles. How’s he?”

“Not hurt a mossle, mem, so they says. Jem says that he heard as Mr Keening cut the rope when he went in, and the old gentleman got up and shook hisself, and then took a spoonful of loddlum, and he was all right again directly, and stood laughing at his brother, the doctor, mem, who was strange and bad.”

“And no one knew anything about it?” said Mrs Lower.

“Not a word, mem,” cried Charles, “and it’s a mercy as we weren’t all murdered, I’m sure. And Jem says he saw old Squire Octy laugh when they lifted the doctor into the fly, while he’d got no chain, nor studs, nor rings, as you know he wears a lot of them things, mem.”

Mrs Lower nodded.

“And I hear as all the plate’s gone; and they’ve had the wine, and I don’t know what, mem; but what caps all, mem, was for the squire, old Mr Octy, mem, to be quite laughing like, and Jem says he looks more like an old ghost than anything, mem, with a black-velvet cap and a dressin-gownd.”

A ringing bell summoned Charles away, and, quite forgetful of the remainder of her breakfast, Mrs Lower sat thinking of her old master in his present character of the facsimile of a ghost in a black-velvet cap and a dressing-gown, thinking of the changes in the family, wondering, too, what had become of the doctor’s daughter, Agnes; but above all, of the shabby-looking elderly man whom she always spoke of as “Master Sep.”

Volume One—Chapter Fourteen.

Matt Makes a Discovery.

People about Lincoln’s-inn began in these days to turn their heads and look after the shabbily-dressed old printer,

who passed them to stop every now and then at a lamp-post, and then go on again, shaking his head like an anglicised mandarin, for old Matt was sorely troubled about the state of affairs in Bennett's-rents. At times he would be for making a confidant of Mr Sterne, and asking his advice and guidance, but somehow there always seemed a certain amount of suspicion on either side, and Matt and the curate maintained a gap between them which neither attempted to cross. But the old man was after all not unhappy, for he was enjoying that supreme pleasure which fills the heart, making it swell almost painfully—that pleasure which never satiates, while it is like the seed of the parable cast into the ground, some may be blighted, some trampled down, but there are always certain grains which flourish and give to the sower a hundredfold of grain in return. Old Matt was enjoying the pleasure of doing good and helping a fellow-man in distress. It may be questioned whether the old man's path was ever easier or more brightly irradiated than during his connection with the Hardons. True, his income was of the very smallest; but then it is not the extent of a man's income that gives him pleasure in this life, but the secret of having all the possible enjoyment out of it. Some with wealth seek for this enjoyment after a wrong fashion, and find only bitterness, while in the homes of poverty joy often finds an abiding-place.

Septimus Hardon often wondered afterwards how they had managed to live in this time of trouble; but one way and another the days passed by. Now he would make a few shillings by his copying, then there was Lucy's work, while, in spite of remonstrances, old Matt persisted in enjoying his income after his own fashion, playing his little miserable farces to his own satisfaction, and then grinning to himself over the little bits of deceit. He never stopped, shrewd as he was, to ask himself whether his subterfuges were not of the most transparent; they gained him his end, and he considered that it was a novel and a neat way of managing the matter, when a hint at lending money would have given offence.

One day succeeded another, with the family struggling on, Mrs Septimus helping Lucy when she could, while, as for Septimus, the most satisfactory work he obtained was that of copying sermons out for Mr Sterne; though, strange as it may seem, that gentleman never once used Septimus Hardon's clear, unblurred transcript, but put it away week after week, sighing that his income was not greater.

Septimus had now given up all hope of hearing from his father, and, resigned somewhat to his fate, he bent over his writing-table trying to make up by perseverance what he wanted in ability—a capital plan, and one that has succeeded where talent has made a miserable failure, as old Aesop knew hundreds of years ago. As for asking his uncle for aid, such a thought never crossed Septimus Hardon's mind, and perhaps it was well, for it spared the poor sensitive man the unpleasantry of a refusal.

One day, all in a hurry and bustle, up came old Matt, just at dinner-time, to find Mrs Septimus making a sorry failure in her attempt to find an invalid's dinner in some bread and a long slice of cheese that a laundress would easily have seized by mistake, under the impression that it was "best yellow soap."

"There, just like me!" exclaimed the old man, with a hasty glance round the room; "just like me; but you won't mind, I know. I always drop in at mealtimes.—There, give us a kiss, my man. God bless you! 'What I dot for 'oo?' There's a pretty way to talk! Why, let's see; I think there's something here—down in here somewhere;" and the old man began to dive behind into one of his pockets. "To be sure, here it is!" he cried; "and if all the rich jam isn't coming through the paper! Here we are," he cried, bringing out of a little bag a small oval paste-dish with a crimped edge, full of a very luscious treacly-looking preserve, one that, ten minutes before, had been danced over by the flies in the pastrycook's shop in the Lane.

Off went little Tom rejoicing, to prepare himself for the after-dinner wash by gumming his chubby face and hands with the jam.

"You won't mind, sir; and, ma'am, I hope?" said Matt apologetically. "But I'm full of work, and haven't time to go home—my lodgings you know; and if you wouldn't mind. I'm as hungry as a hunter—money-hunter, you know; and there's as nice a bit of roast veal and bacon, piping hot, in the Lane as ever I did see, and that's saying a good deal. Talk about the smell of it! there, you didn't look in at the shop-door or you'd never give a fellow such a cold-shouldery look, ma'am. Whatever you do, ma'am, lend me a couple of plates; I won't intrude long."

Mrs Septimus hesitated and glanced at her husband, who was making a feint of eating.

"There," cried old Matt, making a grimace, and glancing at Lucy, "I knew it would come to this; they're growing proud, and I may go. They might have put it off another day, and not showed it just when I feel so well and jolly, and could have enjoyed a bit of dinner, which ain't often with me."

Septimus Hardon saw his wife's appealing glance, and peered about him in every direction, as if to avoid giving an answer; but on one side there was Tom, sticky and happy with the old man's bounty; before him was his invalid wife, with her wretched face; again, there was Lucy working, and relieving hunger by occasional mouthfuls of the bread-and-cheese at her side; while on turning his eyes in another direction, there stood Matt, just as he had stood on the day when he borrowed a shilling on their first encounter.

What was he to do? He had as much pride, or false pride, as most men, and he would gladly have been independent of old Matt's assistance; but there seemed no help for it, and once more in his life, humbled and mortified, he nodded to Mrs Septimus; and the next moment old Matt stood irresolutely by the table clattering a couple of plates together, to the great endangering of their safety, as he seemed to be turning them into a pair of earthenware cymbals.

"There, sir; don't, now," said Matt earnestly; "don't let's have any more pretence or nonsense about it; don't be put out because I'm doing this, sir. 'Tain't that I don't respect you; I didn't get on the stilts, sir, when you helped me. I asked you for it, which is a thing I know you couldn't do; but when it's offered you free and humble-like, don't take on, sir, and fancy I respect you any the less. I sha'n't forget my place, sir, 'pon my soul I sha'n't, begging your pardon, ma'am, and Miss Lucy's; but you see I'm in earnest, and it worries me to see Mr Hardon here put out,

because—because—Well, you know," said Matt, with a twinkle in his eye, "because an old battered type of humanity like me wants to sit down and have a bit of dinner here, and it's all getting spoilt; best cut's gone, you know, I'm sure. I know I *am* shabby."

Septimus waved his hand deprecatingly.

"There, sir; there," continued Matt; "don't be down; don't let the world see as there's no more fight in you. See what a son and daughter you've got. Why, God bless 'em, they're enough to make a man of a chap if he's ever so bad. Never say die, sir. I'm often in the downs, I am, you know; but then I say to the world, 'Come on, and let's have it out at once and done with it.' Let's take it like a dose of physic, and then have the sugar that's to come and take the taste out of one's mouth afterwards. Sure to be a bit of sugar to come some time, you know, sir; some gets more than others, but then there's always a share for you if you won't be soft enough to get your mouth out of taste and fancy it's bitter when it comes, and so not enjoy it. Lots do, you know, sir; while lots more, sir, think so much of their sugar of life, sir, that they spoil it, sir,—foul it, and damp it, and turn it into a muddy, sticky, dirty treacle, sir; and then, sir, loving nothing but pleasure,—or sugar, as we call it,—how they buzz about it like so many flies, till they are surfeited and get their legs and wings fixed, and die miserably, sir. Sugar's no good, sir, unless you have a taste of bitter before it. You don't want to be having all pleasure, you know; it wouldn't do. Bound the wheel of fortune, you know, sir; now down, now up, just as times go."

All these meant-to-be-philosophical remarks old Matt accompanied by a cymbalic tune upon the two plates, while Septimus sat moody and silent.

"Now, you see, sir," said Matt gently, "I know what you feel,—you don't like having such a battered old hulk about your place, and feel a bit offended at me for imposing upon your good-nature."

Septimus made a gesture of dissent.

"Well then, sir, we won't play with the matter. You don't like my having a bit of dinner here, and all that sort of thing; but don't you make no mistake, sir, I ain't kicked about in a selfish world all these years without ketching the complaint. I was never vaccinated against selfishness, sir, so I've took it badly, I can tell you. You may look out, sir, for I've a long score chalked up against you, and you'll have it some day."

And then old Matt stuck his hat on very fiercely and shuffled out of the room, muttering and chuckling as he went down, "Ho, ho, ho!—creditor! New position for me as have been in debt all my life!"

The old man soon returned after his fashion, bringing in a large portion of the veal and bacon from the cook-shop in the Lane; for the best cuts were not all gone. Then followed the old farce of what he called his chronometric complaint, from its always coming on just at mealtimes; and helping himself to a slice of bread, in spite of all appeals, the old man took a sticky kiss from Tom and shuffled out of the room.

It was a sight worth seeing—the satisfaction of that grim old man, as he went chuckling down the creaking stairs, and out into the court. His was not the shape a painter would have chosen for the embodiment of gratitude; but there it was—even the battered, ill-used carcass of that old printer—a body misused by the hard world till he had grown careless of it himself, and misused it in his turn. Alone in the world, what had he to care for beyond a little present enjoyment? For as to the future, it is to be feared that Mr Sterne would have pronounced him as being beneath a dense black cloud. Twice was the old man stopped by lamp-posts, but he recollected himself and continued his route to where the open door of the cook-shop sent out a thick, kitcheny vapour, pleasant or the reverse, according to whose organs it assailed—to the well-fed perhaps disgusting, but to the poor and hungry an odour as of paradise. There upon the shining pewter dishes, that in the early morn had been such a dry metallic desert, were now displayed, in gravy-oozing majesty, what Matt looked upon as all the delicacies of the season. There were round of beef and brisket, boiled; roast leg, shoulder, and loin of mutton; roast beef, and the remains of the veal; while as to gravy—whence comes the gravy that meanders in streams over cook-shop joints, flooding the dishes, and making glad the hearts of the hungry?—there was gravy to an extent never known in private life, for the joints soaked in the tissue-renovating fluid.

Ah! that fat cook-shop-keeper, as he wielded his long-bladed, keen carver, and equitably and glibly sliced it through fat and lean, well-done, under-done, and brown, with a facility that made one think he had been apprenticed to a ham in the palmy days of Vauxhall—dealing with the porcine joint with similar intentions to those of the gold-beater with his morsel of the yellow ore. Ah! that fat, rosy-faced man in the white cap and jacket had much to answer for in the way of tempting hungry sinners. Fat! he might well be fat, for was he not existing upon the very essences of the meats always beneath his nostrils, which must have inhaled sustaining wealth at every breath he drew, to the saving of both teeth and digestion?

But he did not tempt old Matt, who entered and asked for a "small German," for which he paid twopence, asking no questions regarding its composition, while it was delivered to him after the fashion that buns are presented to our old ursine friends at the "Zoo"—stuck at the end of a fork.

Old Matt turned his back stolidly upon the luxuries of the cook-shop, strolled into the big street, and began to nibble his small German, in company with the dusty, fluey slice of bread he brought out of his pocket. There was a parish pump there, with its swinging copper handle; and regardless of medical reports, and chemical analyses, and cholera germs contained in the clear, sparkling fluid, old Matt had a hearty draught, and smacked his lips after as if he enjoyed it—and doubtless he did. There was the prospect of a murky old inn down a gateway, and the busy throng of people passing him; but Matt noticed nothing, for his thoughts were upon matters in Bennett's-rents—though, for all that, he was enjoying his simple meal, which was eaten without a thought of the prime veal and bacon, or his sad complaint, which had now fled till next dinner-time, as, by way of amusement, he turned down Castle-street to witness the performance of a gentleman in tights and spangles—a gentleman evidently high in his profession, but

blessed with a nose of the Whitechapel mould, black, greasy, tucked-under hair, confined by a blue ribbon, slightly oiled; a pimply face, and a body apparently furnished with gristle in the place of bones.

As Matt came up, the gentleman was balancing a peacock's feather upon the tip of his nose, to the accompaniment of a popular air performed by a partner upon drum and pan-pipes—the arrangement of the air apparently necessitating more muscular action with the arms than from the lungs; for though now and then a shrill and piercing note was heard from the pipes, it was not often, while the rumble of the beaten drum was incessant. The next performance was the balancing and twirling of a barrel on the acrobat's feet, he all that time lying down upon a cushion in a very uncomfortable, determination-of-the-blood-to-the-head position, what time the band, tucking his pipes inside his coat and setting his drum on end, came round the attentive circle, shaking the performer's greasy, private-life cap in the observers' faces, after the fashion of zealous deacons in churches of high proclivities—save that in this case the cap was of very common cloth, while in the other the little bags would probably be of red velvet, lined with white satin.

The band stopped opposite old Matt, who had loudly applauded the performance, for he had felt so at peace with the world at large, that he was in the humour to be pleased with any and everything. So the old man thrust a willing hand into his pocket, and the band smiled expectant; but the next moment Matt's face turned very serious, and with the loud taunt of the band ringing in his ears, he shuffled down Castle-street and into Cursitor-street, in the direction of the office where he had a job; far more piercing than the shrillest note of the pipes, and more impressive than the heaviest bang of the drum, came the words of the musician:—

"Well, if I hadn't ha' had a brown I'd ha' said so, and not made believe."

For the old printer's pocket did not contain a coin of any description, the last two having been expended for his simple meal; so hurrying along the old fellow looked very serious for quite fifty yards; then he began to whistle; then he stopped at a lamp-post, but wrenched himself away again directly and hurried down Fetter-lane, for the clocks were striking two, and his dinner-hour was over. But before turning into Typeland Matt entered into one of those well-known places of business with swinging doors, and shuffling up to the pewter-covered counter, asked for a pint of porter on trust.

And went away wiping his mouth upon the back of his hand, of course? Nothing of the kind; for the landlord smiled pleasantly, shook his head, and declared that whenever he gave trust he lost a customer. So old Matt slinked away, and soon came to another swing-door, when, passing through, a far different odour saluted his nostrils—an odour commingled of steam, oil, treacle, glue, turpentine, stale breath, fresh paint, wet paper, and gas; where there was a continual noise of hissing, and rumbling of wheels, rattling of straps and bands, with a constant vibration of the great building, which heavily brooded over the reeking mass, as if hatching earthquakes. Up a staircase, whose walls shone with the marks of inky and oily hands, past dirty-faced boys in paper-caps and aprons, whose shirt-sleeves were rolled high above their elbows; past a window, a glance through which showed mighty engine and machine rushing off their work in never-tiring mode, wheels spinning, cylinders slowly revolving, with white sheets of paper running in, printed sheets running out, to be piled in stacks; here the portion of a magazine whose pages should rivet the attention of some fair reader; there the newspaper, to be spread in thousands through the length and breadth of the land; while again, close at hand, lumbered the heavy press to turn off by hand copies of the broad-margined, large-typed, thick-papered Chancery bill, whose legible words should nearly drive some weary disputant mad, although but a short time before its well-paid pages and open work had made glad the heart of a round-shouldered compositor—sower of the dragons' teeth of knowledge. Up still went old Matt Space—past boys bearing proof-sheets—boys who read copy in a sing-song, nasal, pointless twang to keen-eyed readers, ready to give angry stabs at ill-spelt words, to stick their pens through eyeless i's, and condemn the mutilated letters to the melting-pot; past pressmen toiling—down, Benjamin-Franklin-like, with heavy forms of type; up—up, till he reached the top story, where, beneath rows of skylights, men formed themselves into the hotbeds that generated disease, as they toiled on day after day at the cases of type, before a pair of which old Matt posted himself, took a pinch of snuff, and then prepared for work.

In a few more minutes he was hard at his task, picking up letter by letter the component parts of the words spoken the day before at a public meeting, where an orator discoursed at length upon the financial greatness of this our country; after which he dived into statistics, so that the old compositor was soon realising the facts, and revelling in sums of money eight figures in length, and that, too, without a single penny in his pocket.

Click, click; click, click; letter after letter passing into the metal composing-sticks; thirty men busily engaged, and not a word spoken beyond the occasional muttering whisper of the worker, who sought to impress his MS more fully upon his mind by reading it aloud; while old Matt, poring over his copy by the aid of a pair of horn spectacles, now and then paused for a stimulator from the snuff loose by accident in his coat-pocket hanging from a nail in the wall—snuff that had to be hunted into corners and brought forth in pinches, the greater proportion of which consisted of flue and crumbs.

"Pound, nine, comma; eight, four, three, comma; six, four, two," muttered the old man, arranging the figures. "Ah, bless my soul! now, what could I do with nine—nearly ten millions of money? And that sum's nothing at all. Poverty? Pooh! all humbug! There isn't such a thing; it's all a mistake. Somebody's got more than his share, and made things crooked."

Old Matt finished his task, and, on applying to the overseer for a fresh supply, he was set to correct a slip proof, when, taking the long column of type from which it had been printed, the old man was soon busy at work once more, correcting a misspelt word in this paragraph, removing a broken letter in that, and all the while muttering to himself, to the great amusement of the other men. But all at once he stopped short and stared at his work, looked eagerly round the office, as if to assure himself that all was real, and then devoured the words before him. Then he went on with his work in a flurried, nervous way, dropping words, misplacing letters, scattering type upon the floor, and making his fellow-workmen look up with wonder—attentions that made the old man more nervous and fidgety; until, as his nervousness increased, so did his task become more difficult of completion, the perspiration standing upon his

forehead, and the expression of his face growing pitiful in the extreme.

But it was complete at last, though, through anxiety, old Matt had been twice as long as he would have been in an ordinary way; and then secretly tearing off a portion of the proof, he slipped it into his pocket, made an excuse to the overseer that he was unwell, and hurried into the street, where he jostled first one, and now another; now walking in the road, now upon the pavement, but all the while with one hand clasping tightly a scrap of paper he held in his pocket. As to what was going on around him he seemed so utterly oblivious that twice over he was nearly knocked down by passing vehicles. Again and again he would have stopped, but for the busy throng constantly hurrying along the street; and for the time being the old man strongly resembled a cork tossed about in some busy eddying stream; but he had evidently some object in view, for he kept pressing on in one particular direction, and his lips were incessantly in motion, forming words that savoured continually of that much-sought-for object—money.

Volume One—Chapter Fifteen.

Another Visitor from Town.

How ever great the shock of his night's adventure may have been to his system, Dr Hardon, beyond missing his attentions to a few patients, displayed very little of it to the world at large comprised in Somesham and its neighbourhood. There were certainly two or three discolorations about his face, caused by the playful taps of the burglar's life-preserver, but they very soon disappeared. The doctor's greatest grievance was the loss of his numerous articles of jewellery, though even upon that subject he talked lightly and affably to his patients, evidently having a soul above the loss of such trifles, and people thought more of him than ever. The police had certainly been upon what waiter Charles of the County Arms called the "tract" of the burglars, but only discovered that they had entered the house by opening a window and stepping in; that they had taken all the plate; that three heavy-featured men came from London by the down-mail on the night of the robbery, arriving at Somesham at half-past ten; and the porter thought he gave tickets to three stoutish men who went by the up-mail at 2:30; when the police-sergeant came to the conclusion that it was a prearranged affair, and people talked about it for a few days, till they had something else to take their attention.

Doctor Hardon, portly and comfortable-looking, sat reading the evening paper just delivered from the stationer. No one to have seen him could have imagined that care had ever sat for a moment upon his ample forehead; and though, taking into consideration the incidents of the past few weeks, it might have been expected that he would look anxious and worn, on the contrary, he seemed greatly at ease within himself, and turned and rustled his newspaper importantly, refreshing himself from time to time with a sip of port from the glass at his elbow.

"I declare!" he exclaimed, suddenly throwing down the paper; "it's abominable—it's disgusting."

"What is?" said Mrs Hardon, roused from the thoughtful mood into which she seemed to have fallen.

"Why, to have the privacy of one's life dragged into publicity in this way. The matter ought to have been hushed-up."

"But what do you mean?" said Mrs Hardon. "Is it anything about—"

"Yes, of course it is!" cried the doctor savagely. "They've got it in the London papers, condensed from the *County Press*—a filthy penny rag. Just look here—made into a sensation paragraph.

"'Eaten of Rats.—A shocking discovery was made at Somesham on Monday last. A rather eccentric gentleman, named Hardon, residing entirely alone at a short distance from the town, was found in bed with his lower extremities horribly mutilated by the rats which infest the place. The medical evidence at the inquest showed that death had probably taken place some eight-and-forty hours before the body was discovered; while the bottle of laudanum and teaspoon at the bedside pointed to an end which the post-mortem examination proved to have been the case; an overdose of the subtle extract having evidently been the cause of death. The deceased was without servants; for, in consequence of a burglary committed at the house shortly before this discovery, his housekeeper had left him, and her place remained unsupplied. As may be supposed, this tragic affair, following so closely upon the burglary, has caused intense excitement throughout the neighbourhood.'

"Isn't it disgusting?" exclaimed the doctor, after a few moments' pause; while during the reading he had not displayed the slightest emotion, but read the paragraph from beginning to end without faltering. Receiving no answer, he looked up to see Mrs Hardon sitting staring at him with a horrified aspect, while her fingers were stopping her ears.

"O, Tom!" she gasped at last, "haven't we had enough of that horrid affair lately without bringing it up again? I shall be glad when it's all over, and we begin to look upon it as a thing of the past. I declare I shall never like to use any of the money; I shall fancy a curse hangs to it. But do you think Septimus is dead?"

"Of course I do," said the doctor; "and if he is not, what does it matter?"

"Nothing at all, I suppose," replied Mrs Hardon; "but really, Tom, it came upon me like a thunder-clap. Was that what poor Octavius sent for you about—to tell you that? I often thought there must be some reason for his long-continued obstinacy. What did he say to you about it?"

"Don't ask questions," said the doctor abruptly. "It is enough for you to know that it is so, and that the money comes at a time when we want it badly."

"Then we have no business to have been wanting it badly!" exclaimed Mrs Hardon; "and I shall make it my business

to go to Keening's one of these days, and ask them the state of your affairs."

"Yes, you had better!" snarled the doctor, displaying a bright speck of the gold setting of his teeth.

"But such a saint as poor Lavinia always seemed!" said Mrs Hardon. "I should never have thought it of her; and if it was not that the poor thing is dead and gone, I should have called it quite disgraceful. But there, we can't afford to talk about such matters, I'm sure;" and she began to rock herself to and fro in her chair and to sob: "O, Tom! you drove that poor girl away,—you did. She would never have left if—"

"Hold your tongue!" cried the doctor fiercely.

"But you did, Tom; and I shall never forget her look that day I met her in the street—it went like a knife to my heart."

Mrs Hardon sat crying silently for some time, while the doctor savagely rustled his paper, but all the while reading not a word, for his lips moved, and he talked fiercely to himself.

"There!" cried Mrs Hardon at last, "I won't take on, for it seems of no use, and whether she or I live or die, don't seem to matter to you, Tom. And now I want to know about Octavius's property. How much is it? and are you certain that there was no will?"

"I've told you there was none ten times over," said the doctor; "and now wait till the funeral's over, for I won't be bothered."

"But, Tom," said Mrs Hardon, "I want to know what is the extent—what it is really worth, and how much you owe."

"Never mind," said the doctor.

"But I have a right to know," cried Mrs Hardon.

"There! I don't know myself," said the doctor.

"Then perhaps your solicitors do," said Mrs Hardon; "and I shall, as I have often threatened, ask them."

"And much good it will do you," muttered the doctor; but, not liking to run the risk of any exposure of his present differences with his wife, he compromised. "Well," he said, "what is it that you wish to know?"

"Why, I told you," said Mrs Hardon; "what Octavius's property is worth, and whether you are quite sure that Septimus —"

"You are wanted, sir, if you please," said the maid, appearing at the door.

"Who is it?" said the doctor testily, for this was an hour when he objected to being disturbed.

"Wouldn't give any name, sir," replied the girl.

"Send him round to the surgery," said the doctor.

"Please, sir, he's in the front passage, and he said he didn't want the sudgery."

"What sort of a man is it?" said the doctor.

"Look's like a poor man, sir," said the girl.

"How many times have you been told not to leave strangers in the passage!" exclaimed Mrs Hardon angrily. "There'll be another coat gone directly; go and stay with him till your master comes."

The maid disappeared, giving the door so loud a shut that it sounded almost like a bang, when the doctor began to complain of fatigue, and being worn out, and Mrs Hardon, who wished to propitiate, offered to go.

"Do, please, my love," murmured the doctor, in the most gentle of tones—the professional.

Mrs Hardon slightly drew down the corners of her mouth in a contemptuous grimace as she left the room, but returned in a few minutes looking pale and scared; and then she carefully closed the door after her.

"It's quite taken my breath away!" exclaimed Mrs Hardon. "He frightened me: what made you tell me that Septimus was dead?"

"Well, isn't he?" said the doctor, shuffling hastily round in his chair.

"Dead?" exclaimed Mrs Hardon. "If he is, it's his ghost that has come down: that's all."

"Come down?" cried the doctor, turning of a dirty pallid hue.

"And he's walked all the way from London. And you never saw such a poor, deplorable-looking object in your life. He looks twenty years older, that he does."

"What does he want?" cried the doctor, panting in spite of his efforts to keep down his emotion.

"Says he's come down to see his father, and to attend to his affairs."

“Well, tell him to go to Keening’s. I won’t see him—I won’t see him. My nerves won’t bear it; they have not recovered from the last shock yet, let alone that horrible night of the robbery.”

“But you’d better see him,” said Mrs Hardon, whose woman’s heart was touched by her visitor’s aspect.

“No, no; I can’t—I can’t bear it, and it’s better that I should not;” and as he spoke there was no dissimulation in the doctor’s words or mien: he was undoubtedly very much moved.

“But you must see him; and besides, it will seem so strange if it’s known in the town that you sent him away like that.”

“Well—er—well—perhaps I had better,” said the doctor; “where is he? I’ll go to him, or—no, let him come in here; but put away the wine first.”

Mrs Hardon took no notice of the last remark, but went out, and returned directly with Septimus Hardon, footsore, dusty, and travel-stained.

“Good-evening, Mr Septimus,” said the doctor, in the tone of voice he had heard so often from his patients, and as he spoke he slightly bent forward, but lay back again directly in his chair, without offering his visitor a seat. “Good-evening, Mr Septimus. I suppose we must say Hardon?”

“If you please, uncle,” said Septimus, somewhat startled at his strange reception—a reception more chilling even than in his diffidence he had anticipated.

“Sit down, Septimus, you look tired,” said Mrs Hardon, pouring out a glass of wine for the visitor, who drank it with avidity, for he was faint and agitated, feeling somewhat like the Prodigal, though this was no prodigal’s welcome.

“How do you find business, Mr Septimus?” said the doctor, perspiring freely, but now speaking calmly and slowly.

“Bad—bad,” said Septimus. “I have lost all, and been put to great shifts, while my poor wife is a confirmed invalid.”

“Dear me, dear me!” said the doctor blandly, “how sad! I might perhaps be able to give her advice. I suppose she could not call at my surgery any morning before ten?”

“She always was delicate,” put in Mrs Hardon hastily, for she was annoyed at her husband’s behaviour; while something kept, as it were, whispering to her, “He is from London, and may know something of my poor girl.”

There was a dead silence then for some few minutes, which the doctor broke.

“I—er—er—I—er—I think you have hardly come on a visit of ceremony,” he said; “you wished to see me?” and after coughing away something which seemed to form in his throat, he spoke in his most unguental tones—in the voice he kept for married ladies upon particular occasions.

“I came down,” said Septimus, in a broken voice, “upon seeing my poor father’s death. It was shown to me—by a friend—newspaper—torn scrap—I have walked down—weak—and ill.”

Mrs Hardon uttered an exclamation, for Septimus had risen as he spoke, and stood working his hands together, as he gazed appealingly at his uncle; and then, as he trailed off in his speech, he reeled and clutched at the table, sweeping off a wine-glass in his effort to save himself from falling.

“Better now,” said Septimus faintly, as he sank into the chair behind him. “I am sorry, but I feel overcome, and weak, and giddy. I have had much sorrow and trouble lately, and my father’s death was so sudden.”

The doctor winced a little, but recovered himself in a moment, for he was used to witnessing trouble, and could bear it.

“Yes—yes—a sad thing,—very sad—mournful I may say,” he observed. “But my poor brother always was so distant and peculiar in his dealings with his relations. Of course you know that the funeral takes place to-morrow?”

“No,” replied Septimus; “I know nothing beyond what I have told you, and I come to my father’s brother for information.”

“Yes, just so,” said the doctor; “but I can not refrain from blaming my poor brother; doubtless you had given him great cause of offence, but he ought to have made some provision for you.”

“I did write to him again and again,” said Septimus, “but I suppose he felt too angry, and—let it rest now; I have struggled through all my trouble without his help, and I do not complain.”

“Just so,” said the doctor; “but it would have been more just if he had made some provision.”

“You have seen his will, I suppose?” said Septimus.

“O no!” said the doctor, “there is no will.”

“Then he has left no legacies?” said Septimus.

“Not one,” replied the doctor; “but I am not surprised—he never was a business man.”

“I am sorry too,” said Septimus softly, “for the sake of my cousins and yourselves;” and Septimus started as he saw

the wince Mrs Hardon gave at the mention of the word “cousins.”

“Yes,” said the doctor blandly; “it would have been more just towards you. For even if he had only left you a hundred or two they would have been acceptable, no doubt.”

“I don’t understand you,” said Septimus.

“I was alluding to your being left so unprovided for,” said the doctor. “It seems so sad.”

“But you told me he left no will,” said Septimus wonderingly; “and I am his only child.”

The doctor smiled compassionately upon his nephew, with the air of a man removing a leg or an arm.

“There, for goodness’ sake don’t go on torturing the poor fellow in that way!” cried downright Mrs Hardon. “Why don’t you speak out? You see, Septimus—”

“I beg that you will be silent, Mrs Hardon,” exclaimed the doctor.

“I shall be nothing of the kind,” cried Mrs Hardon. “The poor man has enough to suffer as it is, without being grilled over a slow fire.”

Septimus gazed from uncle to aunt in a strange bewildered way, prepared for some new shock, but unable to comprehend what blow Fate meant to deal him now.

“You see, Septimus,” continued Mrs Hardon, without heeding her husband’s uplifted hands,—“you see the property comes to my husband as next of kin.”

“Nonsense!” exclaimed Septimus, as if relieved that his aunt’s communication was of no more weight. “I am the only child, and besides, *I* have a son.”

“Now just see what a painful scene you have brought about,” whined the doctor, reproachfully eyeing his wife.

“Indeed,” interrupted Septimus, “I am sorry that the matter should be discussed, for it appears unseemly at such a time: before my poor father’s remains are beneath the earth.”

“If you would only have been silent,” continued the doctor, not heeding the interruption.—“Now pray, my good sir,” he said, turning to Septimus, “go to Messrs Keening and Keening, my solicitors, and—”

“Tell me what it all means, aunt, or I shall go mad!” cried Septimus, catching Mrs Hardon’s hand in both of his, and gazing imploringly in her face.

“Well, the plain truth of the matter is this,” said Mrs Hardon—

“Pray be silent, Mrs Hardon,” said the doctor. “My solicitors—”

“You were not born in wedlock,” said Mrs Hardon.

“Who dares say that is true?” shouted Septimus, with eyes flashing; “who dares speak in that way of my poor mother?” he exclaimed. “It’s a lie—a base lie!” and in spite of Septimus Hardon’s plainness, his years, the dust and shabby clothing, there was in him a nobleness of aspect that made the doctor look mean by comparison, as he stood there furiously eyeing both in turn, and thinking then no more of his father’s money than if it had been so much dirt beneath his feet. That such an aspersion should be cast upon the fame of the mother whose memory he tenderly loved seemed to him monstrous; and it was well for Doctor Hardon that he did not think it necessary to answer the sternly-put question; for most assuredly, had he replied, Septimus would have taken him by the throat.

“I’m sure *I* don’t know,” said Mrs Hardon. “All I know is, that it’s very sad, and I’m very, very sorry for you.”

But Doctor Hardon, taken aback at first by the fierce mien of Septimus, had now somewhat recovered his confidence, while the anger of the nephew was as short-lived, so utterly bewildering was the news he now heard; the insult to his mother’s memory, the snatching away of the competence that seemed in his hands, the cool self-possession of his uncle,—all completely staggered him, and he knew not what to say or do.

“Sir,” said the doctor, rising and placing a hand within his waistcoat as he spoke with great dignity,—“sir, I must beg that this scene, this unseemly brawling, may not be continued in my house. You can find my solicitors, who will give you all the information you may require. The funeral takes place to-morrow, and, under the circumstances, I have taken upon myself the duty of seeing that proper respect is paid to the departed. You are folly aware that your presence would not have been even tolerated for an instant in my brother’s house during his lifetime, and you presume on my forbearance by treating me as you do. Under the circumstances, I decline to hold any further communication with you. Had you come in humbleness and treated me with respect, I will not say what I might not have been tempted to do for you out of pity. As to your assumption of ignorance of your illegitimacy, it is simply absurd, for it is a matter of which you must have been fully aware. You know well, that when my brother declined to hold any further communication with you, it was not merely on account of your opposition to his wishes, but because it was painful to his feelings to be constantly reminded in daily life of the sins of his youth. I think too, now, that if you have any right feeling left, you will have the decency to end this most unseemly meeting by leaving at once, for it is to me, after my late sufferings, most painful. My poor brother!”

Doctor Hardon paused to bury his face in his handkerchief, and congratulate himself upon the very effective way in which he had acted his part. He then made a show of wiping away a tear, and Mrs Hardon did likewise; but in the one

case the tear was genuine, in the other counterfeit coin.

As for Septimus Hardon he had never made but one enemy in his life—himself; but had he owned a score, and they had stood around him at that minute, not a man of them could have struck a blow at the abject, crushed, spiritless, broken man, as, without word, almost without thought, he mechanically glanced round the room, turned, and then slowly walked out, closely followed by Mrs Hardon, who passed something into his hand as she closed the door upon his retreating form.

Volume One—Chapter Sixteen.

Seeking Hospitality.

“Why, if it ain’t you, Master Sep, as I thought we were never going to see no more!” cried Mrs Lower to the desolate-looking man outside her snug bar. “But, my; you do look bad, and it’s close upon ten years since I’ve set eyes upon you. There, do come in and sit down. Yes; that’s poor Lower’s chair; he’s been gone years now, Master Sep, and I’m left a lone widow, my dear; but your name was one of the last words he spoke—your name and poor Miss Agnes’s. Do you ever see her in the big city, Master Sep?”

Septimus shook his head.

“Has she left here?” he said.

“Didn’t you know?” said Mrs Lower. “Ah, yes, long enough ago!” and she stooped her head and whispered in her visitor’s ear. “But there, we needn’t talk about troubles now. How haggard and worn you do look! And how’s Mrs Septimus? I always think of her as Mrs Grey. But what’s it to be now? Isn’t it awful about poor master, whom I’d never have left if I’d known what was to happen? No, Master Sep, not to marry a dozen Lowers, and be the mistress of fifty County Arms; though, rest him! poor Lower was a good, kind husband, for all we were elderly folk to wed, and had forgotten how to make love. Now, say a hot cup of tea, Master Sep, or a hot steak with a little ketchup. If you’d been a bit sooner, there was a lovely sweetbread in the house; but there, it’s no use to talk of that; so say the steak and tea. I *am* glad to see you, my dear boy!”

Septimus signified his desire for the tea, and Charles was summoned, and dismissed with his orders, but not without making a tolerable investigation of the guest whom his mistress delighted to honour—an investigation apparently not very satisfactory, from the imperious way in which he gave his orders in the kitchen.

“Now, just a toothful of my orange cordial, Master Sep. Now, don’t say no, because you must. I make it myself, and the gentlemen take it on hunting-days. Now, tip it up like a good boy; and here’s a biscuit. See now; don’t it put you in mind of old times, when you were a naughty child, and wouldn’t take your physic? How time does go, to be sure; why, it’s only like yesterday. But there, I won’t bother you. Have a pair of slippers and a comfortable wash. Did you bring any luggage?”

Ten minutes passed, and then Septimus was again seated in the snug bar, with the kettle singing its song of welcome upon the hob; a savoury steak was before him; and the comely old dame, in her rustling black silk, smilingly pouring out the strong tea she had been brewing, taking a cup too herself, “just for sociability sake,” as she told her visitor.

“And so poor master’s gone, and you’re coming down to the old place again?” said Mrs Lower.

Septimus groaned.

“Ah, Master Sep, I can respect your feelings; but though poor master’s dead and gone, he had his failings, while he never did his duty either by you or your poor mother.”

Septimus Hardon nearly dropped his cup as he gazed blankly in his old nurse’s face.

“What—what do you mean?” he exclaimed.

“Why, he was always hard, and—But there, poor man, he’s dead and gone, and we all have our failings, and plenty of them. But come, my dear boy, pray do eat something.”

Septimus tried to eat a few morsels, but his appetite was gone, and he soon laid down his knife and fork.

“Of course you’ll come down and live at the old place, Master Sep?” said Mrs Lower.

Septimus shook his head sadly.

“O, Master Sep!” cried the old lady, “don’t sell it; don’t part with it, it would be a sin.”

“But it will never be mine!” cried Septimus passionately. “O, nurse, nurse! this is a hard and a bitter world. I came down here almost in rags, tramping down like a beggar, and now, in cold and brutal terms, my uncle tells me that I am a bastard—that I have no right to enter my own father’s house; while, if this is true, I am a beggar still.”

Mrs Lower looked astounded. “What,” she exclaimed, “does he mean to say? But there, it’s nonsense. You can soon prove to him that you are not.”

“How?” exclaimed Septimus wearily. “Everything goes against me. I have been away ten years; my father sent me from his house; he refused all communications with me; and now I return on the day before the funeral.”

“O, but you must go to the lawyers!” cried Mrs Lower. “They can put you right.”

The couple sat talking for some time. It was refreshing to Septimus to find so sincere a welcome, for he had put Mrs Lower’s hospitality to the test on the strength of the sovereign his aunt had slipped into his hand. But the old dame could give him no information touching his birth, and but little respecting the place and time of his father’s marriage.

Weary at length of the subject, Septimus listened to the history of Somesham during the past few years, till, taking compassion upon her visitor’s jaded looks, Mrs Lower showed him his bedroom, where he tried to forget his present sorrows in sleep.

But sleep came not, and he tossed feverishly from side to side, bewildered by the thoughts that rushed through his brain: old faces, old scenes, and, foremost among them, home, and the stern countenance of his father, came crowding back. Now he would doze, but to start up in a few minutes under the impression that he was called. He dozed off again and again, but always to start up with the same fancy, and once he felt so sure that he leaped out of bed and opened his door; but the dark passage was empty, and all without quite still, so he returned to his bed, sat there for a few minutes thinking, and then went to the window, drew the blind, and stood gazing out upon the buildings of the familiar market-place.

The wind swept by, swinging the old sign to and fro, while all looked so calm and peaceful that he returned to his bed, and again tried for rest, falling into a fevered, half sleeping, half waking state, wherein the old faces still came crowding back, now nearer and nearer, now seeming to vanish away into nothingness, till at last that one old face seemed to exclude all others, and he saw his father as he saw him last, frowning harshly upon him; but soon the face assumed an aspect of pity, a look that told the suffering man that he was forgiven, before it changed into the frigid hardness of death.

Septimus Hardon started up in bed and gazed at the dim, shaded window, hardly realising where he was, as he tried to get rid of the dread image which oppressed him; but the night through, hour after hour, as soon as he closed his eyes, there was the same cold, stern face, as though impressed upon his brain, and wanting but the exclusion of the light for him to direct his gaze inward upon the fixed lineaments. So on, hour after hour, dozing and starting up, till the first streaks of the coming day appeared in the east, and as they grew stronger, peering in through the bedroom window, and holding forth to view the various objects in the room in a half-shadowed, ghostly manner that completely chased away the remaining desire for sleep that lingered with the unnerved man.

“Knocked three times, mem,” said Charles, “and can’t make him hear.”

“Never mind,” said Mrs Lower. “I’ll go myself presently.”

Mrs Lower had carefully prepared what she considered a snug breakfast, and put her regular body to no slight inconvenience by waiting past her usual hour for the morning meal; but she thought of her visitor’s fatigue and trouble.

“He can’t do better than sleep, poor boy,” she muttered, descending the stairs, after listening at the bedroom door for the third time; when she sat in the bar and waited for quite an hour, till suddenly a thought struck her, which set her trembling and wringing her hands, and her comely old face worked as she tried to keep back the tears.

“O, if he has—if he has! O, my poor boy!” she exclaimed, hurrying up the staircase, and stumbling at every second step in her agitation. “O, Charles, come with me!”

The door yielded to her touch, and almost falling against the bed, Mrs Lower found it empty, while the pillow was quite cold.

“O, look round—look round, Charles!” she gasped, as she sank upon her knees at the bedside, and buried her face in the clothes.

“No one here, mem,” said Charles, after a cursory glance round—not being able to comprehend his mistress’s emotion.

“O, look behind the door, Charles!” gasped Mrs Lower; “and at the bedposts.”

“Silk dress behind the fust, and wallance and hangings on the seconds,” said Charles methodically. “What next, mem?”

“Can’t you see him, Charles?” said Mrs Lower, slowly raising her head.

“No, mem,” said Charles; “he’s gone, safe. Did he pay, mem?”

“Nonsense!” cried Mrs Lower angrily; “he was a friend of mine;” and then the doubting dame carefully examined the room, looking in the most impossible of corners for the missing visitor, and only stopping as she was about to peer up the chimney by seeing a half-concealed grin upon the face of Charles.

“I’ll ask Boots if he’s seen him, mem,” said Charles, to get out of his difficulty.

But that gentleman had neither seen Septimus Hardon nor the articles of clothing after which he was named; so that it seemed evident that the visitor had taken his unbrushed boots and departed.

“So very strange!” muttered Mrs Lower to herself.

“The seediest pair of boots we’ve ever had in the place,” said Charles in confidence to the chambermaid; and then,

after due cogitation, he came to the conclusion that if many of the visitors to the County Arms were like the unknown of the past night, his situation would not be worth the energy he displayed for the comfort of all who sought there rest and refreshment.

Volume One—Chapter Seventeen.

“Nothing like Leather.”

The very morning upon which waiter Charles of the County Arms, Somesham, spoke so disparagingly of Septimus Hardon’s boots, the maker, or rather re-maker, of the said boots sat, as soon as it was broad daylight—not an extremely early hour in his home—industriously plying his craft, till, after divers muttered anathemas, a voice growled:

“Confound it, Ike, I wish that old lapstone was at the bottom of the Thames. Who’s to sleep?”

“Get up, then,” said the lapstone-smiter slowly and heavily.

“Get up!” growled the voice, “get up!”

“What, in the middle of the night! Ain’t six yet, is it?”

“Just struck,” said the lapstone-man, following the example of the clock, and hammering vigorously at a scrap of leather about to be used in the repair of an old boot before him; while from sundry smothered growls coming from the room behind the shop where the shoemaker was at work, it was evident that the idler had buried a portion, if not the whole of his face, beneath the blankets, and again offered sacrifice to the sleepy god.

It had always been a matter of dispute amongst the confraternity as to where Matthew Space slept. Some said that he reposed nightly amongst the casuals at Saint Martin’s Workhouse; but as, when he had work, he would often be at it by half-past eight in the morning, it was evident that he did not lodge there; for the most industrious would not be at liberty for another hour, on account of the work to be done in payment for the lodging. Others talked of the Adelphi, and the recesses of Waterloo Bridge. In short, there was always plenty of chaff flying concerning old Matt’s lodgings; but the cleverest never threshed out the grain of wheat they sought, for the old man was as close a tusk as was ever attacked by flail. His club was generally considered to be the mouldy, fungoid-looking house in Hemlock-court, where he could mostly be found of an evening, if the seeker had failed to see him sitting over his pint-pot in Bell-yard; and, according to circumstances, he dined at various places. If trade flourished, and the ill wind that blew misery to Chancery suitors wafted half-crowns to his pocket, he dined in state at the cook-shop, shut up in one of the little elbow-cramping boxes, where there were dirty table-cloths, and everything was steamy and sticky with the pervading vapour, whose odour was as that of the soup-copper after the “inmates” have had their pauper repast; sometimes in the street, as we have seen, when his dinners varied—kidney-pies, saveloys, peas-pudding served on paper, or perhaps only the warm tuber taken from a potato can; though, when funds were low, Matt generally leaned towards the kidney pieman, an old friend with a red nose and a white apron, augmented at night by very business-like white sleeves, when, extinguishing the coke-fire of his tin, he became a trotter himself for the time being, as he went from public-house to gin-palace disposing of his stock of succulent sheep’s-feet. There was a great deal of the epicure in Matt Space, and had he been a Roman emperor he might have been as lavish in the recorded worship of the gastric region. As it was, he had always looked upon money as of value only for the pleasure it afforded his palate, till better feelings had been roused within him. Well versed was Matt in the edibles best suited for families of large size but small income; he was deep in tripe, was old Matt Space, and he knew the shop in Clare-market and Newport-market best worthy of confidence. You never caught him buying sausages at random, nor yet purchasing his baked sheep’s-heads or fagots in Leather-lane. No; Matt knew better; and if he could not get the prime article, he would content himself with a penny-loaf and two ounces of single Glo’ster. No one could get such scraps from the butcher’s as Matt; and if any one of his acquaintance wanted a pound or two, it was almost worth their while to ask the old man to dinner, for the sake of getting him to undertake the commission. For did not the old fox always go into the Lane by Lincoln’s-inn, where such a trade was done in chops that the butcher must have bought his sheep nearly all loin, and that, too, of the primest, for the legal gentlemen of the district were rather particular. As to distance Matt never studied that when he was bent upon any delicacy, being ready to visit Saint Martin’s-lane for hot black-puddings, Leadenhall-market for cocks’-heads or giblets, Billingsgate for cockles or mussels; but all to oblige friends.

Now, although old Matt made great shifts over his dinners, he revelled in his tea; that is to say, his evening coffee—coffee-shop tea being a decoction, as the tea is carefully boiled to the extraction of all its strength, but to the destruction of all flavour, and Matt foolishly preferred the simple infusion of everyday life. So Matt enjoyed his evening coffee—a half-pint cup for a penny, and three large greasy slices of bread-and-butter for the same coin—the butter being always the best Dorset, slightly rank in the eating, and prepared by some peculiar Dutch process without the assistance of cows. Old Matt never missed his tea if his funds would at all hold out; for at this delectable coffee-house there were newspapers and, better still, magazines of so tempting a nature that they often made the old man late back to his duties. The real enjoyment that he felt over his book must have flavoured the repast, for he always seemed to relish these meals immensely. Generally speaking, men of his trade—haunters of his haunts—are rabid politicians; but not so Matt: missing a glance at the morning or evening paper never troubled him; but still there were times when the old printer took an interest in questions current; and if “the poor man” happened to be on the *tapis*, Matt digested the leading articles most carefully.

But no one knew where Matt slept, and many a job he lost in consequence; though this he set down to the score of his ill-luck. And yet he need not have been so nervous about anyone tracking him to his den; for Lower Series-place was once the resort of many of the choice spirits of a bygone age: lordly gallants strutted there in the showy costumes of their day; here, too, was the famous Kit-cat Club; but the glory had departed when Matt chose the court

for his resting-place: where the wits made their rendezvous, were misery and dirt, frouzy rotting tenements, vice and disease. Trade was in the place, but in its lowest and least attractive forms; for there might be bought “half-hundreds” of coals in little sacks; ginger-beer; great spongy-shelled oysters, opened by dirty women, ready to place a discoloured thumb upon the loosened bivalve, and to rinse it in the muddy tub from which it was fished; fruit, too, in its seasons; potatoes and greens always; mussels, farthing balls of cotton, brass thimbles, comic songs, and sweets. But the two most flourishing trades here were those of translating, and dealing in marine-stores—businesses carried on next door to one another by Isaac Gross and Mrs Slagg. And a busy shop was Mrs Slagg’s, a shop where, in place of the customary gibbeted black doll, hung a painted and lettered huge bladebone that might, from its size, have belonged to the celebrated vastotherium itself, only that it was composed of wood, carved in his leisure hours with a shoemaker’s knife, as a delicate attention to Mrs Slagg, by her neighbour, Isaac Gross. Gay was Mrs Slagg’s shop with gaudily-illustrated placards, touching the wealth, ease, and comfort to be obtained by carrying all the worn apparel, rags, bones, and old iron to Slagg’s; serving-maids were walking out in the gayest of dresses bought with kitchen-stuff; men were fitting on impossible tail-coats and solid-looking hats bought with old iron, brass, and pewter; while the demand for white and coloured rags, waste-paper, bones, and horsehair, appeared insatiable; and to obtain them, it seemed that Mrs Slagg was ready to ruin herself outright by giving unheard-of prices. A wonderfully heterogeneous collection was here of the odds and ends of civilisation: one pane of the window resembled the foul comb of some mammoth bee, filled up as it was with bottles presenting their ends to the spectator, who shuddered as he thought of the labels that once decked those vials, such as “The draught at bedtime,” “The mixture as before,” “A tablespoonful every two hours,” etc; while many a wild and fevered dream that shudder brought back, of nights followed by days of pain and misery, aching heads, watching, anxious faces, sleek doctors of the Hardon class, wondering thoughts of the future, and of past hours unappreciated, unvalued. Every medicine-bottle in Mrs Slagg’s shop was a very telescope, which, if applied to the eye, presented such a diorama of sickness and sorrow as caused sensations as of grits getting into the cogs of the wheels of life and staying their would-be even course. Mrs Slagg’s was an obtrusive shop, irrespective of the flaming placards that literally shouted at you, and the black board, painted in old-bony skeleton letters, with the legend “Keziah Slagg, Dealer in Marine-stores,” though the terrene ruled to the exclusion of the marine. In its way, it was in everybody’s way, and seemed to have taken the disease rampant in the region of Lowther Arcadia—“a breaking out”—in this case a hideous leprosy of loathsome objects, that would have at you, catching skirt or umbrella, or being run over after they had been kicked in the way by racing children. The shop was gorged, and its contents oozed out, ran over, and trickled down the steps into the cellar, which was also full and repulsive, sending foul fungoid growths up through the trap to the pavement, and also apparently dipping under where the traffic lay to force its way up on the other side, where the growth spread again along the wall, so that passengers had to run the gauntlet on their journey to and from Temple Bar. In fact, Mrs Slagg’s shop was a very refiner’s furnace for old refuse, which boiled and bubbled over into court and cellar, as we have seen; while in front of the shop of Mr Isaac Gross, extended trays of old iron, bundles of white and coloured rags, odorous bones, crippled tools, wormy screws, screws without worms, odds and ends—odds without ends, and ends that seemed at odds with the world, and tried to trip it up as it went by.

Watching over her treasures would sit Mrs Slagg, just inside her door, stout, happy, and dirty, in a bower of old garments, which waved in every passing breeze; and, saving when clients came to obtain the unheard-of prices for the rags and metal, and the bones and grease, upon which this ogress lived, Mrs Slagg’s time was divided between shouting, “You bring that ’ere back!” to the children, and playing “Bo-peep” with Mr Isaac Gross, who, also working just inside his shop, would lean out occasionally to look at Mrs Slagg; though it took upon an average about nine peeps before both peeped together, when Mrs Slagg would nod and smile at Mr Gross, and Mr Gross would nod and smile at Mrs Slagg; and then work would be resumed, while it was understood in the court that something was to come of it.

But, beyond what has been described, there was another fact which pointed towards something coming of the neighbours’ intimacy; for Mrs Slagg’s cellar being, as she termed it, “chock!” a portion of her stock-in-trade had worked its way into Mr Gross’s back-parlour, and there stood in the shape of a large heap of waste-paper—a heap that Mr Gross would look at occasionally, and then smile in a very slow, heavy manner, as if smiling was a difficult task, and took time, for fear it should be broken if hastily performed, and become a laugh.

And a nice spot was Lower Series-place! Like Bennett’s-rents, it seemed as if every house was a school, and it was always leaving-time; for if, for a short cut, you hazarded a walk through the court, you were attacked by hordes of little savages, who pegged at you with tops, ran hoops between your legs, yelled in your ears, knocked tipcats in your eyes, kicked your shins at hopscotch, drove shuttlecocks upon your hat, lassoed you with skipping-ropes, and forming rings around, apostrophised you in tuneful, metrical language.

No doubt old Matt was used to all this, and so enjoyed a second nature; for be it known that he lodged with Mr Isaac Gross, boot and shoemaker, in Lower Series-place, otherwise Rogue’s, otherwise Shire-lane.

Matt’s landlord was a big bachelor of six-and-thirty, with much more body than he seemed to have muscles to control, the effect being that he was slow—Mrs Slagg said, “And sure,” which is doubtful. Mr Gross had round high shoulders, and more hair than he knew what to do with, or he would have had it cut; but he did not, only oiled it, brushed it down straightly, parted it in the middle, and then stopped it from falling down over his eyes when at work, by confining it with a band of black ribbon crossing his forehead and tied behind—the effect altogether, when taken in conjunction with his fat, heavy, sparsely-bearded face, being decidedly pleasing—judging by Mrs Slagg’s standard. He was not a dirty man, but he never by any chance looked clean, on account of a peculiar tinge in his skin, due perhaps to his trade, the short pipe in his mouth from morn till night, and the salubrious air of the court. Mr Gross was a doctor in his way, buying boots and shoes in the last stage of consumption, and then, by a grafting, splicing, and budding process, with the sounder portions of many he produced a few wearable articles, which, blacked to the highest pitch of lustre, shone upon his board to tempt purchasers from amongst those who could not afford the new article. You might buy a pair of boots from Isaac whose component parts were the work, perhaps, of the cordwainers of many lands, which scraps he would build up again as if they were so many bricks, or perhaps mere bats, rough with mortar; and in this way Isaac Gross lived and flourished.

It was from first wearing his boots that old Matt came to lodge with Isaac Gross, sharing with him the back-parlour, turned for their accommodation into a double-bedded room without bedsteads; but of itself a pleasant grove, whose fruitful sides teemed with boots and shoes in every stage of decay or remanufacture, hung upon nails wherever a nail would hold, the window-frame and its cross-bars not being spared. As to the large and ever-increasing pile of waste-paper owned by Mrs Slagg, old Matt resisted the encroachment with some bitterness; but still it grew, and though the old man grumbled, he would not move, for he liked his abode for its freedom from all restraint, since he could go to bed when he liked, stay as long as he liked, and use his own discretion respecting the removal of boots or other articles of clothing. The place was dirty, but that he did not mind; odorous, but then it was the true sherry twang; but what suited Matt best was, that his landlord troubled him little about rent, leaving him to pay when so minded, and never hinting at arrears; while still another advantage was that, next to a lamp-post, old Matt found his landlord the most satisfactory listener he knew, one ready to be talked to upon any subject, and to fall into the talker's way of thinking.

On the morning when the words at the head of this chapter were spoken, in spite of the hammering, Matt continued to sleep on until nearly eight, when he rose, had his boots polished at half-price in the shade of Temple Bar, and then walked to the barber's, declaring a brushing to be the finest thing in the world for corns. Here he had an easy shave and a wash for a penny; breakfasted heartily and sumptuously to the surprise of *habitués* and waitress, by calling for a rasher of bacon, and having a crumpled, greasy, brown dog's ear brought him to devour with his bread-and-butter and coffee. For Matt was in high spirits: he was in full work upon a newspaper for a few days, and he had discovered the paragraph which, in spite of the drawback of its terrible contents, was a piece of news that should give Mr Septimus Hardon the income and position "of what I always said he was, sir,—a gentleman." So old Matt breakfasted, as he said, "like a prince," for fivepence, spent the change of his sixpence in a morning paper, and walked back to his lodging to read it at leisure, for his work would not begin till the afternoon.

Mr Isaac Gross had finished his economical bachelor breakfast, consisting of bread-and-butter and packet-cocoa, combining cheapness, succulence, and convenience. The breakfast-things were cleared away—not a long task—and Isaac was about to add a pile of old account-books to the waste-paper heap in the back-room.

"She bring them in?" said Matt.

Isaac, with his pipe in his mouth, nodded, and said in a gruff, slow growl, "Waste-paper."

"So it seems," said Matt, opening one or two of the books, and then closing them with an air of disgust, when his landlord took them up, added them to the heap, and before returning to his bench, had a peep out towards Mrs Slagg's; but evidently the look was wasted, for he sighed, and took up his stirrup-leather, while old Matt drew down his mouth and bestowed a grim, contemptuous smile upon him as he rustled his paper, and, sitting down on a low workman's bench, began to read.

"Ah!" said Matt, stopping in his reading to refresh himself with a pinch of snuff from a pill-box, "I thought so; they had an adjourned inquest about that case I told you of; but there's only a short para here."

"Umph!" ejaculated Isaac, taking a good pull at his wax-end, and then readjusting his boot in the stirrup, but directly after disarranging it, to take a peep at Mrs Slagg—this time with success; but he frowned at her—a telegram that she knew meant the lodger was at home, and that friendly communications must stop.

"They've brought it in—"

"Ain't seen my wax, have you?" said Isaac slowly.

"Accidental death," said Matt, not noticing the interruption; "and it's my opinion that—What?"

"I want my wax," said Isaac, hunting about.

"Well, get it," growled Matt, rather annoyed at being interrupted.

"Ain't seen it, have you?" said Isaac.

"No!" growled the old man, turning over his paper.

"Had it along with the dubbin just before breakfast," said Isaac.

"And then," continued Matt, "the coroner gave his order for the burial, and—"

But Isaac Gross, who, in his slow fashion, was as industrious as the bees, like them, could not get on without his wax, so he interrupted the speaker with, "I want my wax," as he routed amongst his tools for the missing necessary.

"You're waxing a great nuisance, Ike," said Matt, "and I wish you'd find your wax;" and then he readjusted his spectacles, and had another pinch of snuff. "Hullo!" he growled, starting up and going to the door to speak to a woman who stood there, and who eagerly, whispered a few words as she passed a note and a shilling into his hand. "Yes; I'll take the note, but I don't want that," he said, refusing the shilling, which fell upon the door-step. "Now, look here," he said aloud, and very gruffly—for the woman had already turned to go—"I don't like this business at all; but if I'm to do it, I don't want paying for it; and if you don't take back that money, I sha'n't take the letter."

"Hush, pray!" whispered the woman, glancing at Isaac's round, wide-open eyes. "Don't be angry with me, please—don't speak so loud."

The appealing voice somewhat softened the old man, but he kept on growling and muttering, as, after a few more words, the woman—the same who had visited the Jarkers—picked up the shilling and left him, watched all the while

most eagerly by Mrs Slagg, who did not seem to be easy in her mind respecting female visitors to her neighbour's place of business.

"It won't do, it won't do," muttered the old man, taking his seat after glancing at the note. "I don't like it.—Well," he said aloud, "have you found that wax?"

"It was in my pocket," said Isaac, slowly and seriously pointing to the discovered necessary covered with bread-crumbs, tobacco-dust, and flue.

"Now then, let's have a bit more news," said Matt, once more settling himself.

"Ain't there a murder nowheres?" said Isaac, whose work was now progressing.

"No, there ain't!" said Matt gruffly. "Nice taste you've got; but here's two fires—p'r'aps they'll do for you?"

"Ah!" said Isaac slowly, "let's have them;" but again, to Matt's annoyance, further progress was stayed by the entrance of a man to dispose of three pairs of old boots.

Old Matt crumpled up his paper and put it away in disgust, and as soon as the man had taken his departure he began to examine the boots.

"Ah!" he said, "nice trade yours—three pair of decent boots for three shillings; and then you'll touch them up and sell them for five shillings a pair. Tell you what—I'll give you a shilling and my old ones for this pair."

"Why, you can't wear 'em till they're mended," said Isaac.

"Can't I?" replied Mat with a grim smile; "I can wear these, old fellow, which are a deal worse;" and he placed one of his old ones on the bench.

This was unanswerable, so Isaac only smoked.

"Try which pair fits you best," he said at last, "and I'll do them up a little bit for another shilling."

"No book-cover soles," said Matt, pointing with his thumb over his shoulder at the heap in the back-room.

Isaac grinned after his slow fashion, and then growled, "Fust-class leather and good workmanship."

"For two shillings?" said Matt.

"And the old ones," said Isaac.

"Why, they're worth nothing to you," said Matt.

"And they ain't worth nothing to you," said Isaac.

"S'pose I'm going out to dinner and want a change?" said the old man with a grin.

"'Nother shilling, then," said Isaac determinedly.

"Why, they ain't worth sixpence!" exclaimed Matt indignantly.

"Not to you," said Isaac slowly.

"No, nor you, nor anybody, except the owner," said Matt.

"Which is it to be?" said Isaac in intervals, between drawing home stitches. "Two bob and the old uns, or three bob wi'out?"

"Done up?" said Matt.

"Done up," said Isaac.

"With new leather?" said Matt.

"With fust-class, well-seasoned leather," said Isaac, cutting off his wax-ends.

"Take 'em at two, then," said Matt, rising; "and I'll tell you what it is, Ike, I put up with your smoke and your courting; but if you don't make an end of choking me up with your confounded waste-paper, I'll move, Ike—I'll move."

Isaac Gross smiled, faster this time, for he took his pipe out of his mouth to allow the smile to break into a grin; he then had a peep at Mrs Slagg, who was on the watch, having seen Matt outside; and then, as the old man made his way through the impedimenta of Lower Series-place, turning the note he had received over and over in his hand, and muttering as he went, Isaac's hammer went on "tap, tap, tap," till he was out of hearing.

End of Volume One.

Volume Two—Chapter One.

Home.

Softly along the dark passages of the County Arms stole Septimus Hardon, and with stealthy hand he loosened bar and bolt, till the front-door yielded to his touch, and he stood in the grey dawn of the morning, looking round the marketplace for a few minutes before making his way along a road not travelled by him for years.

How familiar every spot seemed as he left the town behind!—spots dimly seen as yet, but familiar enough to cause a swelling sensation at his heart, and tears to rise unbidden to his eyes. Now he stopped to gaze upon some old half-forgotten scene; now to listen to the morning hymn rising from the wood upon his left—loud and high notes from thrush and finch, mingled with the starling's mocking whistle, the mellow flute-tones of the blackbird, and the incessant caw of the rooks. All around seemed so peaceful, so utter a change from the miseries of a close London court, that his thoughts went back from the present to the old days of his boyhood, and for a while a sense of elation coursed through his veins, his eyes sparkled, and he gazed round with delight till they rested upon the spire of the old church, when a chill fell upon his spirit once more, as he remembered the funeral and the miseries of the present. Then, for the hundredth time, he recalled his father's lonely and fearful end—passing away without a word of forgiveness; his own return as a beggar to his old home, without a right therein—to be met as it were upon the threshold, and to be told that he was an intruder who could be admitted only upon sufferance. But he would enter, he said, if only to ask of the dead to give him a sign respecting the truth of his uncle's words.

Septimus Hardon's brow furrowed, and he walked on hastily; then he fell back into his listless, weary way. It was very early, or his gesticulations would have excited attention; but he met no one, and once more hurrying on, he at last stood before the clump of trees within whose shades was the gloomy moss-grown house where so large a portion of his life had been spent. He passed through the rusty iron gate, which creaked mournfully, and then stood before the old place, which looked more gloomy, moss-grown, and damp than ever. Desolation everywhere; for when the son left his home, the father had shut himself up, discharging the gardener and all the indoor servants but the one who filled the post of housekeeper. The vine still hung to the large trellis-work, but here and there, tangled with ivy, it had fallen away, and lay across the path; the windows were dim, the paths overgrown with weeds; while between the door-steps the withered herbage that had grown up the previous year, rustled in the breeze of the early spring. Over such windows as yet possessed them, yellow time-stained blinds were drawn, while here and there upon the ground-(four pages missing from the scan.) the perspiration in large drops upon his forehead, as the blind slowly flapped to and fro, and the lath rapped in a strange ghostly way upon the framework of the window.

For a few minutes Septimus Hardon stopped, leaning against the window-sill, trembling and undecided, till, mustering his strength of mind and body, he slowly drew himself up, climbed within the room, and then as the blind fell back to its place, stood in the presence of the dead, listening to the "rap-rap" of the blind-lath against the window-frame, and a sharp vicious gnawing that proceeded from behind the wainscot of the old house, and all the while not daring to turn his eyes in the direction of the bed whose position he knew so well, and upon which he could feel that the coffin was resting.

Gnaw, gnaw; tear, tear; sharp little teeth savagely working at the thin hard wood, and evidently making rapid progress towards their goal.

The sound was hideous, and the sweat dropped from Septimus Hardon's forehead with a tiny plash upon the bare boards, where he could see more than one little star-like mark, and then rousing himself, he ran towards the spot from whence the noise proceeded, and kicked furiously at the wainscot, when there was a scuffling noise, followed by a deep stillness, broken only at intervals by the gentle rapping of the blind-lath upon the window-frame.

And there stood the careworn man in his own old room—the old plainly-furnished room that he might have slept in but the previous night, so unaltered was everything, as, with eyes putting off that which he had come to see until the very last, he gazed around. There were the quaint old black-framed prints of Hudibras, whose strange, uncouth figures had frightened him as a boy—figures that, in the half-lights of evening or early morn, he had looked upon until they had seemed to stand forth from the frames as he lay quaking with childish terror; there was the old wall-paper, in whose pattern he had been wont to trace grotesque faces; there again the marbled ceiling, whose blue veins he had been used to follow in their maze-like wanderings, when he lay fevered and wakeful with some childish ailment; the same strips of lean-looking striped carpet; the same old hook in the beam, round which the flies darted and circled in summer; the same rickety corner washstand, with its cracked ewer, and quaint water-bottle and glass, which tinkled when a footstep passed along the passage; the fire-board, which blew down on windy nights, and almost frightened him into a fit, while there it was, even now, half-fallen and leaning against a chair, with a faint dust of the old fine soot, just as it used to be, scattered upon the hearthstone; the same drawers, whose old jingling brass knobs caught in his pinafore, and held him that dark night when he let fall the candle, and stood screaming for help; the same shells upon the chimney-piece—shells that of old he had held to his ear to listen to the roaring sea; even the old rushlight shade—big, and pierced with holes—was there, the old shade that used to stand upon the floor in the wash-hand basin, and throw its great hole-pierced shadow all over ceiling and wall—while each hole formed a glaring eye to stare at him and frighten away sleep.

Familiar sights that made him disbelieve in the lapse of time, and think it impossible that he could be standing there an elderly man; for all his association with the room seemed those first-formed impressions of childhood. But he cast away the dreamy, musing fit; for he felt that he had driven it to the last, and he must look now. Yes; there was his old bed, with the great black-cloth coffin, nearly covered by its lid, now drawn down a little from the head.

"Tap-tap, tap-tap," went the blind-lath; while outside shone the sun, and through the open window came the cheery twitter of the birds. Within the room Septimus Hardon could hear the heavy beating of his own heart. Then again, close behind him, came the sound of hurried scuffling beyond the wainscot; then a shrill squealing; and directly after, the loud sharp tearing of hungry teeth, gnaw, gnaw, gnaw incessantly, for the scared rats had again returned to the charge.

Septimus Hardon roused himself from his stupor, and kicked angrily at the wainscot, and once again he heard the hurrying rush of the hunger-driven little animals as they fled, and a shuddering sensation ran through his veins as he recalled the past.

And now he nerved himself to approach the bed, and stretched out his hand to remove the coffin-lid; but for some time he stood with his hands resting upon it. A dread had overshadowed him that he was about to gaze upon something too hideous for human eyes to bear; but at last he thrust the covering aside, and it fell upon the bed, when, with swimming head, he clung to the bedstead for a few minutes to save himself from falling. But the tremor passed off, for he was once more roused by the indefatigable gnawing of the rats; and he asked himself how long it would be before they would work their way through the thin oaken panel, and then whether they would attack the coffin.

Gnaw, gnaw, gnaw incessantly, till he once more angrily struck at the wall, when the noise ceased. And now Septimus Hardon strode firmly up to the bedside and gazed upon his father's face, not hideously disfigured, or frightful to look upon, but pale, calm, stern, with the brow slightly contracted, and, seen there in the twilight of that shaded room, apparently sleeping.

Dead—not sleeping. Gone from him without a word, without a sign, of forgiveness; leaving him a beggar with a name that was fouled and stained for ever in the sight of men. Gone—taking with him a secret of such vital importance; but Septimus Hardon thought not now of all this, for his memory was back amidst those early days when his mother was living, and his father would relax from his stern fits, so that for a while happiness seemed to dwell within their home. Then came the recollection of his mother's death, and the cold indifference into which his father had sunk. Then again all the sorrows and pains were forgotten, and the old man's virtues shone forth, as his shabby, travel-stained son sank upon his knees by the coffin and buried his face in his hands.

The sun streamed through the loose corner of the blind and shone like a golden bar-sinister across the kneeling man; the sparrows twittered in the eaves, and ever upon the window-frame the blind kept up its monotonous tap, tap, tap, at regular intervals, while at times a puff of light air made it shiver and shudder from top to bottom. But, above all, came from behind the wainscot the incessant gnaw, gnaw, gnaw, as though the rats knew, that their time was short, and that their prey would soon be beyond their reach; gnaw, gnaw, gnaw, as though splintering off large pieces of the woodwork, while now no angrily-stricken blow scared them off; gnaw, gnaw, gnaw, until little ragged splinters and chips began to be thrust out beneath the skirting-board; then more, and more, and more, till a tiny, light heap, that a breath would have scattered, appeared close to a ragged hole. Then heap and hole grew larger, and as the noise increased a sharp nose was seen moving quickly, as a rat worked vigorously, till, as it obtained room to tear away at the board, the heap grew bigger, fragments were thrust out hastily into the room, and at last the little archway afforded space for the passage of the worker, a sharp-eyed, keen-looking, little animal, which, after peering about eagerly for a few moments, darted into the room, darted back again, and then renewed its attack upon the skirting-board until the hole was enlarged.

Then for a while all was silent, but a keen observer might have detected within the darkness the sharp nose of the rat, and the eager glint of its watching orbs. Then came a faint rustle, and the rat seemed to glide out into the room; then another head appeared at the hole, and another lean, vicious animal was out, but a louder tap than usual from the blind sent them darting back to their lair.

Another five minutes and they were out again—one, two, three; another, and another, and another—a swarm of rats, savage with hunger; but now the loud, chirrupping squabble of a pair of sparrows which settled on the window-sill scared the little animals once more, and they fled in haste to their corner.

Out again, for all was silent; first one peering into the room, with its black, bead-like eyes scanning the place, then darting back at some false alarm, but out again directly, followed by its fellows, till there was a swarm once more, now running a few feet, now darting back to the hole; and still Septimus Hardon knelt, as he had knelt for hours, motionless beside his father's coffin.

The golden bar shone into and across the room, a bar-sinister no longer, for it played upon the features of the dead, seeming to illumine them with a smile; the sparrows twittered in the eaves, the faint whistle of a carter, cheering his way with some old minor strain, was heard from the road; the blind still tapped softly and shuddered from top to bottom; but the gnawing sounds from the skirting-board had ceased, and the kneeling man remained motionless by the bedside.

Tap, tap, tap, in a strange warning way, as the shuddering motion of the old blind continued. Warning taps, as if softly made by unseen watchers—signals to rouse the kneeling figure whose face was buried in his hands, and whose worn, lean fingers touched the black-cloth of the coffin; taps that now grew louder, for there was a faint, scratching noise, as of little vicious claws passing over a counterpane.

Volume Two—Chapter Two.

Meetings.

With something like the wondering pleasure that must have been felt by the first photographer who applied his developing liquid to a sensitised plate and then saw spring out by magic, as it were, first faint, then stronger lines, feature by feature, the lineaments of a beautiful face, gazed old Matt Space upon Lucy Grey as Time, that wonderful developer, caused her day by day to take more and more the aspect of a beautiful woman. Yesterday almost it seemed to him that she was a mere girl, a child; but the transition had been rapid. True, hers was a time of life when the bud is seen to expand rapidly; but here there had been forcing powers at work. In fact, in quiet self-dependence, thought, and her managing ways, Lucy had been for years a woman, and the friend and counsellor of her mother in

many a sore trial. Familiarity with sorrow, poverty, her step-father's struggles, and their life in the busy streets of London, had all tended to develop the mind of Lucy Grey, who might truly be said never to have known a girlhood: nurse to her little sister and brother in sickness and health, attendant of her ailing mother, housekeeper, cheerer of Septimus Hardon's misery, and now busy worker for the family's support, it were strange indeed if she had not stepped as it were from child to woman, for in such cases as hers years seem secondary.

But the years had not been stationary, for Lucy Grey was now seventeen, and the old printer used to gaze with pride upon the fair girl, who chose him gladly for her companion to and from the warehouse for which she worked.

But Matt was angry and annoyed, for he had been made the half confidant of a secret which galled and worried him. Twenty times a day he vowed that he would have no more of it; and at such times the consumption of his snuff was terrible. There was hardly a lamp-post in Carey-street to which he had not fiercely declared that he would "split," nodding mysteriously the whole while; but night after night, when he met the appealing look of Lucy, all his resolutions faded like mist in the sun, and he would whisper the next post he passed that he was getting to be a fool in his old age.

The old man had carried the letter he received to Lucy, giving it to her at dinner-time, while Mrs Hardon was lying down; and then furtively watched the eager looks, the flushing cheeks, and tear-wet eyes, as the reader devoured the contents.

"You'll be here to-night, Mr Space?" said Lucy, looking up. "You'll go with me?"

"Old Matt Space, miss, is your humble servant, and he'll do what you tell him; but he don't like that at all. He don't like secrets;" and the old man pointed to the note. "Why not tell her?" and he nodded towards the inner room.

"No, no," whispered Lucy hurriedly.

"All right, miss, all right. I'll be here at seven. Be taken bad, I suppose, and slip off for an hour." And at the appointed time the old man hurried from the office where he was employed, at the great risk of being told that he would be wanted no more, and accompanied Lucy to where in the dusk of evening, she stood talking to the dark, showily-dressed woman, whose agitated, mobile countenance made the paint upon her cheeks look weird and strange. She had hold tightly of Lucy's hand, and more than once old Matt saw her kiss it fondly, clinging to it as if it were her last hold upon innocence and purity.

Twice during their interview the old man advanced, signing that it was time they went, by many a hasty jerk with his thumb; but the appealing looks he encountered sent him muttering back to his former post beneath a lamp, where he stood watching uneasily.

And old Matt had something to watch, too; for twice he saw the villainously-countenanced Mr Jarker slink by on the opposite side of the way, trying very hard to appear ignorant of a meeting taking place, but failing dismally, for from time to time his head was turned in the direction, besides which many a passer-by paused to gaze, with something like effrontery, upon the sweet, candid face of Lucy, while more than one seemed disposed to turn back. All this troubled the old man, and made him redouble his watchfulness as he walked a little nearer to the speakers; but he did not see that, some fifty yards down the street, standing in a doorway, there was another watcher, from beneath whose broad white brow a pair of keen grey eyes were fixed uneasily upon the group, with a troubled, puzzled expression.

"God—God bless you!" whispered the woman; "you must go now, my darling!" just as a well-dressed man sauntered back, cigar in hand, and, slightly stooping, addressed some observation to the startled girl; when old Matt, who had been watching his movements and followed close behind, suddenly shouldered him on one side, and so vigorously, that he stepped into the road to save himself from falling. Then there was a shout from a passing cabman, a half-uttered cry, and the daintily-dressed lounger was rubbing the marks of a muddy wheel from his dark trousers, while old Matt, with a gruff "Come along, miss!" drew Lucy's arm through his own, and with a short, sharp nod to her companion, marched her off.

But Matt did not turn back to see the next change in the scene, or he might have looked upon Mr William Jarker crossing the road and speaking to the dark woman, who replied fiercely and shortly, as she turned from him in an abrupt manner, but only to return and say a few words quietly ere she hurried off. Then the city dandy, recovered from his fright, followed the steps of old Matt and Lucy, till a firm hand was laid upon his shoulder, when turning, he encountered the calm, fixed gaze of a man of some one- or two-and-thirty, dressed as a clergyman.

"Stand back, sir, or I give you into custody for insulting that young lady," he said, in quiet, hard, measured tones.

"Young what?" was the reply; but there was a something so firm and convincing in the look of the keen grey eyes upon him, that, muttering inaudibly, the fellow shrank back, and was soon lost in the passing crowd.

The Reverend Arthur Sterne then looked hastily round, to see that Lucy Grey had passed down the next street, to whose corner he hurried, where he could see her nearly at the bottom, with old Matt striding fiercely along. He then turned to look for the woman who had been Lucy's companion, but she had disappeared. However, he walked hastily in the direction she had taken, and searched eagerly for some distance, now thinking that he caught sight of her bonnet on this side, now upon that, but always disappointed; several times he was about to return, but a delusive glimpse of some figure in the distance led him on, till, tired and disheartened, he turned to reach his apartments, when he encountered, first, the ill-looking countenance of Mr William Jarker, who made a sort of slouching attempt at a bow, and directly after, a quiet-looking individual, with a straw in his mouth and his hands in his pockets, whom Mr Sterne passed without notice, though he had recognised the birdcatcher, whose wife he had from time to time visited. But Mr Sterne was not aware that he had been followed by the ruffian, as a bull-dog would follow his master, or a hound his quarry—though it is disgracing the latter simile to use it. Nor was Mr Jarker aware that that quiet-

looking individual had been following him in turn till he was once more about to track the curate, when for a moment he and the quiet individual stood face to face, apparently without seeing one another; but it was observable that Mr Jarker immediately went off in quite another direction, while, after slowly twisting his straw and winking to himself, the quiet man slowly took the same route as Mr Sterne.

Volume Two—Chapter Three.

Another Funeral.

Septimus Hardon leaped to his feet, as suddenly a key turned and the bedroom-door opened; there was a sharp scuffling noise, as of a swarm of rats leaping hurriedly from the bed, and tearing over one another, in their haste to reach the hole; a wild shriek from a woman, a heavy fall, and then all was again silent.

As soon as he could recall his scattered energies, Septimus Hardon raised the woman's head and bathed her face, when she soon opened her eyes and sat up, gazing at him with a horrified aspect.

"Hush!" he said softly; "don't be alarmed. My name is Hardon; I came to see my father for the last time. I think I used to know you in the town?"

"O, yes; I remember you now, sir," stammered the woman; "but you gave me a dreadful turn."

"Hush! Come down-stairs now," whispered Septimus, and he motioned her to follow him to the door.

The woman was about to obey, but, glancing round the room, she pointed to the freshly-gnawed wood and the heap of chips.

Septimus shuddered, and they went together and closed the coffin-lid.

"Stop a minute, sir, please," said the woman—a poor cottager's wife from the town, who followed the same road in Somesham adopted by Mrs Sims of Lincoln's-inn,—"stop a minute, sir, please, and I'll be back directly." The poor thing trembled so that her teeth chattered, as she hurried away; but she returned in a few minutes with a huge black cat, which struggled from her arms and ran, with dilated eyes, towards the rats' hole, where it softly couched, motionless but for the writhings of its lithe tail, as it sat there watching for the coming of its enemies.

There were funeral cake and wine upon the table below, and an extra supply of the former was cut up and sealed in squares of paper, bearing a couple of verses of a psalm, and the pastrycook's name and address as a serious advertisement.

After waiting a couple of hours, most of which he spent wandering about the old house, Septimus Hardon took his old place in the little dining-room, opposite to the sealed-up bureau and cupboards. The undertaker and his man had arrived, and soon after came Doctor Hardon's rival, who had been called in to the deceased. The undertaker knew Septimus and bowed; the surgeon, too, knew him again and shook hands, not being at all surprised to see him there; while he invited him to dinner before he should leave the town. But although Doctor Hardon, who came soon after, well knew Septimus Hardon, he *was* surprised to see him there, and did not shake hands, but started as though someone had struck him a violent blow. Mr Keening—Keening and Keening—then entered the room, when the gentlemen all took wine in a heavy, impressive way, and talked in a low tone about matters as far removed as possible from the purpose for which they had met together.

Then came the undertaker to ask in a subdued way if any gentleman wished to go up-stairs; but no gentleman save the son wished to go; and he stole away to stand and gaze for a few moments upon the calm pale features, and then returned to where the undertaker was distributing gloves of the best black kid, asking the size each gentleman took with a smooth oily courtesy. Scarves were then produced of the richest and stiffest corded-silk, cloaks were tied on, and as each mourner was dressed for his part of the performance, he was inspected all round, and from top to toe, by the undertaker before he was allowed to reseat himself. Then more wine, and more subdued conversation followed, interrupted by the grating of wheels upon the gravel drive. Heavy footsteps overhead now; trampling; someone slipping upon the stairs, and the balustrade heard to creak loudly as an exclamation was heard; a shuffling noise; more footsteps heavily descending; a sharp pattering of feet on the passage oilcloth, and much rustling past the room-door, followed by an interval of a few minutes, and the noise of wheels going and wheels coming; and then the undertaker stood bowing in the open door, and motioned Septimus Hardon to follow.

This was almost too much for Doctor Hardon, who had ordered that everything possible to make the funeral impressive should be done. The large hearse and two mourning-coaches had been hired expressly from the county-town; velvet and ostrich plumes were in plenty; and, as chief mourner, the doctor had reckoned upon a very imposing spectacle, one that should to a certain extent erase the horrors of his brother's end, and help to raise him, the doctor, in the estimation of the inhabitants of Somesham. But now this was spoiled by the coming of the shabby, worn son, towards whom the undertaker had leaned in the belief, in his ignorance, that he was the chief mourner.

Septimus rose, and moved towards the door, while Doctor Hardon hesitated to obey the beckoning finger of the undertaker; but the dread of drawing attention to his tremor made him more himself, and, putting a white-cambric kerchief to his face, he followed his nephew, to be directly after shut up with him in the mourning-coach. But Septimus noticed him not, as he sat stern and with knitted brow, no muscle betraying the wild emotions struggling within.

The surgeon and solicitor followed in the next coach; and then the funeral procession moved slowly off towards the town, making as great a show as the undertaker's strict adherence to his employer's orders could effect. Doctor

Hardon said he wished to keep up appearances for his dear brother's sake; but he had not reckoned upon the presence of the stern, careworn man by his side, and he shrank into his corner of the mourning-coach, angry, but at the same time fearful lest a scene might ensue which should damage his reputation in the good town of Somesham; besides, it would have been so painful to the feelings of his three daughters—he only thought of three, even though one was married and two resided at a distance. Nothing could have been more unfortunate than the appearance of Septimus at such a time, and during the silent ride the doctor's wishes were anything but loving towards his nephew; while upon reaching the church the gall of bitterness was made more bitter, for the doctor again found himself made of secondary importance by Septimus, who seemed to have roused himself into action for the time, and strode on in front, close behind the coffin, to take his place in the church so crowded with familiar recollections. There, bowed down in the same pew, but with very different thoughts, uncle and nephew listened to the service ere they stood together by the bricked vault prepared for the remains of old Octavius, and here again the doctor seemed to have shrunk into a nonentity, for every eye was fixed upon the shabby mourner by his side.

The clergyman had concluded, and, closing his book, was slowly walking away; the clerk had followed, and at the church-gate the foremost mourning-coach stood waiting, with a crowd of children and idlers around, the hearse being drawn up at a distance, already half denuded of its plumes by one of the deputies of the furnisher. There was a crowd, too, thickly clustered amidst grave and tombstone in the churchyard, for plenty of interest attached to the death of old Octavius Hardon, and the people of Somesham seemed bound to see the matter to the end.

Nothing now remained for the mourners but to take a last glance at the coffin and come away. Septimus had stood for a few moments looking down into the vault, with the stern aspect of resolution fading from his face, to give way to one of helpless misery, when, turning to leave, he encountered the mourning brother advancing with drooping head and raised handkerchief to take his farewell look.

Septimus Hardon shrank back as from a serpent, and made room for his uncle to pass; but the next moment a sudden rage possessed him, and, stepping forward, he laid a hand upon the doctor's shoulder, whispering a few words in his ear.

Hastily confronting his nephew, the doctor turned, when, shaking a threatening finger in his face, Septimus exclaimed: "Hypocrite! I know—" But before he could finish the sentence, the doctor started back as if to avoid the threatening hand; his foot slipped upon the very edge of one of the boards, and the next moment, before a hand could be stretched out to save him, he fell with a crash into the vault.

For a while no one moved, a thrill of horror running through the assembled crowd; but soon help in plenty was there to raise the fallen man from the coffin upon which he lay, apparently senseless, and amidst a buzz of suggestions the sexton nimbly descended, rope in hand, and, slipping the strong cord around the doctor's chest, he was dragged out and borne to the waiting coach.

Septimus, shocked, and almost paralysed at the effect of his threatening gesture, stood for a few minutes looking on, till, seeing relief afforded to the fallen man, he turned slowly away, people giving place right and left to allow him to pass. On reaching the second coach, he hastily disencumbered himself of his trappings of woe, and threw them to the astonished man at the door, who had never before witnessed such unseemly conduct at a funeral. Then, after another hasty glance towards the crowd around his uncle, Septimus strode off in the direction of the County Arms; while, gaping, talking, and wondering, the people slowly dispersed, saving such as followed the coach to the doctor's residence in the High-street, where they hung about, clinging helplessly to the iron railings, and staring at the dining-room windows, until Mr Brande, the surgeon, and Mr Keening, the solicitor, came out together, looking very important, and walked down the street; when several of the railing barnacles followed at a distance, as if the gentlemen had brought out a printed account of the gossip-engendering scene in their pockets ready for distribution.

With his mourning habiliments Septimus Hardon seemed to have cast off the interest the crowd might be supposed to have taken in him; for no one followed the thin shabby man in dusty clothes and battered hat, as he strode on, till abreast of the old inn, where he paused, as if about to enter; but the next moment, shaking his head wearily, he walked on, and was soon past the first mile-stone on his way to the great city.

Volume Two—Chapter Four.

After a Lapse.

"Do, sir?" exclaimed old Matt, pausing in his occupation of pulling the string to make a lathen figure throw out arms and legs for the delectation of little Tom,—"do, sir? Why, what I've always told you, and you say the parson's told you,—go in for it, you've nothing to lose; so if anything happens, you must win. A year last spring now since I come running in here with that para thinking I'd made your fortune for you, sir; and now—Look there, what you've done, you've pulled one of his legs off!"—This in a parenthesis to the little boy between his knees.—"And where are you? Certainly, you get on a bit with the writing, sir; but if it was me I couldn't have settled down without making him prove his words."

"But, you see," said Septimus, looking up from his copying, "I'm not clever, I'm not a business man; and what could I do without money for legal advice? It's a sad life this; and ours is, and always was, a miserable family, and my uncle's too. Look at him: his children are always away, while Agnes came to us through some love-affair with the assistant, and soon after I came away she disappeared, and has never been heard of since. Did you speak?"

"No," said Matt, whose face was puckered up, while he had been trying to catch the eye of Lucy, who sat at the window busily preparing some work for a bright new sewing-machine which had lately been supplied to her from the warehouse where she was employed.

“He has the money,” continued Septimus, “but that can’t compensate for the loss of his child. Poor Agnes!”

“Don’t speak of her,” exclaimed Mrs Septimus angrily, “she was a very weak, bad woman, and—”

“Hush!” said Septimus sternly, “we are all weak; and who made us judges?”

Mrs Septimus fidgeted about in her easy-chair, looking nettled and angry as she sat near the window, while with flushed cheek Lucy bent lower and lower over her work, once only catching Matt’s eye, when the old man looked so alarmingly mysterious that the flush upon her face deepened, and she rose and left the room.

“You see, sir,” said Matt, continuing a conversation that had evidently been broken off, “it’s been let go by so long now, when steps ought to have been taken at once. No offence meant—you won’t be put out if I speak plain?”

Septimus shook his head, and went on copying.

“You see,” said Matt, “you ought to have gone to Doctors’ Commons, and entered a something against your uncle, and done a something else, and had a lawyer to engage counsel, and then this precious uncle of yours couldn’t have touched the property till the matter had been tried in the Court of Probate; when, of course, you must have come out with flying colours. But here, you see, you do nothing; first letting one month slip away, and then another, and all the while he goes to work, gets uninterrupted possession, sticks tighter and tighter to it, and for aught you know, he’s spent it all by this time. You ought, you know, to have carried on the war at once.”

“And about the sinews?” said Septimus drearily, without raising his head.

“Blame them sinews!” cried the old man; “they’re about the tightest, and hardest, and toughest things in the whole world. It seems to me, you know, sir, thinking it over—and I’ve had it in bed with me scores of nights—it seems to me that your uncle rather reckoned on his meeting no opposition; and on your—snuff, snuff, snuff,” muttered the old man in a confused way, as he fumbled about in his pockets.

“Say it out, Matt,” said Septimus with a sad smile, “my weakness—no doubt of it, for he could never have believed his own words.”

“Well, that was the word, certainly, sir,” said Matt; “and after all your fuss, I don’t know that a man’s any the better for being strong, mind you. I wasn’t going to say weakness, for I was hanging fire for a word that meant the same with the corners rubbed off a bit; but there wasn’t letter enough in the case to make it up.”

“Can’t help it, Matt,” said Septimus, removing a hair from his pen by wiping it upon his coat-tail, and then smearing his forehead with his inky fingers, ready for Lucy, who entered the room directly after, to take his careworn head upon her arm, wet a corner of her handkerchief between her rosy lips, and then wipe away the obstinate smear—Septimus the while as still and patient as possible, till the fair girl concluded her performance with a kiss, when he went on with his task. “Exors—ecutors—and assigns,” muttered Septimus, writing. “Can’t help it, Matt, I suppose it’s my nature to be weak.”

“And let everyone kick you,” said Matt to himself.—“Well, sir,” he continued aloud, “it’s my belief that this uncle of yours, not to put too fine a point upon it, is a rogue. He’s a deep one, that’s what he is; but then, you know, he isn’t the only deep one in the world, and if you’d begun when you should have done—there, I won’t say so any more,” he exclaimed hastily, for Septimus made an impatient movement. “Now, you see, you’ve taken this sudden whim—very well, sir, all right—we’ve talked you into it, say then—and you mean now to see if you can’t go on with the matter. Better late than never, say I; so now, how does it stand? He has possession, and that’s what they call nine points of the law; and he’s had possession for above a year, and you haven’t taken a step to dispute his right.—Well, I can’t go into the thing without speaking of the rights and wrongs of it, can I?” exclaimed the old man in an injured tone, for Septimus shuffled nervously in his seat.

“There, go on!” said Septimus.

“But, there, p’raps I’m making too free,” said the old man, snatching at the string so angrily that he broke the other leg of the figure he had brought the child.—“Never mind, my man,” he whispered; “I’ll bring you such a good un next time I come.”

“Go on, Matt,” said Septimus quietly; “you ought to make allowances for me.”

“So I do, sir, so I do—heaps,” cried the old man eagerly.

“We have not so many friends,” continued Septimus, laying down his pen and stretching out his hand, “that we can afford to behave slightingly to their advice, even if it is unpalatable.”

Old Matt took the proffered hand, and shook it warmly, before going on with his subject.

“Well, sir,” said Matt, “you say he told you out flat that you were a—a—well, you know what I mean.”

“Yes, yes,” said Septimus drearily, for he had so familiarised himself in thought with the word, that it had ceased to bring up an indignant flush to his cheek.

“Well,” said Matt, “then the whole of our work—I say ‘our,’ you know—”

Septimus nodded.

“The whole of our work consists in proving him false.”

“Exactly,” said Septimus, sticking his pen behind his ear; “but how?”

“Documentary evidence,” said the old man, “that’s it; documentary evidence,” and he took snuff loudly. “Marriage stiffikits, baptism registers, and so on. Let’s see; I don’t think there was any regular registration in those days. Now then, to begin with, sir. Where were your father and mother married?—that is, if they were,” muttered the old man in what was meant for an undertone, but Septimus heard the words.

“O yes,” he said quietly, “they were married in the City.”

“Very good,” said Matt. “Then suppose we get a copy of the marriage stiffikit, sworn to and witnessed, how then?”

“Well, that proves the marriage,” said Septimus.

“To be sure,” said Matt; “but then you’ll find he bases his claim upon your being born before. You don’t think he denies that your father and mother were married? He don’t, does he?”

“No,” said Septimus wearily, as he opened a pocket-book and drew out a frayed and broken letter, which had separated here and there in the folds from frequent reference. “You are right, Matt,” he said, after reading a few lines. “The marriage register would be no good.”

“Yes, it would,” said Matt; “it’s documentary evidence, and it will be one brick in the tower we want to build up; so don’t you get sneezing at it because it ain’t everything. It will be one thing; and so far so good, when we get it. You see it’s a ticklish thing, and before you put it in a solicitor’s hands—a respectable solicitor’s hands, for cheap law’s the dearest thing in Lincoln’s-inn—you must have something to show him. Now, so far so good, only recollect your uncle’s on firm ground, while as yet you’re nowhere. Now say we go to a good solicitor. ‘Were you born in wedlock?’ says he. ‘Yes,’ says you. ‘Now then,’ says he, ‘prove it.’”

Septimus sighed, and began to wonder whether his uncle was right.

“Now, then,” said Matt, “family Bible with birth in, eh?”

“We had one, full of plates,” said Septimus, recalling the old Sunday afternoons, when he had leaned over the table, amusing himself with the engravings; “but there were no entries in it, only my grandfather’s name. I fancy, though, now you mention it, my father had a little pocket-Bible with some entries in, but I never took particular notice.”

“Rotten reed—a rotten reed,” said the old man. “You are not sure; and even if you were, your uncle’s been foxy enough to hunt the place over and over, and that book’s gone up the chimney in smoke, or under the grate in ashes, long enough ago. No will, you say?”

“Not that I could hear of,” said Septimus.

“We might, p’r’aps, find the nurse, or doctor, or some old friend; but then, unless they can bring up documentary evidence, ’tain’t much good. You know, when old folks are made to swear about things that took place fifty years ago, people shake their heads and think about failing memories, and so on. You see we must have something strong to work upon. If we could get the date of your birth, and the marriage stiffikit, we should be all right, shouldn’t we?”

“Yes, they would prove all we want,” said Septimus.

“Exactly so,” said Matt; “and if we couldn’t get the date of your birth, how about date of baptism?”

“That would do just as well,” exclaimed Septimus.

“No, it wouldn’t,” said the old man, “without it’s got in how old you were when the parson made a cross on your forehead—eh?”

Septimus was damped directly.

“It’s no use to be sanguine, you know, sir. What we’ve got to do is to expect nothing, and then all we do get is clear profit. Now, where were you baptised—do you know that?”

“Yes,” said Septimus.

“Well, that’s all right, if it contains the entry of your age at the time, but we won’t be sure; and if it does, you see if your uncle don’t bring someone to swear it’s false, and that they nursed you a twelvemonth before you really were born. Most likely, you know, there’d be half-a-score done at the same time as yours, and they never asked your age. I don’t say so, you know, only that perhaps it was so. Now, what do you call your birthday, sir?”

“Tenth of January 17—,” said Septimus.

“Very good, sir; but then, that’s only what you say, mind, and a bare word’s not worth much in a court of law when a case is being tried. ‘’Tis,’ says you. ‘’Tisn’t,’ says your uncle, who’s rich, and prosperous, and respectable, and has the money, and lives in a big house, with plenty of well-to-do friends round him. ‘Prove your case,’ says the judge to you; and mind you, sir, this is the ticklish point; it ain’t a question of who’s to have your father’s money. He’s got it, and it’s a question of your turning him out. So, ‘Prove your case,’ says the judge. ‘You’ve left this man in possession for a year, and now you say he does not hold the property lawfully. Prove your case.’ ‘Can’t my lord,’ says you—‘no documentary evidence.’ And now do you know what the judge would say?”

Septimus shook his head dismally.

"'Judgment for the defendant'—that's your uncle, you know." And then, as if highly satisfied with his logical mode of putting the case. Matt snapped his fingers loudly after a large pinch of snuff.

"But," said Mrs Septimus, "my doctor told me that he always kept a register of all the births he attended."

Mrs Septimus said no more, for old Matt's fist went down upon the table with a bang that made some of the ink leap from the stand, but fortunately not upon Septimus Hardon's clean sheets of paper.

"I beg your pardon, ma'am!" cried Matt, hurriedly sopping up the ink with his wisp of a handkerchief; "but blame me if I don't wish I'd been born a woman! trust them for getting to the bottom of everything. Why, Lord bless you, sir, there you are—there's the case in a nutshell!—that's the matter hit right in the bull's-eye! Why didn't you begin about it before? You're right as a trivet. There's the date of the marriage, and there's the doctor's book—such-and-such a day, such-and-such a time; medicine and attendance, two pound twelve shillings and sixpence. Hallo!" exclaimed Matt, scratching his head, "that comes very pat; where did I hear those words before? But there, look here, sir; I think we've got hold of the right end of the tangle, and here it is. You go down to Somesham and tell nunky how it stands. 'Here we are,' says you, 'and now give up peaceable and quiet, and I'll say nothing at all about what's gone by.' Of course he won't, and begins to talk big about kicking out of the house, and all that sort of thing. 'Two can play at that,' says you; and as he won't be civil, he must have it hot. Back you come; put it in a decent solicitor's hands; with your good documentary evidence out he goes—in you go; and my di'mond has a pony with a long silky tail; Miss Lucy a carriage, and missis here an invalid chair, and old Matt to push it—eh, ma'am?"

"But about finding the doctor," said Septimus sadly.

"Well, yes—true, to be sure," said Matt, over a fresh pinch of snuff; "but I think we can manage that part, sir. Don't you see, we can tell our road now we've got our line cut out; and we've only got it to do. There's some pye in the case, of course, but we can correct as we go on, eh? There's a doctors' directory, and we can soon find him."

"There's a hitch directly," said Septimus. "I don't know his name."

"Phillips!" exclaimed Mrs Hardon excitedly.

"There we are again," cried Matt; "who'd be without a good partner?"

"But how do you know?" said Septimus.

"I remember in your mother's last illness," said Mrs Septimus, "that she told me how she longed for her old doctor, for she felt sure Mr Thomas Hardon did not understand her complaint; and that was the first cause of disagreement between your father and Dr Hardon. I heard your father tell him afterwards that he had killed his Sister, and to leave the house."

"But the name?" said Septimus, anxious to change the conversation.

"Phillips—the same as my own; and that was why it made an impression upon my memory."

"Talk about cards to play, sir!" cried Matt, "why, that's winning: your partner has played the leading trump."

Septimus Hardon rose from his seat to begin anxiously pacing up and down the room. He could see plainly enough the value of the position he was nerving himself to fight for, but he shrank, as he had shrunk again and again, from the exposure certain, whether he succeeded or not. Vacillating in the extreme, he was at one time telling himself that it was his duty to try and clear his mother's fame, though the next moment would find him shrinking from the task, while his brow wrinkled up as he sighed and looked from face to face, lastly on that of old Matt, who, having relieved himself of the child, was taking snuff extravagantly, and chuckling and rubbing his hands in anticipation of the coming triumph.

"Now, sir," he said upon catching the troubled man's eye, "about this doctor."

"Dead before now," said Septimus. "Allowing him to have been quite young for a doctor, he would be eighty now, and how few men reach that age!"

"Pooh! nonsense!" cried Matt; "scores do—hundreds do—ninety either. Eighty? Pooh! nothing! youth, sir. Why, I'm past sixty, and see what a boy I look, eh? Why, I believe Miss Lucy would pick me out from scores to take care of her, —wouldn't you, miss?"

Lucy looked up from her work, nodded and smiled.

"But now business," said the old man.—"Where did you live, sir, before you went down in the country?"

"Finsbury," said Septimus.

"And you were born there, eh?"

"I believe so," said Septimus, wondering in his own mind whether it was worth all this trouble, perhaps to gain nothing.

"To be sure," cried Matt; "and now we shall soon find it out. Brass plate on the door—'Mr Phillips, Surgeon;' big lamp sticking out, red bull's-eye one side, green t'other, like railway signals; 'danger' and 'all right' to the people in the street."

Old Matt rose to go, after appointing to meet Septimus on the following morning to take the first steps for obtaining the “documentary evidence” so necessary for their future plans.

“Ten to the moment, you’ll see me, sir,” said Matt. “Good afternoon, ma’am, and—Ah, Miss Lucy’s gone!”

But Septimus only sighed, and sat down once more to his weary copying, sheets of which he so often spoiled by letting his thoughts wander from the task in hand.

“No more business in him, sir,” said Matt as he descended the stairs, “than—Ah, here we are, then! Thought I was going away without seeing you again, miss;” for he had encountered Lucy upon the stairs.

“Hush!” she whispered, “I only wanted to ask you to please be careful. I was so frightened this afternoon.”

Old Matt buttoned up his coat as tightly as if his honour were inside it, pursed up his lips, nodded his head seriously, and then laying one finger upon the side of his nose he shuffled off, looking as mysterious as if he were the repository of state secrets, and ready to bid defiance to all the racks and thumbscrews of the good old times.

Lucy Grey stood for a minute gazing after the shabby figure, and then, turning to ascend, she coloured slightly upon finding herself face to face with the old Frenchwoman who occupied the attic floor, and who now, with a sneering smile upon her thin lips and an inquisitive light peering from her half-closed eyes, looked at her, and then passed softly and silently as a cat down the stairs without saying a word.

Volume Two—Chapter Five.

Homes in London.

Bennett’s-rents still upon that day—a bright breezy day—when for a whole hour the god that kisseth carrion shone down into the court to lick up every trace of green damp and moisture from the foul, broken pavement. There was a pump in Bennett’s-rents, and a channel ran down the centre of the paving, whose broken slabs rose and fell in wet weather to the passing step, spurting out little founts of dirty water, while the channel itself was choked, from being turned into a receptacle for the superfluous odds and ends of the inhabitants—to wit: potato, turnip, and carrot peelings; the shells of whelks, periwinkles, mussels, and crabs; egg-shells were at times seen there, as also the nacreous covering of the oyster, but not as the débris of banquets, since these latter were only brought in by the grotto-building children, and the former thrown out by the jobbing bookbinder’s-finisher when robbed of their albumen for purposes of trade. Heads, tails, and the vertebra of plaice, or the real Yarmouth bloater, were common objects of the shore. Babies had been seen in that channel, which possessed a certain charm from its safety, since the child that rolled in rolled no farther. It was the favourite resort of the small fry of the neighbourhood,—a neighbourhood that rejoiced in small children, and big babies of an elastic nature, which prevented falls and contusions from stopping their growth,—for the refuse in that channel could be raked about and poked at with bits of stick to the formation of dams, where walnut cock-boats could be sailed, or mussel-prows launched; and occasional visitants from as far off as Lower Series-place had been known to perch there and peck, for the channel was famed for its ample supply of impromptu playthings for the little savages of the place. A large lobster-claw found therein had formed the coral of Dredge minor, whose father worked at Covent-garden Market, and never slept at home by night. Little Jenny Perkins wore a necklace composed of periwinkle-shells; while whelk-shells, stuck at the end of thick pieces of firewood, and previously filled with peas, formed rattles that were indestructible.

Like Lower Series-place, Bennett’s-rents was famous for its prolific inhabitants. Long as daylight lasted, there was a dense small population of half-dressed aborigines, hooting, racing about, playing, and quarrelling, aided in their efforts by levies from others of the rags of Lincoln’s-inn. Why called Bennett’s-rents was not obvious, though it might have been from the hideous cracks and seams in the frowzy old houses, whose windows looked as if they had been in a brown-paper-and-rag war, in which glass had suffered a terrible defeat, and submitted now, with an ill grace, to the presence of the new settlers.

But the children did not have the channel all up themselves, for at early dawn the pigeons from the housetops paid it visits, and, in spite of broken, dissipated-looking chimney-pots, falling-out mortar, and shattered, soot-covered tiles, there were many soft-eyed, iridescent—hued birds dwelling upon the roofs of the houses in Bennett’s-rents; and, more especially upon Sunday mornings, an observer from some high edifice might have seen dirty-faced men, in hairy caps, rising out of trap-doors in roofs, like “Mr F’s aunt” through the factory-floor, and, when half-way out, and forming prominent objects among little wildernesses of sooty, lath-made cages and traps, amusing themselves by waving red-cotton handkerchiefs tied to the end of sticks, for the purpose of keeping their flights of pigeons high in air.

A rumour had spread through the court that something was to be seen in the neighbouring street, when out trooped the children from the narrow entrance, and comparative silence reigned, till place and echoes were alike mocked by a man with his cry of “Rag—bone!” but his was labour in vain: he took nothing further from the Rents to glut the shop of Mrs Slagg, and, reaching the end of the place, he departed with his bag still light, and the court knew him no more that day, though there were rags enough in every house to have filled his sack again and again, and drawn down the index of his portable weighing-machine to the furthest limit. Still there was another sound to be heard, for Mr William Jarker, of the heavy jaw, flattened nose, and general bull-dog aspect, was above his attic, whistling to his pigeons, as the Reverend Arthur Sterne stood by the reeking channel, gazing up into the strip of blue sky above his head, and following the circling flight of the birds as he muttered sadly to himself, “O, that I had wings like a dove; for then would I fly away and be at rest!” but the next instant he smiled sadly, as he recalled work undone, duties to perform, and then thought of the rest and fate of these birds, wondering, too, how it came that they should form the “fancy” of the roughest of the rough. Then he paused with his foot upon the threshold of the house where Septimus Hardon lodged, for there, in the hot, close London court, came gushing down in tones of purest liquid melody, the wild,

heaven-gate trill of a lark: “Tsweet-tsweet-tsweet-tsweet!” every trill an intoxicating, magic draught, drunk in by the ear, and—a very opium—bearing the hearer far, far away to green fields, shady woodlands, golden hill-sides, and sparkling brooks; louder, louder and more rapturous, thrilling the air around; rising and falling, echoing from far and near, but ever sweet and pure, even joyous at times; and praise the song of the wild bird as you may, there is that in the trill of its caged brother in some close London alley that shall sound the sweeter in the sadness engendered by the surroundings, for it whispers of brighter scenes and purer homes, bearing you with it far, far away from the misery where you stay.

Even Bill Jarker ceased waving his handkerchief, took his short, black pipe from his mouth, and listened; the curate thought of days when, with a soft white hand in his, he had wandered over the downs, listening to those ever-sweet English notes; while from the window above was stretched forth the fair, shapely head of Lucy Grey, her eyes sparkling, and lips apart, as if to command silence; and then, as the curate looked up, there was a slight start, a faint flush of colour in the girl’s pale cheeks, and her head was quickly withdrawn.

A tall, slight, careworn man was the curate of Saint Magdalen’s; hair sprinkled with grey, deep lines crossing his brow, and yet there was a smile of ineffable sweetness lingering about his mouth—a smile which, far from telling of weakness, whispered of sorrow, tenderness, patience, and charity.

The few minutes of tranquillity had passed. The door of the house stood open—as, in fact, did that of every other house in the thickly-inhabited court; the children began to troop back, Bill Jarker took to his pipe and pigeon-flying, and with thoughts trembling between the ideal and the real, the curate entered the door before him.

It was not a Saturday, or he would have found the ascent of the stairs troublesome; but he well knew the manners and customs of the natives, and abstained from making his visits on that day of the week, for on Saturdays there was a rule carried out (one set in force by the landlady), that the attics cleaned down to the second-floor, the second-floor to the first, the first-floor to the passage, which last portion fell to the lot of the occupants of the parlours, front and back—two families who took it in turns to make the dirt upon the said passage wet, and then to smear it from side to side with a flannel, so that the boards always wore the aspect of having been newly hearthstoned with a lump of brown clay, if the simile will stand. Consequently, upon this seventh day of the week, when the lodgers were busy, and Mrs Sims could be heard sniffing as she “did Hardons’ bit,” the journey upwards was dangerous, for if the traveller avoided the snares and pitfalls formed by divers pails and brown pans, or even, maybe, a half-gallon can from the public at the corner if the pail was engaged; if he saved himself from slipping on the sloping, wet boards, and fell over no kneeling scrubber in a dark corner, he most certainly heard low-muttered abuse heaped upon his head for “trapesing” over the newly-cleaned stairs—abuse direct or indirect, according to the quality of the traveller.

Not, then, being a Saturday, Mr Sterne entered the house known as Number 7—by tradition only, for the brass number, after being spun round by one pin for some months, suddenly disappeared—passed along to the worn stairs, two flights of which he ascended, creaking and cracking the while beneath his weight, and every one sloping, so that it seemed hanging to the wall to save itself from falling. He paused for an instant upon the landing opposite Septimus Hardon’s rooms, and listened to the rapid beating “click-click” of Lucy’s sewing-machine; then up two more flights; and again, without pause, up two more, which groaned with weakness and old age; while sunken door-frames, doors that would not shut, and various other indications, told of the insecure condition of the house. And now once more he paused upon the top landing, where some domestic spider had spun a web of string, stretching it from rusty nail to rusty nail, for the purpose of drying clothes—garments now, fortunately for the visitor, absent.

Here fell upon the ear the twitterings of many birds, and the curate’s face again lighted up as the song of the lark once more rang out loud and clear, apparently from outside the window of the attic before whose door he stood. But his reverie was interrupted by a sharp shrill voice, which he could hear at intervals giving orders in a quick angry tone. Then followed the lashing of a whip, a loud yelp, or the occasional rapid beat of a dog’s tail upon the floor. At last, turning the handle of the rickety door, the visitor entered.

“*En avant! Halte là! Ah-h-h! bête*! O, ’tis monsieur,” were the words which greeted Mr Sterne as he entered the sloping-roofed attic, one side of which was almost entirely window—old lead-framed lattice, mended in every conceivable way with pasted paper and book-covers; and there, in the middle of the worn floor, stood the thin, sharp-faced woman of the cellar, holding in one hand a whip, in the other a hoop; while two half-shaven French poodle-dogs crouched at her feet. Seated by the open window surrounded by birdcages, conspicuous among which was that of the lark whose notes enlivened the court, was a sallow, dark-haired, dark-eyed youth, eager-looking and well-featured, but sadly deformed, for his head seemed to rest upon his shoulders, and the leg twisted round the crutch which leaned against his chair was miserably attenuated.

“*Bon jour*! How are the pupils, Madame la Mère?” said the curate, taking a broken chair and seating himself.

“*Bête, bête, bête*!” hissed the woman, making feigned cuts with her little whip at the crouching dogs, which yelped miserably as they shrunk closer to the boards. “Ah, what you deserve!” she said.

“And how are the birds, Jean?” continued the visitor, addressing the young man, who was looking at him half-askance. “Your lark gives me the heartache, and sets me longing for the bright country.”

The curate had touched the right chord, for the youth’s face brightened into a pleasant smile directly.

“Does he not sing!” he said, with a slight French accent; and he leaned towards the cage where the bird, with crest erect, was breasting the wooden bars, and gazing with bright bead-like eyes up at the blue sky; but as soon as the cripple’s finger was inserted between the bars, the bird pecked at it playfully, fluttered its wings, and then, with head on one side, stood looking keenly at its master.

“O yes, he sings,” hissed the woman; “but he is obstinate, is Jean; he should sell his bird, and make money, and not let his poor *mere* always keep him.”

“Pst, pst!” ejaculated Jean, frowning upon his mother; but she only stamped one foot angrily, and continued:

“He is *bête* and obstinate. The doll down-stairs with the needle-machine loves the bird, and she would buy it, and it is worth four shillings; but Jean will that his mother seek his bread for him in de street, wis de stupid dogs; and they are *bête*, and will not learn nosing at all. *Allez donc*!”

As the woman grew more voluble in her speech, she passed from tolerable English to words with a broader and broader accent, till the command given at last to the dogs, each word being accompanied by a sharp cut of the whip, when the animals rose upon their hind-legs, drooped their fore-paws, and then subsided once more into their natural posture, but now to bend their fore-legs, as if kneeling. Then they rose again, drooped, and afterwards meekly crossed, their paws, winking their eyes dolefully the while, and, with an aspect of gravity made absurd, walked slowly off to separate corners of the room, where they again went down upon all-fours, and then sat wistfully winking at and watching their task-mistress.

“See, then!” she exclaimed, in her harsh shrill voice. “They would not do it, though I try thousand time; but now the task is ended they walk. Ah-h-h!”

The cut in the air which accompanied the exclamation might have fallen upon the dogs themselves, for the miserable little objects yelped as they saw it fall, and, as if moved by one muscle, laid their heads against the whitewashed wall till, seeing themselves unnoticed, they curled up, but never for a moment took their blinking eyes off their mistress.

Amidst much muttering, and with many frowns and short sharp shakes of the head, while her lips were pressed closely together, the woman, after much fumbling in her pocket, drew forth a partly-knitted stocking; when, sitting down, she began furiously clicking her needles, watching the while, with half-closed eyes, the curate and her son.

“So, then, you will not sell your lark, Jean?” said Mr Sterne.

The cripple knit his brow slightly, shook his head, and then drawing a long, delicate, girlish finger over the bars of his favourite’s cage, the lark set up its crest, twittered, fluttered its wings, and again pecked at the finger.

“No, no, no,” he said softly; “why does she complain? I would work if I could; but I sell and make money of these, though it seems cruel to keep them shut up, and they beat themselves against their prison-bars to get out into the free air and the green woods. And I’m sorry for them when the little breasts grow bare, and the feathers lie in the bottom of the cage; and she says—*ma mère* there—that I am *bête*.”

The woman seemed to compress every feature, as she shook her head fiercely, and went on with her knitting.

“Look!” continued Jean softly, as he smiled and pointed rapidly from cage to cage, “canaries, linnets, redpoles, goldfinches, and a blackbird. The thrush broke his heart with singing, they said—the birdcatchers—but it was not that: I know why. I have sold four birds this week; but I keep the lark; he is a favourite.”

“Bah!” ejaculated the mother softly; “but he is *bête*;” when, as the curate turned, she was bending over her knitting, shaking her head and frowning, while she stabbed fiercely again and again at the worsted ball till it was transfixed by her needle, when she replaced the ball in her pocket, where the first drag she gave at the thread drew the ball from its place and it rolled on the floor. “Ah! good dog, *bon chien*!” she cried, as one of the poodles ran forward, caught the errant ball, and bore it to his mistress, returning immediately to his corner; but not to be unrewarded, for the woman rose, and forcing up the sliding socket, caused a little scrap of tallow-candle end to shoot out of a tin-candlestick as from a gun, when, receiving permission, the dog snatched it from the floor, and devoured the savoury morsel in its corner.

“But he should sell the lark, monsieur,” said the woman.

“Hush, *ma mère*,” said the cripple angrily; “the bird is not to sell.”

The mother shrugged her shoulders, and clicked her needles furiously.

“We all have our loves and likes, madame,” said the curate quietly.

“O, yes, yes, you rich; but we poor? No. We must live, and eat and drink, and have clothes; and Jean, there, has ruined me in medicine. What do we want with favourites, we poor? But that they help to keep us, I would sell the dogs. We are all slaves here, we poor; and we sell ourselves, our work, our hands, our beauty, some of us,—is it not so? and you rich buy,—or we starve. It is a bad world for us old and ugly. I am not like the doll upon the floor down-stairs.”

A sharp angry glance passed between mother and son, as the former rose from her seat, and with a short quick step left the room, driving back the dogs as they tried to follow; while it was evident that her words jarred painfully upon the curate. “Our beauty, some of us,” seemed to ring in his ears again and again, and he could not help associating these words with the latter part of her speech.

“How do you get your birds, Jean?” said the curate, making an effort, and breaking the silence.

“From him,” said the young man, nodding across the court to where Bill Jarker sat half out of his trap-door, still keeping up his pigeons, for a stray was in sight, and he was in hopes of an amalgamation, in spite of the efforts being made by neighbouring flights. “From him: he goes into the country with his nets—far off, where the green trees wave, while I can only read of them. But the book; did you bring the book?”

Thinking of other birds breasting their prison-bars: now of the fair bright face that he had seen at the window below, now of that of the cripple before him, the curate produced a volume from his pocket, and smiled as he watched the

glittering eyes and eager aspect of the young man, as, hastily grasping the volume, he gazed with avidity upon the title.

“You love reading, then, Jean?” said the curate.

“Yes, yes,” cried the cripple. “What could I do without it? Always here; for I cannot walk much—only about the room. Ah, no! I could not live without reading—and my birds. She is good and kind,” he continued, nodding towards the door; “but we are poor, and it makes her angry and jealous.”

The lark burst forth with one of its sweetest strains as it heard its master’s voice, and then, rising, the curate left the attic, closing the door after him slowly, and peering through the narrowing slit to look upon the cripple eagerly devouring a page of the work he had brought.

The Frenchwoman was upon the first landing, and saluted the curate with a sinister meaning smile as he passed her and thoughtfully descended.

“But he is mean, I tell you,” cried *ma mère* angrily, as she once more stood beside her son. “What does he give us but words—words which are worth nothing? But what is that? My faith, a book he brought you? You shall not read; it makes you silly, and to forget your mother, who does so much for you. But I will!”

“Ah!” cried Jean, painfully starting from his seat, and snatching back the volume, and just in time, for the next moment would have seen it flying from the open window.

“Then I will sell the lark when you are asleep,” cried the woman spitefully.

The youth’s eyes glittered, as, with an angry look, he hissed between his teeth, “Then I will kill the dogs!” But the anger passed from his countenance in a few moments, and smiling softly, he said, “No, no, *ma mère*; you would not sell my poor bird, because I love it, and it would hurt me;” and then, casting down her knitting, the woman sprang across the room, throwing her arms round the cripple, and kissing him passionately, calling him by every endearing name, as she parted the hair from his broad forehead, and gazed in his bright dark eyes with all a mother’s fondness.

But the curate heard nothing of this—nothing but the loud song of the lark, which rang through the house—as slowly and thoughtfully he descended the worn and creaking stairs, while the woman’s words seemed to keep repeating themselves in a slow measured way, vibrating in his ears, and troubling him sorely with their cutting meaning; and more than once he found himself forming with his lips, “Our beauty, some of us.”

Volume Two—Chapter Six.

Shades.

The lark was silent once more; and now from the open door of the first-floor, rising and falling, with a loud and rapid “click, click, click,” came the sound of Lucy Grey’s sewing-machine—“click, click,” the sharp pulsations of the little throbbing engine, whose needle darted in and out of the soft material held beneath it by those white fingers. But as one of the stairs gave a louder crack than ordinary, the machine stopped, and the quiet, earnest, watching face of Lucy Grey appeared at the door, which she now held open, bowing with a naïve grace in answer to the curate’s salutation.

“My mother wished me to watch that you did not go down without seeing her to-day,” said Lucy apologetically; for Mrs Hardon was far from well that week, and, since the long discussion that morning between old Matt and Septimus, she had been bemoaning her lot in a weak spiritless way, till, finding all his attempts at consolation of none effect, Septimus had taken his hat and gone out for a walk with his boy. To-day Mrs Septimus would be tolerably well; to-morrow, in a weak fit, exacting sympathy from husband and child in a way that would have wearied less loving natures. Now she would refuse food, upon the plea that it could not be afforded for her; consolation, because she was a wretched, miserable burden; and medicine, because she was sure that it would do her no good.

“Be patient with her, my darling,” Septimus would say to Lucy—a needless request. “Think of the troubles she has gone through, and then look at me.”

“What for?” Lucy would cry, laughingly prisoning him by seizing his scrubby bits of whisker in her little fingers, and then kissing him on either cheek,—“what for? To see the dearest father that ever lived?” And then memories of the past would float through Septimus Hardon’s brain as he smoothed down the soft braided hair about the girl’s white forehead. But there were tearful eyes above the smiling lips, and Septimus Hardon’s voice used to tremble a little as he said, “God bless you, my darling!”

“Our beauty, some of us,” seemed vibrating in the curate’s ears as Lucy spoke; but the bright look of welcome, the maidenly reserve, and sweet air of innocence emanating from the fair girl before him, seemed to waft away the words, and, returning to the present, he followed her to where Mrs Hardon was lying down. Drawing a chair to the bedside, he seated himself, to listen patiently to the querulous complaints he had so often heard before—murmurings which often brought a hot flush to Lucy’s cheek as she listened, until reassured by the quiet smile of the curate—a look which told her how well he read her mother’s heart, and pitied her for the long sufferings she had endured,—sickness and sorrow,—which had somewhat warped a fond and loving disposition.

Perhaps it was unmaidenly, perhaps wrong in the giver and taker, but, seated at her sewing-machine in the next room, Lucy would watch through the open door for these looks, and treasure them up, never pausing to think that they might be the pioneers of a deeper understanding. She looked forward to his visits, and yet dreaded them,

trembling when she heard his foot upon the stairs; and more than once she had timed her journeys to the warehouse so that they might take her away when he was likely to call; while often and often afterwards, long tearful hours of misery would be spent as she thought of the gap between them, and bent hopelessly over her sewing-machine.

A long interview was Mr Sterne's this day, for Mrs Hardon was more than ordinarily miserable, and had informed him two or three times over that she was about to take to her bed for good.

"But it does not matter, sir; it's only for a little while, and then perhaps I shall be taken altogether. I'm of no use here, only to be a burden to that poor girl and my husband. But for me and the different fancies I have, that poor child need not be always working her fingers to the bone. But she will grow tired of it, and Mr Hardon's health will fail, and our bit of furniture will be seized; and I'm sure I'd rather die at once than that we should all be in the workhouse."

"But," said Mr Sterne, smiling, "don't you think matters might just as likely take the other direction? See now if it does not come a brighter day to-morrow, with a little mental sunshine in return for resignation;" and he whispered the last few words.

Now there was some truth in what Mrs Septimus Hardon said; for had it not been for her liking for strange luxuries when her sick fits were on, Lucy need not have worked so hard. At other times Mrs Hardon was self-denying to an excess; but when in bed, probably from the effort of complaining, her appetite increased to a terrible extent, and she found that she required sticks of larks roasted, fried soles, oysters, pickled salmon, or chicken, to keep her up, while port-wine was indispensable. But if she had preferred ortolans to larks, game and truffles to chicken and oysters, if the money could have been obtained she would have had them. And many a day Septimus and Lucy dined off bread-and-cheese, and many a night went supperless to bed, that the invalid's fancies might be gratified.

The conversation went on, and Lucy at her work more than once raised her eyes; but when her mother's complaints were like the last, she bent her head, and the tears she could not restrain fell hot and fast upon the material before her.

"What have I to hope for?" moaned Mrs Hardon, taking refuge in tears herself when she saw how Lucy was moved. "What have I to hope for?"

"Hope itself, Mrs Hardon," said the curate firmly. "You suffer from a diseased mind as well as from your bodily ailment; and could you but come with me for once, only during a day's visiting, I think you would afterwards bow your head in thankfulness even for your lot in life, as compared with those of many you would see."

"Yes, yes, yes, I know," sobbed the poor woman; "but don't be angry with me. I know how weak and wicked I am to murmur, when they study me as they do; but when I am like this, this weary time comes on, I am never satisfied. Don't—don't be angry with me."

Mrs Hardon's sobs became so violent that Lucy hurried to the bed and took the weary head upon her breast; when, drawing his chair nearer, the curate took the thin worn hand held out so deprecatingly to him.

"Hush!" he whispered; and as he breathed words of tender sympathy that should awaken her faith, the mother looked earnestly on the sad smile on the speaker's face, a smile that mother and daughter had before now tried to interpret, as it came like balm to the murmuring woman, while to her child it spoke volumes; and as her own yearned, it seemed to see into the depths of their visitor's heart, where she read of patience, long-suffering, and crushed and beaten-down hopes.

All at once a heavy step was heard upon the stairs, and Lucy started from her mother's side as a loud rough noise called "Mrs Hardon! Mrs Hardon!" But before she could reach the door of the other room, the handle rattled, and the curate could hear a man's step upon the floor.

"Hush!" exclaimed Mrs Hardon, "it must be a letter;" and involuntarily, as he rose from his chair to leave, the curate had to stand and listen, gazing upon Lucy, who stood in the middle of the next room, now flooded with light from the sunshine which streamed through staircase window and open door, and he could not but mark the timid face of the girl as she stood wrapped as it were in the warm glow.

But it was no letter, only Mr William Jarker, who, invisible from where the curate stood, was telling Lucy in familiar easy tones that his "missus wanted to see the parson afore he went."

As Mr Sterne stepped forward and saw the ruffian's leering look and manner, and the familiar sneering smile upon his coarse lips, he shivered and turned paler than was his wont before knitting his brows angrily, while, troubled and confused, Lucy looked from one to the other as if expecting Mr Sterne should speak.

But the look made no impression upon Mr Jarker, who directed a half-laugh at Lucy, and then, nodding surlily towards the curate, he turned, and directly after there came the sounds of his heavy descending steps as he went down, leaving the room impregnated with the odour of the bad tobacco he had been smoking.

"Our beauty, some of us," rang in the curate's ears once more, and like a flash came the recollection of the meeting he had witnessed in the street. His mind was in a whirl with thoughts that he could not analyse; while as his eyes met those of Lucy, the girl stood with face aflame, trembling before him—looks that might have meant indignation or shame, as, with the smile still upon his lip, but so altered, the curate turned to go; but he stopped for a moment at the door, where out of sight of Mrs Hardon, he could again confront the shrinking girl with a long inquiring gaze; but trembling, agitated, with lips void of utterance, though parted as if to speak, Lucy stood back, her eyes now cast down, and, when she raised them once again, he was gone.

Then, with the colour slowly fading, to leave her face ashy pale, Lucy stood with outstretched hands, gazing at the

closed door. Something seemed rising in her throat which she tried to force back, and it was only by an effort that she kept from crying out, as, falling upon her knees by a chair, she buried her face in her hands, choking down the sobs, lest her mother should hear; though she, poor woman, slowly turned her face to the wall, ignorant of her child's suffering, and slept.

And now again came ringing down the sweet clear trill of Jean's lark, till, worn out with the impetuosity of her grief, the poor girl raised her head, smoothed back her dark hair, and half-sitting, half-kneeling, listened to the strain.

The song ceased as suddenly as it had commenced, and the void was filled by a long, loud whistling; when, with lips set firm, and angry countenance, Lucy rose and stepped lightly across the room to her sewing-machine by the open window, where, raising her eyes, she could see Mr Jarker, pipe in hand, presenting himself once more as a half-length study, as he whistled and cheered on his flight of pigeons, which sailed round and round, till the whirring and flapping of their wings brought up early days of her childhood, and Lucy seemed to gaze upon some half-forgotten woodland scene in the country, with ring-necked stockdoves crowding on a bending branch after their return from flight.

But no such visions floated before the mind's eye of Mr Jarker, for his pipe was out; so, ceasing his whistle, he proceeded to ignite a match upon the blackened pipe-bowl, screening the tiny flame between his hands till the tobacco was in a glow—all the while in happy oblivion of a pair of indignant flashing eyes that rested upon him till their brightness was once more dimmed by tears. Heedless, too, was Mr Jarker of the strange sardonic leer directed at him from the attic-window opposite his own, where *ma mère*, with her dim grey eyes, glanced at him from time to time as she busily knitted, or stabbed her ball of worsted; for Mr Jarker was evidently interested in what was taking place beneath him, as he glanced through his trap from time to time. And now once more, with rapid beat, rose the "click, click, click," of Lucy's sewing-machine, as, flashing in and out of the fine material the needle laid in its chain-like stitches; but Lucy Grey's finely-stitched lines were far from even that afternoon.

Volume Two—Chapter Seven.

With Mrs Jarker.

Always at the call of the poor of his district, the Reverend Arthur Sterne sighed as, slowly descending towards the court, he tried to drive away the words that seemed to ring in his ears; but in vain, for the next moment he was muttering them once more; and the thought came upon him that, for many months past, he had been gazing at the Hardon family through a pleasant medium—a softening mist, glowing with bright colours, but now swept away by one rude blast, so that he looked upon this scene of life in all its rugged truthfulness. He told himself that the mist had once opened to afford him a glimpse, while again and again he smiled at the folly which had led him to expect romance in a London court. The pleasant outlines and softened distance, toned down by the light mists, were gone now, and he gazed upon nothing but the cold, bare reality. It was strange; but he did not ask himself whether the bitter blast might not have brought with it some murky, distorted cloud, whose shade had been cast athwart the picture upon which, he now woke to the fact, he had dearly loved to gaze; and still muttering to himself, he slowly went down step by step.

"So young, so pure-looking! But who could wonder, living in this atmosphere of misery? But what is it to me?" he cried angrily; for strange thoughts and fancies came upon him, and his mind was whispering of a wild tale. The thoughts of the past, too, came—of the happy days when, in early manhood, he had loved one as fair and bright—one whom another bridegroom had claimed, as having been betrothed to him from her birth. The cold earth had been her nuptial-bed, and he, the lover, became the gloomy retired student until his appointment to a city curacy, and the devotion of his life to the sorrows of the poor. But again he bit his lip angrily, at making the comparison between the dead and the living. What connection was there between them, and of what had he been dreaming? What indeed! After years upon years of floating down life's stream,—a calm and sad, but placid journey, unruffled but by the sorrows of others,—he now awoke to the fact that unwittingly he had halted by a pleasant spot, where he had been loitering and dreaming of something undefined—something fraught with memories of the past; and now he had been rudely awakened and recalled to the duties he had chosen.

He passed into the court, and stood for a few moments gazing at where there was a cellar opened, with half a score of children collected to drop themselves or their toys down; while, being a fresh arrival upon the scene, a cluster of the little ones began to get beneath his feet, and run against him, or give themselves that pleasant cramp known as "a crick in the neck," by staring up in his face; but he freed himself from his visitors by hastily entering the opposite house.

More than one door was opened, and more than one head thrust out, as Mr Sterne ascended the staircase; but in every instance there was a smile and a rude curtsey to greet him, for he had that happy way of visiting learned by so few, and his visits always seemed welcome. Those who, moved by curiosity, appeared, were ladies, who directly after became exceedingly anxious concerning their personal appearance. Aprons, where they were worn, were carefully stroked down; hair was smoothed or made less rough; sundry modest ideas seemed to rise respecting a too great freedom of habit where a junior was partaking of nourishment; but everywhere the curate met with cordial glances, till he once more stood in front of an attic and entered.

Mr Sterne had so far only encountered females; for "the master" of the several establishments was out at work, or down in the country after the birds, or at the corner of some street where there was a public-house, at whose door he slouched, in the feeble anticipation that work would come there to find him, or that the landlord or a passing friend would invite him to have "a drain;" but Mr William Jarker was, as has been seen, at home, though, with the exception of his legs, invisible; for he was among his pigeons, emulating the chimneys around by the rate at which he smoked—chimneys smoking here the year round, since in most cases one room formed the mansion of a family.

But Mr Sterne had not come to see Jarker, but at the summons of his wife, in whom some eighteen months had wrought a terrible change. She sat wrapped in an old shawl, shivering beside the few cinders burning in the rusty grate—shivering though burned up with fever, the two or three large half-filled bottles of dispensary medicine telling of a long and weary illness. The wide windows admitted ample light, but only seemed to make more repulsive the poverty-stricken place, with its worn, rush-bottomed chairs, rickety table, upon which stood the fragments of the last meal; the stump bedstead, with its patched patchwork counterpane; the heaped-up ashes beneath the grate; the battered and blackened quart-pot from the neighbouring public-house standing upon the hob to do duty as saucepan; while here and there stood in corners the stakes and nets used by Mr Jarker in his profession of birdcatcher. A few cages of call-birds hung against the wall; but Mr Jarker's custom was, when he had captured feathered prey, to dispose of it immediately—pigeons being his "fancy."

A sad smile lit up the woman's face as the curate entered,—a face once doubtless pleasing, but now hollow, yellow, and ghastly; where hung out flauntingly were the bright colours which told of the enemy that held full sway in the citadel of life.

"I knew you would come, sir," she whispered, letting her thin white fingers play amongst the golden curls of a little head, but half-concealed in her lap, where one bright round eye as peeping timidly out to watch the stranger; and then, as the curate took one of the broken chairs and sat beside the sick woman, whenever she spoke it was in a whisper, and with many a timid glance at the ladder and open trap in the roof, where her master stood, as though she feared to call down punishment upon her head,—"I knew you would come; and Bill was easy to-day, and come and fetched you, though he came back and said you were busy, and would not stop."

"Look alive, there, and get that over!" cried Mr Jarker from the trap. "I ain't a-goin' to stand here all day;" and by way of giving effect, or for emphasis, this remark was accompanied by a kick at the ladder, and a shake of the trap. Then followed an interval of peace, during which the presence of the domestic tyrant was made known only by the fumes of his tobacco, which floated down into the room, and made the poor woman cough terribly.

Once Mr Sterne was about to tell the fellow to cease, but the look of horror in the woman's face, and the supplicating joining of her hands, made him pause, for he knew that he would be but adding to her suffering when his back was turned. The open trap seemed to act as a sort of retiring-room for Mr Jarker when anyone was in the attic that he did not wish to see; but every now and then during the earnest conversation with the suffering woman, there came a kick and a growl, and a shake of the ladder, which made Mr Sterne frown, and the poor woman start as if in dread. And so, during the remainder of the curate's stay, the consolatory words he uttered were again and again interrupted; while at last the voice came growling down as if in answer to a statement Mrs Jarker had just made:

"Don't you tell no lies, now, come, or I shall make it hot for yer!" When in the involuntary shudder the woman gave, there was plainly enough written for the curate's reading the long and cruel records of how "hot" for her it had often been made.

And now the importunities of the child by her knee aroused the poor woman to a forgetfulness of self in motherly cares, when the curate took his leave, but in nowise hurried by the savage shake that Jarker gave to the ladder—a shake which brought down a few scraps of plaster, to fall upon the cages and make the songsters flutter timidly against their prison-bars.

Half-way down the stairs Mr Sterne encountered the woman with whom he had seen Lucy in the Lane; the woman he presumed to be the mother of the child Mrs Jarker had now for some time nursed.

For a moment he stopped, as if to speak; but he remembered the next instant that he had no right to question her, and he stood gazing sternly at her, while, as she shrank back into a corner of the landing, her look was keen and defiant—the look of the hunted at bay. Once he had followed her for some distance, and then perhaps he would have spoken; but now the desire seemed gone, and linked together in his mind were Lucy, *ma mère*, the ruffian he had left up-stairs, and this woman.

"But what is it to me?" he thought bitterly; and, hurrying down the stairs, he stood for a moment at the doorway, heedless of the children scampering over the broken pavement—heedless that, with hot eyes and fevered cheeks, Lucy had left her sewing-machine and stepped back from the window that she should neither see nor be seen—heedless of all around; for his thoughts were a strange medley—pride, duty, and passion seeking to lead him by different roads. Then for a while he remembered the poor woman he had left, whose leave-taking he felt was near—a parting that he could not but feel would be a happy release from sorrow and suffering.

At last, turning to go, he cast his eyes towards the open window that Lucy had so lately left, when, with knitted brow and care gnawing at his heart, he passed out into the street, and walked towards his lodgings; but even there, in the midst of the busy throng, where the deafening hum of the traffic of the great city was ever rising and falling, now swelling into a roar, and again sinking to the hurried buzz of the busy workers, ever rang in his ears the bitter words of the old Frenchwoman—"Our beauty, some of us!"

Volume Two—Chapter Eight.

Documentary Evidence.

"Now, sir," said old Matt, as he appeared, brushed-up and smart for the occasion, punctual to his appointment; "now, sir; here we are—baptism, marriage, and doctor. First ought to come last, you know, only Saint Mark's Church comes before Finsbury, don't you see?"

Septimus Hardon rose from his writing with a sigh, for he was far from sanguine of success, and would fain even now

have given up his task entirely, so feeble seemed to him the likelihood of any advantage accruing; but in obedience to instructions from Mrs Septimus, old Matt rattled on about the future, thoroughly doing his duty in keeping the shrinking man to his part; and so they started.

They made their way out into Holborn, and then up Skinner-street, past the frowning walls of Newgate, and into the street of the same name; when old Matt could not get along for stopping to admire the various joints displayed, and giving his opinion upon their merits.

“Here, let’s go this way, sir,” he said, turning into Warwick-lane. “Pretty game this, sir, isn’t it? Slaughtered sheep, and murdered novels, and books of all sorts close together. Authors’ sheep’s-heads, and butchers’ sheep’s-heads cheek by jowl. Rum thing for both trades to get so close together. Regular bit of philosophy if you like to take it up, sir; stomach and brains, you see, food for both—books for the brains, meat for the stomach; and then backwards and forwards, one feeds the other, and one couldn’t get on without the other; and here they are situated close to the very heart of the City. Look at the circulation going on—wonderful, ain’t it, sir?”

Old Matt stopped by a slaughter-house, not to pity the simple animal just killed, but to point out sundry choice portions that might be had bargains, if they could have availed themselves of the opportunity.

“Wouldn’t do, though, to go about such a job as we have on hand carrying a sheep’s-head, would it, sir?” he observed to Septimus.

“No; pray come along, and let’s get our task over,” exclaimed the latter.

“To be sure,” said Matt, coming to himself, and the next minute they were in Paternoster-row. “Lots of my old friends here,” said Matt, stopping short in the middle of the narrow way, to be hustled by boys laden with sheets of paper fresh from the press, lads carrying reams, or newly-bound works tied between boards; men with blue bags over their shoulders heavily laden with books; men with oblong “mems” in their hands which they consulted as they hurried from swinging door to swinging door, collecting the publications of the different firms. Once the old man was nearly run over by a truck full of type-galleys driven by a pair of reckless imps of some neighbouring printing-office; while at least four times he came into contact with the fruit-baskets of the nymphs in stout boots and flattened bonnets, whose haunt is the labyrinth of learning known as “the Row.”—“Lots of my old friends here,” said Matt as his companion looked bewildered, and was thrust off the pavement; on to it again; into booksellers’ where he did not want to go; and once against the muddy wheel of a cab, whose driver roundly abused him for nearly getting himself injured.—“Lots of my old friends here. Ah, you needn’t mind a bit of pushing, sir—it’s a busy place. Now, you know, if I liked to hunt about, I could find more than one bit of my work here, for I’ve done things and bits of things that’s come out in more than half these places. All sorts of stuff; and what a sight of work a man can be put upon in a matter of fifty year, from playbills to prayer-books, and down again to penny-a-lining and posters! Law and physic’s been my strongest points: but there; I’ve been on your magazines, and newspapers, and three-volume novels, and pamphlets, and everything else that’s printed on a leaf, ’cept’ last dying-speeches and halfpenny songs; and I never did get down, quite so low as that. I’ve taken hold of author’s copy so queer that it’s made you scratch your head and torn the paper t’other way up to see which is tops and which is bottoms, and then back again, for you’ve been as wise as ever. Talk about ants and bluebottles running over the paper with inky feet, that’s nothing, sir. You’ve seen them painter-chaps, sir, graining the shetters of shops?”

Septimus, seeing that he was expected to say something, roused himself from his brown study, and nodded.

“Well,” continued Matt, “you see they have what they call a tool, though it’s only a flat brush made like a comb, and with that they make lines cross and across the panels, all about the same distance apart, and then they dab them lightly with a long soft brush to keep the grain from looking too stiff and hard. Well, I’ve had copy that’s looked as if the author had used one of these tools dipped in ink, and streaked it across and across the paper, and then dabbed it, not with a very soft brush, but with a very hard one, shoving in, too, a few smears and blots, just to fill up as knots and specimens of cross-grain. Up one goes to the overseer and asks him to help you, giving the other men a side-grin at the same time. He takes it, looks at it, turns it over, and then can’t make anything of it, though he won’t say so; for overseers must of course seem to know everything. So he sticks it back in your hand, and says he, ‘Go and make the best you can of it; for I’m busy.’ Well, you go back, and make the best you can of it; puzzles out one word, jumps at another, puts in two, and guesses two more, while you make a couple more out of the next line fit in somewhere after ’em; and so, one way or another, it gets scrambled up, and the proof goes to the reader, who cuffs his boy’s head because he blunders so over the stuff he can’t make head nor tail of, though he’s as much bothered as his boy; while, though some of them are clever, intelligent fellows, some of those readers, sir, have about as much imagination as a mop. They’re down upon a wrong letter, or bad pointing or spelling, and stick a big qy? against a bit of slack grammar, like lightning; but give ’em a take of stuff where the author goes a little out of the regular rut, and it bothers them as much as the bit of copy I’m talking about. Well, sir, corrections get made, and the proof is sent in to the author, who most likely don’t know it again; but he sends it back so as one has a better chance of getting it together; and so it goes on, backwards and forwards, till it’s all right, and they write ‘press’ in one corner, when it’s printed, and, as far as we’re concerned, there’s an end of it. Strange ways, ain’t they, sir?”

Septimus Hardon stared in a bewildered manner at the speaker, but did not answer.

“Blest if I think he’s heard a word I’ve said,” muttered the old fellow.

“Strange?” said Septimus, rousing himself; “yes, very.”

“’Tis, sir,” said Matt, who was interested in his subject. “Now, do you know, sir,” he continued after they had walked part of the way along the Row,—“do you know that if I was younger, I should be for founding a society, to be called the ‘Printers’ Spectacle Association,’ supported by contributions from writers for the press, who by this means would supply us with glasses, for often and often they quite destroy our sight.”

Old Matt's dissertation was put an end to by the driver of one of the Delivery carts, when, returning to the matter which had brought them from home, the strange couple were soon threading their way along Cheapside.

There was but little difficulty in getting access to the registers of the old church, and a not very long search brought the seekers to the entry, in brown ink upon yellow paper, of the baptism of Septimus, son of Octavius and Lavinia Hardon, January 17—; but though the ages of the children before and after were entered, by some omission, his was absent.

A copy was taken by both, and then they stood once more in the open street.

"Just as I told you, sir," said Matt, "isn't it? there's the date; but it don't say how old you were."

"No," replied Septimus; "but still it is satisfactory, so far. Now we'll see about the marriage, and then visit Finsbury."

"You know the church?" said Matt.

"Well, not exactly," said Septimus dreamily.

"There are two in the street; but it was at one of them."

"Good," said the old man; and soon after they stood in the street of two churches, and, taking the most imposing, they obtained admission to the vestry, where, after a long and careful search of the time-stained register, they were compelled to give up, for there was no result; while the regular way in which the leaves followed proved that none were missing.

"Try t'other," said Matt laconically; and soon after they entered the damp, mouldy-smelling receptacle of the registers at the second church—a quaint, queerly-built place that looked as if architecture had been set at defiance when it was erected.

Old Matt was quiet and laconic enough in his speech; but as leaf after leaf was turned over, it was evident that the old man was more deeply interested than Septimus himself; for he grew so excited, that he was quite voracious with his snuff, his nose becoming a very devouring dragon of Scotch and rappee, till the supposed date of the marriage was neared, when the snuff was hastily pocketed.

"Rayther rheumatic spot this, I should think," said Matt to the sexton, so as to appear quite at his ease.

"Well, yes, it *is* damp," said the sexton, who would have had no difficulty in passing himself off as Matt's brother; "but we have a fire here on Sundays all through the winter."

"Don't have many berrin's now, I s'pose," said Matt, again bringing out the snuff, but this time for hospitable purposes.

"Bless you, no," said the sexton, "ain't had one for years upon years. All cemetery work now."

"To be sure, of course," said Matt, trying to converse in a cool pleasant way, but with one eye fixed upon the trembling searcher; for some of Matt's eagerness seemed now to be transferred to his companion.

"There's a great piece of the book out here," said Septimus suddenly—"most of the year before the baptism."

"Torn out, by Jove!" muttered Matt, shaking his head, and looking suspicion's self.

"Dessay there is, sir," said the sexton coolly; "the damp here would spile the binding of any book."

"But, I say; look here, you sir; here's a good four months gone: no Jennywerry, nor Feberwerry, nor March, nor April. Looks precious queer," said Matt.

"Ah, so there is—good big bit gone; all but a leaf here and there." And then, to get a better look, the sexton took out an old leathern case, drew out his spectacles, replaced the case very carefully, wiped the glasses upon the tail of his coat, and then very leisurely put them on, a process not directly completed; for, like their master, the springs of the spectacles had grown weak, and were joined by a piece of black tape, which had to be passed carefully over the sexton's head to keep the glasses in their place. "Ah," he said again, while the searchers looked on, astonished at his coolness, "so there is—a good big bit gone; but 'tain't no wonder, for the thread's as rotten as tinder, and—"

"I say, old un, don't tear any more out," cried Matt excitedly; for the sexton was experimentally disposed, and testing the endurance of the thread and glue.

"There's plenty loose," said the old sexton, "and I shouldn't be a bit surprised if you find a lot more gone."

Septimus Hardon looked at Matt, who returned the look, for the feeling of suspicion was now fully shared. However, they still went on carefully searching.

"It's of no use," said Septimus at last, mournfully; "we may as well go. I never had any hope."

"Don't be in a hurry, sir," said Matt. "You know there are other ways of killing the cat, as the old saying says; wait a bit. Looks suspicious, certainly," he said, treating himself to a fresh pinch of snuff.—"I say, guv'nor, you haven't got the loose leaves lying about anywheres, have you? Not been taken away that you know of, eh?"

The sexton shook his head, thrust his hands to the bottoms of his trousers-pockets, shrugged his shoulders to his ears, and then stood gazing at his visitors with his spectacles high up on his forehead.

“No,” said he, “nobody never meddles with ’em, ’cept a lawyer’s clerk now and then; and they’re very civil, and just copies out something, and gives me a shilling, and then goes.”

Septimus Hardon took the hint in its first acceptation, while the mouldy old sexton removed one hand from his pocket to accept the proffered shilling held to him, before his visitors were about to take the second part of the hint.

As they moved off through the damp old church, Septimus Hardon wondered whether, upon some bright morning half a century before, his father and mother had knelt before that altar and been made one. He sighed as he walked on, meeting in the entrance a tall, gentlemanly—looking man who was passing in.

“What’s to be done next, Matt?” said Septimus, in a dispirited tone.

“Pint of porter and crust o’ bread-and-cheese,” said the old man decidedly. “I’m faint, sir—got a fit of my chronics; but it’s taking me the wrong way to-day; I’m hungry, and you must want support. Keep your chin in the air, sir; we can’t win every time. You’ve had two tries this morning, and one’s come all right. That register looks suspicious, certainly; but after all you can’t even go and swear that your old people were married in that church; and even if you could, and had the copy of the stiffikit, that ain’t all we want, for it don’t prove that you weren’t a year old then.”

“Hi!” cried a voice behind them; and upon the cry being repeated, they both turned to find that the old sexton was telegraphing them to come back, by wagging his head in the direction of the church-door.

“What’s up now?” said old Matt when they reached him.

“Parson wants to see you in the westry,” was the reply.

Anxiously following the old man, Septimus Hardon found himself in the presence of the gentleman he had encountered at the door.

“I think,” said he, “that you have been complaining of the bad state of our registers, and really we deserve it. I have only been here a few weeks, and have done but little towards getting them right. However, I have quite fifty loose leaves and pieces arranged here ready for pasting back, though I can assure you it is no light task.”

As he spoke, he took down from a little closet on the wall a heap of damp-stained, ragged, worthless-looking paper, and then set himself to try and help discover the required name.

“Hardon,” he said,—“Hardon, Octavius Hardon and Lavinia Addison. We’ll lay those that are done with down here, if you please; for, though they do not appear so, the leaves are in a certain order. Hardon, Hardon, Octavius, and Lavinia Addison,” he kept on muttering, as Septimus and he carefully examined column after column amongst the dilapidated leaves; though Septimus progressed but slowly, for his hand trembled and a mist swam before his eyes.

“Take a glass of wine,” said the curate kindly, producing a decanter and glass from the little cupboard; “you seem agitated.”

Septimus took the glass with trembling hand, and then resumed his task with increased energy, till at last there were not above half a dozen leaves to scan, when he uttered an exclamation of joy, for there, upon a scrap before him—torn, stained, and almost illegible—was the sought-for entry, bearing the well-known signature of his father, and the trembling handwriting of his mother.

“Here, here, Matt,” he whispered, “look!” and the paper quivered in his hands—“‘Octavius Hardon, Lavinia Addison,’ and signed by her old friend Miss Morris.”

“Right it is, so far,” said Matt, holding his glasses to his eyes wrong way foremost, with both hands, “and just a year and a half before the baptism. Now you know, sir, I pitched it pretty strong before now, so as you shouldn’t expect too much; but it’s my belief that, after all said and done, we’ve got enough documentary evidence; and things seeming so very regular, if you had begun as you should have done, unless there was something very strong on the other side that we can’t see through, you must have got a verdict. But then I hardly like for you to try on this only; for the law’s a ticklish thing to deal with, and though this all looks so straightforward, it don’t prove against what your uncle says, and will bring witnesses to swear.”

“But how can he?” exclaimed Septimus, in a whisper.

“Ah,” said Matt, refreshing himself after his wont, “how can he? Why, by means of that comical stuff as he’s been so anxious to get hold of. Why, sir, he could find witnesses as would swear to any mortal thing on the face of this earth; they’d almost undertake to prove as you weren’t born at all, sir. Mind, I don’t say that they’d carry the day, sir; but I’m only telling you of what villainy there is in this world, and how you must be prepared, even to fighting the dev— I beg your pardon, sir,” said Matt bashfully, as he pulled up short, having in his earnestness forgotten the presence of the third party.

“I’m sorry to say that there’s a great deal of truth in what you assert,” said the curate quietly; for Septimus was looking at him in an appealing way as if expecting that he would demolish all that Matt had advanced. “Suborned witnesses are nothing new in this world of ours.”

“Pull out your note-book, sir, and let’s take it down,” said Matt; and as he spoke, he drew out an old dog’s-eared memorandum-book and a stumpy fragment of lead pencil that would not mark without being kissed and coaxed every moment, when he copied the entry most carefully, compared it with the original, and then with that just made by Septimus Hardon.

“Really,” said the clergyman at parting, “I am extremely glad to have met you this morning, and you may depend

upon finding us in better order at your next visit."

"There has been no trickery there you see, Matt," said Septimus, as they stood once more in the street; "all seems straightforward."

"Just so, sir; your uncle seems to have some game of his own that I can't quite see through as yet; but stop a bit. Good sort o' chap that young parson. I'll ask him to dinner some day, though he didn't say, 'Take a glass of sherry, Matthew Space.' Then how careful you ought to be! Now I should have been ready to swear that your precious uncle had been at them books. S'pose he ain't so much older than you, sir?"

"Not many years," replied Septimus. "He was my poor father's younger brother. But now for the doctor!" he said in an elated tone.

"Thanky, sir, but suppose we have the porter and bread-and-cheese first. You youngsters are so rash and impatient; and besides, I didn't taste that fine old dry sherry, you know. One thing at a time's the best plan, and it seems to me that a little refreshment's the next thing wanted. 'Tain't no use to suppose, sir, that because a horse has won one race he'll go and polish off the next the same hour. D'yer see, sir?"

Septimus expressed himself as being able to see, and he submitted forthwith to his companion's guidance.

Now most people would imagine that Matt entered the first inviting open portal that presented itself, where the gorgeously-emblazoned boards announced the retailing of So-and-so's entire; but no. Old Matt seemed very particular and hard to please, passing house after house before he could meet with one to his satisfaction; and in a quarter of an hour's brisk walk a few public-houses can be passed in London streets. But Matt had something else on his mind besides draught stout; and at last, when Septimus Hardon's patience was well-nigh exhausted, the old man stopped short before a place where the window displayed a notice to the effect that the Post-office Directory was at the bar.

"There," said Matt, pointing to the window, "thought me a nuisance now, didn't you, sir? But that's what I wanted. So now we'll have our stout and cheese, and a look at the doctors too."

Seated in the public-house parlour, fragrant with the fumes of flat beer and stale tobacco, they were soon discussing the foaming stout and more solid refreshments, though Septimus spent the greater part of his time poring over the volume he had laid open upon the gum-ringed table—a volume that Matt considered would be as useful as a medical directory. Surgeons there were in plenty; but only one answering to the name of Phillips, and he was practising at Newington.

"Moved there, perhaps," said Matt.

Septimus Hardon shook his head, and read again, "Phillips, EJ, Terrace, Newington."

"Stop a bit, sir," said Matt, rising and catching the ring hung from the ceiling, and pulling the bell.—"Here, fill that pint again, my man; and, I say, got another of these d'rectories anywheres?"

"Yes," said the pot-boy, "there's another somewheres—an old un."

"That's the ticket, my lad, bring it in."

The boy performed the, to him, satisfactory feat of pitching the pot in the air, and catching it with one hand as he went out, though the performance was somewhat marred by the vessel turning in its flight, and announcing its descent by a small frothy brown shower, which sprinkled the performer's countenance. However, he was soon back with the refilled measure, and a very dirty, very dusty, and dog's-eared old copy of the Directory, with one cover torn off, and a general aspect of its having been used for generations as the original London Spelling-book.

Septimus seized the bulky tome, and soon had the right page found; and in this volume there was no mention of EJ Phillips of Newington.

"Young beginner," said Matt hollowly; for he had the pewter-vessel to his lips. "Anyone else same name?"

"Two more!" cried Septimus in a husky voice: "Phillips, Thomas, Camden-town; Phillips, Nicholas, Chiswell-street."

"Hooray!" cried Matt, thumping down the pewter-pot, so that a portion of the contents splashed over into the cheese-dish. "That's the man we want, sir; so finish your crust and cheese, and then off we go." And shrewd old Matt forgot to ask himself in his excitement how it was that the name was not in the Directory often years later date, but acted up to what he was advising, and, then late in the afternoon, they again started on their search.

It was not a very long walk from Walbrook to Chiswell-street; but old Matt made very little progress, halting at times as if in pain, while in answer to inquiries he only smiled and declared that it was his "chronics." Now he panted and seemed out of breath, then he paused at one of his favourite halting-places, but too short of breath to make a speech, even had he felt so disposed. At the last stoppage, induced by Septimus Hardon's eager strides, the old man panted out:

"Let's see, sir; you walked down to Somesham, didn't you?"

"Yes," replied Septimus somewhat surprised at the question. "Come along;" for he was now as eager to continue the quest as he had formerly been to avoid it.

"That's all very well," said Matt, panting; "but I shouldn't have liked to walk with you, and if Chiswell-street had been

t’other side the square, you’d have had to carry me, so I tell you; and—”

“Is anything wrong?” exclaimed Septimus anxiously, for his companion had turned very pale and haggard.

“Not much,” he gasped; “better d’rectly—out of breath rather.”

But he seemed to grow so much worse, that all thought of farther search was forgotten in the anxiety to get the old man to the principal thoroughfare, for he stoutly refused to hear of a cab being called; though he sank back thoroughly exhausted in a corner of the omnibus, when at last the right one passed with room inside.

A quiet cup of tea and an hour’s rest seemed to restore the old man, and he rose to leave Bennett’s-rents, firmly refusing to allow Septimus to walk home with him, though it was only by slow stages and great exertion that he reached his lodging.

Volume Two—Chapter Nine.

The Curate at Home.

The task of the Reverend Arthur Sterne was weary, and one that might have made him sigh had he known no other troubles. Work, work, work, of the most disheartening character for the most part; and it was only in rare instances that he could feel in his own heart that his labours had been of any avail. Here he would listen to a hypocritical tale of woe, there to a story of real sorrow; now his task would be to try and point out some foolish reckless piece of extravagance; then to call to account for folly and idleness. Everywhere there was the same display of live to-day, and let to-morrow take care of itself. Forethought and providence seemed to know no home in Bennett’s-rents and the neighbourhood, perhaps because hope had often been so long deferred that the sickened hearts believed in it no more. Dirt everywhere, drunkenness frequently, vice often, with their followings of sorrow, repentance, disease, and death. Years, however, had made him to be looked upon as a friend, and his step was always welcomed, while, effecting what good he could, he toiled patiently on; fearing no fever, dreading no epidemic, but ever ready, he visited the bedside of the stricken—the vilest or the most unfortunate—ready to join his prayers to theirs for pardon—to point out the long neglected road that should have been taken—to teach the ignorant the words they had never known, or perhaps forgotten years upon years before. His was a task that knew but little earthly recompense, save the knowledge of duty done; but many a parting soul blessed him with lips soon to be motionless for ever, or thanked him with those glazing eyes from which the wild despairing look had faded, as he knelt in intercession for one whose opportunity for better things had never come, but who, born into the misery and wretchedness of a great town, had passed in it the life now about to be given up at the stern call that knows no refusal.

It was a weary task amidst so poor and wretched a flock; but could the curate have been at rest, he would have been happy in the good he effected, and the simple confidence now placed in him by those he visited. Even Bill Jarker had of late taken to pulling off his fur-cap and picking it when they met; and there was no hypocrisy in the salutation, for it was wrung from him by the genuine respect he felt. But then the curate was not at rest, for he had now thoroughly awakened to the germs which had rooted themselves in his heart, growing more and more till his very life was interlaced with the strong fibres. Now, he would deliberately try to eradicate the growth, tearing and lacerating himself in his efforts to rid himself of the unbidden guest; but the progress he made was slow in comparison with the growth he fought against. Blindly, though, he would tell himself that he had conquered, that the last root was torn out, and the door of his heart closed against further entrance. And then, in the pride of his believed victory, he would tell himself of how he had been about to lavish riches upon one beneath him, and unworthy, when his heart would reply that love was a leveller, and laugh to scorn the subtle distinctions of caste; reminding him, too, that this maiden had grown up as it were beneath his eye, that he had watched her for years, while she was as well born, perhaps, as he. And then, in his heart, there would shoot forth a tiny green blade, then there was the opening leaf, and soon again the blossom; while roots spread here and there lacing and interlacing stronger and stronger than ever, as if he had been by his efforts merely preparing the soil for a richer growth of the ever-verdant clinging plant that he sought in vain to tear away.

So wearily on, day after day, passed the curate’s life, a struggle between the natural affection and self-imposed duty, while night after night in his sleepless hours he heaped up reproaches upon himself for work neglected, and the dreamy musings into which he was wont to fall. Self-deceiving, he had gone on taking more and more interest in the Hardon family, blinding himself to his real sentiments, until now that the veil had been so rudely snatched from his eyes he writhed hourly, maddened almost, that he should have allowed his peace to have been disturbed for what he fiercely told himself was worthless.

It was not a long walk from the Bennett’s-rents region to Surrey-street, where he had rooms in a gloomy wilderness of a house, which he shared with a solicitor, an accountant, and a company that seemed to be composed of a small secretary and a large heap of prospectuses. Here he would seek for the rest he could not find, anxious and worn, day after day, since his last visit to the Hardons, much to the discomposure of Aunt Fanny, who dwelt with him in the double capacity of housekeeper and companion.

A prim, pleasant old dame, proud of her great age, and of her bright silver hair, smoothed in bands beneath her quaint old widow’s cap; sitting or standing, ever with her arms crossed over her black corded-silk apron, while a mitten-covered hand clasped each elbow. A prim, pleasant-looking old dame, always dressed in lavender poplin, whose stiff plaits seemed to have been carved out of the solid, as she stood at the window watching for the coming of her boy. For “Arty” always had been, and doubtless always would be, a boy in her pleasant old eyes—eyes that spoke the truth of her tender old heart; though there was one point upon which Aunt Fanny would err, and that was her age. Unlike ladies of a certain time of life, she was proud of her years, and, doubtless from some haziness in her arithmetic, she was given to adding to them, so that more than once in her arguments respecting points of time, she

somewhat upset her calculations.

“Why, aunt,” the curate would say, “you cannot be so old as you say by eight years.”

“Nonsense, my dear boy, how can you know anything about it? I’m eighty-two.”

“Then,” he would say loudly, “you must have been thirty when you were married.”

“Nonsense, child; how can you be so silly! And you need not shout so. I was twenty-two when your poor uncle led me to the altar.” And then she would fall to smoothing her black apron, and arranging the folds of her dress, with hands that trembled in an agitated manner, a tear standing in one of the still bright eyes, as the old recollections sprang up, when, ceasing the discussion, her nephew would tenderly kiss her hand, and sit affectionately gazing in her handsome old face. Indeed time had paid a certain respect to Aunt Fanny, so that she looked years younger than she really was, while all her faculties save one were bright as ever; for proud though she was of the fine stitching placed with her own needle round Arty’s shirt-fronts—stitching aided by no spectacles—and ignorant though she was of her failing, yet Aunt Fanny was terribly deaf.

But she hardly felt the affliction, speaking of it as a slight weakness which affected her when she had a cold, always remaining unconscious that what she looked upon as a whisper was a conversation carried on in a loud key. Poor Aunt Fanny could not hear very well from her pew in the gallery, right in front of the organ, for the thing would make, she said, such a terrible buzzing sound; so a seat was provided for her just beneath the pulpit, which she found necessary, for clergymen were not what they used to be. On the following Sunday, her nephew had ascended to his place, spread out the black-velvet case she had made for his sermons, prayed, and given out his text twice, when, before the first words of the sermon were uttered, Aunt Fanny began to mutter to herself, though her muttering was so loud that everyone present in the little church must have heard it, her nephew himself being overwhelmed with confusion.

“Dear, dear, dear!” she exclaimed; “it’s of no use, and I can’t hear a bit. I might just as well have stayed where I was. O Arty, Arty, you sad boy, why will you mumble so?”

Arty did not mumble any more that evening, but dashed headlong into his discourse; so that when they returned, Aunt Fanny thought she rather liked the new seat the better of the two. Still it was of no avail; the old lady could never hear well in that church; for rector and curate had both got into a bad habit of speaking in a low tone, and drawling out their words. But Aunt Fanny’s pity was sublime in the case of a friend also troubled with deafness; though he knew it, and did not scruple to make an ear-trumpet of his hand, though this was needless when Aunt Fanny was the speaker; for her sentences were always perfectly audible. “Poor Edwards!” she would say, as she smoothed down her apron, “what a nice man you would be if you weren’t so deaf! It’s a pity—a great pity!” And then she would sigh, in profound ignorance that “poor Edwards’s” confusion was caused by her habit of thinking aloud.

And this was the companion of Arthur Sterne’s solitude; but there were pleasant smiles to welcome him, and beneath their sunny rays the deeply-cut lines that seamed his forehead grew less marked, while the light of the pleasant old sunny face was reflected in his own.

Aunt Fanny had seen the change that had come over her nephew, and waited patiently for his complaints, which came not; and after many days, unable to contain her anxiety, she crossed to where the curate was sitting, and, taking his hand, frowned severely as she felt his pulse.

“Well, aunty, and how is it?” he said, smiling at the earnest countenance beside his.

But Aunt Fanny was too much occupied with her thoughts to speak, and only nodded, and then shook her head, as, in her own mind, she went over her long catalogue of simples suited to the various ills of human life, till at last she settled upon camomile-tea as being the most efficacious remedy for her nephew’s complaint, which she settled to be disorder of the liver, produced from over-work, and not a word would she hear to the contrary.

“Now, don’t shout, my dear; I’m not deaf. You know you do too much; and if you won’t petition the bishop for a change, I shall. What do you say to a pleasant curacy in some pretty country place?”

Nothing. What could he say, when he had wakened to the fact that, in spite of pride and doubts, that court was all the world to him?

Appeal was useless; so, yielding with as good a grace as he could, the curate suffered himself to be doctored for his complaint, turning to his books for rest at every reprieve. If it had not been for the heat of the next few days, he would not have been allowed to stir out without the thick muffler that had been aired for his throat; while the many appellants who visited the lodging of a morning were answered by Aunt Fanny herself; for many came to ask advice and comfort of the curate, more especially from amongst the poor Irish; but though they came ostensibly for spiritual, they generally managed to explain that a little solid help would be most acceptable.

Till now, living in their quiet, simple way, the relations between them being more like those existent with mother and son, Arthur Sterne had had no secret from the dame; but now, when he would gladly have eased his burdened heart by confidence, he shrank from laying bare its secrets, even though he was in that state when men are most prone to be confidential. But there was to him something repugnant in the idea of shouting words that seemed to demand that they should be whispered in the twilight of some calm eve, when the reassuring pressure of that time-marked hand would have been loving and tender. For she had been to him as a mother, taking that duty on herself when he had been left an orphan, and now there seemed ingratitude in keeping back any of the troubles of his life. He had no doubts respecting Aunt Fanny. Did he but bring there a wife, and say, “I love this woman,” she would take her to her heart and believe in her; for, saving the mumbling in his speech, Arthur Sterne could not, in her eyes, do wrong. Still the secret was kept—feverishly kept—and brooded over in the sleepless nights, or in those dark watches, when,

impatiently quitting the pillow that brought no rest, he walked the streets of the sleeping city, alone, or in company with some policeman; when mostly his steps would lead him to the end of the court, where, in Septimus Hardon's window, generally glimmered a feeble light—one whose purpose he often asked himself.

At times he would determine to flee the place, and in some far-off country retreat try again to root out the love that had taken hold on him; for here he felt that he could not reason with himself. In vain he conjured up visions of a calm, pale face, whose marble cheek he had once kissed, an hour before it was laid in the grave; in vain he told himself that he was faithless to that old love, and failing in his duty. There still was the sweet, gentle face of Lucy Grey haunting him ever; and though he recalled the words of the old Frenchwoman, and her sinister meaning—the meeting in the Lane, and, above all, the look of shame and confusion—there was the same sense of love beating down all else. But he had made a resolve at last; and that was, to see and question the woman he had seen in Lucy's company; he would see her, and then seek for rest somewhere, since the idol he had unconsciously set up was sullied and broken.

Twice over he had met this woman, but now his efforts to see her seemed in vain. He called at the Jarkers' again and again; but, in place of her coming, as Mrs Jarker said, to see her child and leave the weekly payment for its support, week after week, as if she knew that she was watched, she came not, but sent money-orders by post. He shrank from speaking to Mrs Jarker concerning her connection with Lucy; while Lucy herself he had not seen. Watching seemed useless, for the woman came not; and at last, almost in despair, he had determined to undertake that which his heart shrank from—the questioning of Lucy herself.

At last, after a long and busy day, as now had become his wont, he wandered through the streets for hours, apparently feeling no fatigue, till, late in the night, he stopped by the Rents, walked slowly up the deserted court, lit by its solitary flickering lamp, whose broken glass made the flame dance and tremble, while when an extra puff of wind passed down the court it was but extinct. There was the faint light, though, in one of the rooms occupied by the Hardons, and after standing watching it for some time he hurried away, calling himself foolish, romantic, boy, madman. It was but a passing fancy, he told himself, such a one as might have moved him in his youth; but his heart would not harbour the belief, and mockingly cast it forth.

He was angry and half-maddened to feel how helpless he was, and what a sway the impulse now moving him had obtained; to think that he—the minister of religion, the teacher of others—should have so little power over self that he should be swayed here and driven there helplessly; the whole current of his quiet life turned from its course, and that too in spite of the way in which he had battled, while the doubts that assailed him only added to his misery.

Now as he hurried on he would meet some policeman, who turned to watch him; now it would be some drunken reveller, or a wretched homeless being just started from some corner where he had been sleeping, and compelled to wander the streets till daybreak; but ever and again he would encounter the flauntingly—dressed outcast humming the snatch of a popular air with a wretched attempt at gaiety, which lasted till she had passed, and then almost broke into a wail. But he managed that they should always meet face to face beneath some gas-lamp, when he would sigh and pass on, for not one that he met during his search was the woman of the Lane.

Mrs Jarker did not know her name, nor yet where she lodged; but the little girl was to be called Agnes. That was all the information the curate could obtain; and at times he would frown, bite his lips, and give up the search, but only to take it up once again for what he always told himself was the last time. Then he would play the hypocrite, and tell himself that his motives were unselfish; that to marry a girl in Lucy's position of life would be folly—absurd: he was only anxious for her well-being and future life.

But these fits lasted only for a short time, and then, smiling bitterly, he would, as upon this night, betake himself to the search once more.

And yet it was not on his account she came not to Bennett's-rents, for Agnes Hardon knew not of his quest; she had other reasons, though the visits to her child and Lucy were the only bright spots in her wretched life. Lucy heard from her from time to time through old Matt, who bore her notes always under protest, but still obediently, though Lucy was the only one who knew the poor creature's secret, and she dared not make it known to Septimus lest he should forbid their meetings; for, abandoned by all, hopeless, and in misery, Agnes Hardon clung to her connection with Lucy as the only hope left on earth for self and child. Her appeals to Somesham remaining unanswered, she had ceased to send, and, removing from lodging to lodging, any attempt upon Mrs Hardon's part to find her would have been vain. She had shrunk from the keen searching glances of the curate when they had met, seeing in everyone now an enemy whose object was to break her intimacy with Lucy, whom she, therefore, saw only by stealth. Her heart bled for the misery of the family, for she learned all from time to time at their meetings; while, knowing full well that there was a will made, to which she had signed her name as witness, yet could she not declare her knowledge, from a shrewd suspicion that the doctor had made away with it, and she told herself that she had already brought sorrow and shame enough upon her home.

And to meet her, night by night stole Arthur Sterne through the streets, ever hating himself for his madness, ever resolving that each search should be the last, and still weakly yielding to the one great anxiety that troubled him. Now he would be seeing Lucy's candid face reproachfully gazing at him, and directly after would come again the bitter, spiteful countenance of the Frenchwoman, and he seemed to hear her words, "Our beauty, some of us;" and at such times all faith in the girl had gone. "Our beauty, some of us!" How the words seemed to ring in his ears; they were borne to him in the echo of the far-off vehicle, chimed by the clocks; the very air seemed alive with the words, till he hurried on through street after street again to try and thoroughly wear himself out, that sleep might come, and with it rest from the mental anxiety and doubt he suffered.

At last he stood on one of the bridges, leaning against the parapet and gazing down at the hurrying river, feeling the soft sweet breeze of early dawn sweep up with the tide, whispering of the moaning sea and far-off reaches where the green reeds sighed and rustled, and the wide green marshes were spread out. There was a faint light coming in the

east, and the stars were paling, as the gas grew sickly-hued and dim. All was still and peaceful, so that he could hear the lapping of the water far below as it seemed to whisper peace to his perturbed spirit, telling of the far-off sea and its mysteries, the hopes and fears there buried, and then of the many lost whom the river had borne down, when, from perhaps where he then stood, they had taken the last fearful plunge. And who were they? he asked himself; who were they that plunged daringly into the rushing river? and for reply the faint breeze seemed to whisper, and the tide to sigh, “Our beauty, some of us!” And then trembling he leaned his hot brow against the cold stone balustrade, fighting with the thoughts that oppressed him, with duty, religion, the world, till, with almost a groan, burst from his lips:

“Save her? My God! yes, as I hope to be saved!”

The early untainted breeze breathed upon his fevered lips as it rode upon the breast of the coming tide; the stars paled more and more, the faint pearly light in the east became roseate; and at last Arthur Sterne stood gazing up towards the glowing cross of the great cathedral, glittering as it was in the morning sun, while now, weary and jaded, he turned to seek his home, but only to gaze with doubting eyes, for he stood face to face with the woman he had sought through the night.

Volume Two—Chapter Ten.

On the Search.

Doctor Thomas Hardon, of Somesham, seemed likely to have full enjoyment of his brother’s property, for Time kept on busy at work over his harvest. Septimus Hardon slowly and laboriously did copying for the law-stationers, apparently quite content with his lot, for he scarcely ever gave a thought now to the quest he had commenced with old Matt; Lucy toiled on incessantly at her sewing-machine, the bright needle flashing up and down, and the treadles set in motion by her feet were hardly ever still. Journeys were made to and from the warehouse from whence she had her work, but mostly alone, for Lucy had lost her protector: he had not returned since the day upon which he had been taken ill, and they knew not where he lodged. The information might have been obtained from Agnes, but save a short note or two enclosed in the regular letters sent to Mrs Jarker, in which she implored her to watch over the child, Lucy had not heard from her. Mr Sterne came and went, visiting them as he would have visited at any other house, treating Lucy with a calm, cold deference that made her weep bitterly after each visit, and grow paler day by day; for the curate told himself that he had at last conquered a foolish fancy, that he had triumphed as became him, and that all he felt now was a sublime pity which prompted him to watch her when she went out alone, and follow her at a distance till he saw her once more in safety, when he would hurry home; for his heart was very full of pity for Lucy Grey, even though he knew not of the tears she shed in secret.

As to carrying on his researches alone, the very thought of such a proceeding never occurred to Septimus Hardon—it seemed to border too much upon the impossible; and besides, he was deep in that Slough of Despond—poverty, which, instead of prompting men to energetic action, too often enervates and breeds despair. So he waited on day after day, hoping to see old Matt again, and yet dreading the prosecution of his claim-shrinking when it was named, for he seemed to grow less hopeful as time wore on. The curate had hinted more than once how willing he would be to aid him; but Septimus always shrank so from entering upon the matter, that Mr Sterne, from motives of delicacy, soon ceased to broach the subject.

The sewing-machine clicked on early and late, and Jean’s lark, when he heard it, would set up his crest and whistle away, waking the echoes of the court, while at the open window, when the bird was silent, Jean Marais himself would crane forward and listen eagerly to the fragment of some mournful little air which he could just catch at times, as the machine stopped, and Lucy arranged a portion of her work. But the sweet notes from the first-floor seemed to rouse the lark to fresh exertions, when its master would angrily chide it, and perhaps cover it with a handkerchief, but only to snatch it away hurriedly.

“For she loves to hear him whistle,” he would say; and then he would smile again, as the bird burst forth once more in its joyous carol.

At times Lucy would ascend to the attic to take up a bunch of green food she had bought for the birds, or a few flowers for the cripple, whose eyes brightened when he saw her, but these visits were mostly paid when *ma mère* was from home; for in spite of her civil words, there was something in the old woman’s quiet smile that chilled her; so that she dreaded meeting her more than if her looks had been those of anger. But she knew not the bitter words that had passed between mother and son upon the subject, when *ma mère* once angrily crushed a bunch of violets Lucy had taken up to the suffering youth.

The sewing-machine was clicking away merrily one day, so that Mrs Jarker could hear it from her sick-bed; Septimus Hardon was busily copying at his little table, and the lark jocund as ever, when a slow step was heard upon the stairs. Lucy stopped her machine to listen, and even Septimus raised his head from his work. But there was no mistake—it was not a visitor for up-stairs, but old Matt’s own shuffling footstep, and Lucy run to admit him.

Paler, thinner, more haggard, he came slowly into the room, rubbing his hands and smiling with pleasure at the warmth of the greeting he received.

“Never better,” he said; “capital, thank you; been ill, though, and not able to get out before, though I was afraid you would get all the work done without me. What have you done since I saw you, sir?”

“Nothing,” said Septimus quietly.

“Didn’t expect you had,” said Matt drily. “No offence, sir; but I thought perhaps you might want me; so if you’ll get

your hat, sir, we'll start at the point where we left off, and see after the doctor."

"But you will not be well enough," said Septimus, hanging back from the task—more on his own account than on that of the old man.

"Don't you be afraid of that, sir. I should have been well weeks ago if it hadn't been for fidgeting about your affairs, and wanting to get out. I'm as strong as a lion now, sir; but let's be at it. I want a new suit of clothes out of the estate, you know, sir, when you get it;" and the old man chuckled and nodded at Lucy.

Septimus slowly wiped his pen, and carefully put away his paper, sighing the while, for he was unwilling to start, and the fit of eagerness had long ago evaporated; but at last he declared himself to be in readiness, and the pair once more started off upon their search.

Upon this occasion they directed their steps at once to Finsbury, and, after a slow, and what seemed to Matt a painful, walk, they reached their destination.

"Here is the house," said Septimus, after a reference to his pocket-book; "this is the number."

"H'm!—'Tollicks' Registry Office for Servants,'" read Matt from the board over the door. "This isn't the doctor's. Sure of the number, sir?"

"Yes," said Septimus, referring once more to his pocket-book; "yes; this is the number I took down."

"So it is," said Matt, after a reference to his own memorandum-book. "That's right enough; but wait a bit, one never knows where to be right or wrong with numbers; they always were things as bothered a man; for you have your numbers so-and-so a, and b, and c, and goodness knows how many more, until you're regularly puzzled. Perhaps that's an a, or a b, or something of that kind, and the number we want is somewhere else."

"Let's walk on a little," said Septimus; and they went slowly down one side and up the other, but this proved to be the only house numbered as they wanted.

"Do you know of a Mr Phillips, a surgeon, in this neighbourhood?" said Septimus to the first policeman they met.

The man of order shook his head, beat his white gloves together, and then rearranged the shaken head in his shiny stock before continuing his walk.

"Let's go to the fountain-head at once," said Matt; "perhaps they know something about him. Here we are again—'Tollicks' Registry Office for Servants.' Let's see what Mr Tollicks knows about him."

"Stop a minute," said Septimus, to keep procrastination alive for a few moments longer. "Perhaps there is another door."

"No more doors there, unless they're backdoors," growled Matt; and leading the way, they stood in a floor-clothed room,—the office itself,—furnished with a green—baize—covered table, bearing a stencil-plate, inkstand, and brush; and beside the wall a long bench, upon which sat apparently one of the servants waiting to be hired from ten to four, as announced by a bill in the window, which spoke of cooks, housemaids, and general servants as being regularly in attendance; but most probably the others, tired, had gone home for the day, for the damsel in question was the only one visible. She was "Corrnwall sure," as indicated by the shape of her nose, though any ignorant person might have been excused for mistaking her for an inhabitant of the sister isle.

The door gave a sharp "ting" as it was opened, and another as it was closed,—the refinement of the old jingling door bell of the chandler's shop,—when the young lady on the bench rose, and made a bob and sat down again, and someone from an inner chamber cried, "Coming!" Then a small dog with a very apoplectic voice barked loudly to the tune of a little bell secured to its neck, and came waddling round the counter to smell Septimus Hardon's legs; when visiting old Matt for the same purpose, that gentleman favoured him with a pinch of snuff dropped softly towards his nose, provoking a most violent fit of sneezing, and a loud and agitated jingling of the tiny bell.

With the exception of the sneezing, there was now silence in the office for a few moments, till the sound of rattling milk-cans upon the pavement was heard. A man gave vent to the well-known melodious London yodel, and then opened the door, which again said "ting," when from the inner chamber appeared a tall, stoutish, elderly-young female of very grand deportment, which she displayed to great advantage by making a most ceremonious salute—one that would have been invaluable to a governess in a large-minded family of small means. So elegant was the salute, that even old Matt was staggered, and performed an operation rather rare with him—he took off his hat.

"The side-door, my good man," said the lady to the milkman, who grinned, winked to himself, and drew the door after him, when, quietly placing the customary "ha'porth" in a cream-tin, he set it in a corner by the door, jangled his cans as he took them up, and then yelled his way down the street.

"Mrs Tollicks?" said Septimus, raising his shabby hat.

"Miss Tollicks," said the lady, with another profound courtesy almost equal to the former. "Perhaps you will be seated, sir."

Perhaps he would have been; but as there was only the form upon which the auburn-haired damsel sat whilst waiting to be hired, Septimus merely bowed again, and said, "Thank you," at the same moment inadvertently directing a glance at the maiden in question.

"Thoroughly trustworthy, and has an excellent character from her last place," said Miss Tollicks, who had seen the

glance; “a very good cook—plain cook, early riser, strictly temperate; in fact, a disciple of the late Father Matthew. Requires no followers, and only one half-day out in the month. Only twenty-two; wages twelve pounds; and a capital washer.”

The damsel had risen, and stood with her eyes half-closed, head on one side, and her rather large mouth squeezed up into a modest smirk; and as Septimus Hardon knew nothing of the maiden, he was bound to accept Miss Tollicks’ eulogium; but as to the last-named quality, it was very evident that the girl was not a capital washer of self, while a detergent applied to her hair would have made a manifest improvement.

“Indeed,” said Septimus, bowing; “I am obliged, but—”

“Only *twelve* pounds wages,” said Miss Tollicks with emphasis.

“And very reasonable,” said Septimus; “but—”

“You will find very few general servants willing to go for less than fourteen,” said Miss Tollicks.

“I suppose not,” said Septimus; “but at present—”

“Then you don’t think this young person would suit your requirements?” said Miss Tollicks.

“Decidedly not,” said Septimus eagerly, for he was getting so exceedingly confused, that had Miss Tollicks pressed her point, he would most probably have ended by hiring the damsel off-hand; for every glance directed for help at old Matt glanced off the impenetrable armour in which the old man had encased himself.

“Mary Donovan,” said the lady of the house with dignity, “it is five minutes past four; you need not wait any longer to-day.”

Mary Donovan rose at the instant, and made a bob to Miss Tollicks, and one each to Matt and Septimus—bobs that were a disgrace to her after the elaborate obeisances she had so lately seen made; and then she took her departure, played out by a couple of “tings,” Miss Tollicks smiling blandly, and courteously holding her head on one side as she stood waiting to know the object of her visitors’ call.

Miss Tollicks was a lady whom no one would have supposed to have been born a genius, from the utter absence of ennobling qualities in her face; but for all that she made-up showily, possessed a good figure, had two little corkscrew curls on either side of her face, a suspicion of thinness about her hair—parting, which on a small scale exhibited somewhat the appearance of certain stout ladies’ dresses in the back when they have been without assistance in the hooking department; for the said parting began correctly, and then gradually opened out, but only to contract again and finish evenly some distance farther back. By way of head-dress, Miss Tollicks wore a black-velvet blackbird, with handsome gold-bead eyes, the said ornithological head-dress being kept in its place by means of a fillet of black-velvet and gold twist. A very thick, plain-linked, jet chain was round her neck, a very glossy buckle at her waist, fastening the cincture of her very rusty black-silk dress, slightly rubbed at the plaits; so that altogether Miss Tollicks presented the aspect of a lady superior at the very least.

“We merely called,” said Septimus, after an awkward pause, during which he had been waiting for Matt to begin, “to—er—er—to—er—that is to ask if you could give us any information respecting a Mr Phillips, a surgeon, who once resided here.”

“Dear me, how disappointing!” said Miss Tollicks. “Now do you know I thought you had come after servants; I did indeed.”

“Really,” said Septimus sadly, “I am sorry to have caused you disappointment; but it was important that I should know, and I called—urgent—troubled you,” he stammered again, looking in vain at Matt, who only took snuff.

“O, don’t apologise, pray,” said Miss Tollicks; “come in and sit down, and let’s—let me,” she said, correcting herself, —“let me hear what it is. There, don’t laugh at me, for one is obliged to be so particular how one speaks to the grand people who come for servants.”

Miss Tollicks led the way into her inner chamber, where the fat dog slept snoringly in the sunshine; and, after a little hesitation, her two visitors took the proffered chairs.

“Mr Flips, surgeon,” said the lady of the place, after a little preliminary conversation, “no, I never heard the name, and I’ve been here two years this next week, when my landlord will most likely call. He says he has a bad memory, but he always recollects the quarter-days. He lives down in Dorsetshire, and when he comes up I can ask him if you like; perhaps he would know; or you might write; but he’s sure to write to me directly to say he is coming, so that, as he says, I may be ready for him, just as if one ever was ready for one’s landlord. Two years—yes, just two years,” she continued musingly. “There was a whole year at the millinery, which didn’t half-pay the rent; for people here don’t seem to wear bonnets, and when they do, they’ve been turned and cleaned and altered or somethinged or anothered, although I put my prices so low that there was no room for a bit of profit. Then there was the fancy stationery three months, which was worse, for the only kind of stationery the people fancied was penny-stamps, which cost me a penny a-piece, and then people either wanted them to be stuck on their letters, or else wrapped, up in paper. Then there was the newspaper and periodical trade, which was worse than all; for, as if just out of aggravation, the people always came and asked for the very thing you had not got. I declare that if it wasn’t that you can sit down and read your stock, the periodical trade would be unbearable. Only think of the trouble people gave you by ordering things regularly and never coming and fetching them; so that the back numbers used to get piled up most terribly. And now, you know, I’ve been six months at this, and it’s so trying, you can’t think; for, you see, I’m worse off than anybody: I’ve not got to please the missuses—I beg pardon, the mistresses only, but the servants; and

really, after my experience I can say that there's no pleasing anyone."

Septimus Hardon glanced hopelessly at Matt, but he would not see him, and took pinch after pinch of snuff furiously, with a comical expression upon his countenance the former could not interpret.

"You see, though," continued Miss Tollicks, who seemed to have made up her mind to thoroughly enjoy herself with a good talk; "you see, though, there is one advantage—there's no stock required, and it is genteel; but really, after all, it is so vexatious and pays so badly that I think I shall give it up, and take to tobacco. I suppose it's a business that pays well, and people do use it to such an extent that it's quite wonderful. But let me see! Phillips—Flips—Flips—no, I never even heard of the name; but, do you know, I shouldn't wonder if a doctor did once live here; for there's a regular street-door bell that rings down-stairs, and another that rings up in the second-floor front, just as the night-bell used to at Doctor Masters's, where I once lived at, as—ahem, ahem!—excuse my cough, pray," said Miss Tollicks, colouring; "but there!" she said sharply the next moment, "where I lived as lady's-maid, and I don't see why I should be ashamed of it."

"Hear, hear!" said old Matt, speaking for the first time.

"But can you tell who lived here before you?" said Septimus.

"O, yes; a dairy," replied Miss Tollicks; "but it was only here six months, and my landlord told me the people didn't pay any rent, but went off in the night so shabby, leaving nothing behind but a black-and-white plaster cow, and a moss-basket with three chalk eggs, in the window; and my landlord says that's why he looks so sharp after me, which isn't nice, you know; but then you can't be surprised. Let me see, I think it was a coffee-house before that."

"Perhaps," said Septimus, rising, "you will find that out for me when your landlord calls. I don't think we will trouble him by writing; and maybe you'll ask him how long it is since a Mr Phillips lived here, and if he can tell you to where he removed."

"That I will," said Miss Tollicks pleasantly; "and if you would not mind taking one of my cards, you might be able to recommend me to one or two patrons; and you too, sir," she continued, handing one to Matt, which he took with a comical amused expression, and carefully placed inside the lining of his hat.

"Hadn't you better ask for the landlord's address, and write at once?" growled Matt, as soon as they were outside the house.

"Perhaps it would be better," said Septimus, hesitating; "but no, we won't trouble her again; and it would only hasten the matter a day or two—possibly not at all. She has been very civil and obliging."

"Very," said Matt. "Good sort of woman, she seems; but what a tongue! As soon as ever she had trapped us in that room, 'Matt, my lad,' I said, 'the people in this world are divided into two classes—talkers and listeners. You belong to the second class, so keep your place;' and I did, sir, as you know. I never attempt to tackle a woman on her own ground, sir, which is talking. I can talk, sir, leastwise I could when I was well; but it's my humble opinion that that woman would have rapped out three words to my one."

"There," said Matt, after they had walked a little way along the street, he all the while rubbing his forefinger slowly round and round his pill snuff-box, "I've taken all my snuff, as ought to have lasted till to-morrow night, and all through that precious woman's tongue. Let's go in here, sir, and get a penn'orth."

"Here" was a very dirty-looking little tobacconist's and news-agent's; and, so as to leave no stone unturned, Matt, whilst being served, made inquiry touching Mr Phillips, a surgeon.

"No," said the woman who served, as she allayed the irritation of her nasal organ by rubbing it with the back of the hand which held the snuff-scoop, and so provoked a loud fit of sneezing,—"no, not in my time."

"How long has that been?" said Matt.

"Five years," replied the woman.

Septimus Hardon walked out of the shop, and, after paying for his snuff, old Matt followed him into the street, and they bent their steps homewards.

"I'm dull and stupid and not right, you see," said Matt, "or else I should have known why the name wasn't in the newest of those two Directories. One, you see, was more than ten years old, and the other—well, it wasn't the newest. But you leave it to me, sir, and I'll try and find a medical directory, for I think there is such a thing. I know there is a legal one, for I helped print it; and there's one for the parsons, so there's safe to be one for the doctors. I'll ferret it out, sir; and I shall be better to-morrow. Those look nice, don't they?" said the old man, stopping short in front of a pork-butcher's shop.

"Very," said Septimus dreamily, and without glancing at the freshly-made chains of sausages hanging from the hooks in the window.

"You may always buy your sausages here, and depend upon 'em," said Matt; "and if you'll listen to my advice, you'll take a pound back with you. They'll wrap 'em in a bit of paper for you, and you can slip them in your pocket, and have a nice fry for tea when you get home, and then rest content; for, though we haven't done much, and I should have liked you to have taken that landlord's name and address, yet things are getting in train, I can tell you. So you wait quietly at home, sir, till I come again, for I suppose you won't want to do anything yourself. I shall be stronger and better to-morrow or next day, I hope, for somehow I can't get along as I used, and feel weak and muddled. But there, sir, slip in and get them sausages, and have a bit of patience, and don't try to build any more till our mortar's a

bit settled."

Septimus Hardon smiled sadly at the idea of his being impatient to go on with the search, and, obeying his companion's hest, he obtained the pound of flesh; and then they walked slowly on till they were once more within the shadow of the law.

"And now I'm off, sir," said Matt, stopping short in Carey-street. "I think I shall go and lie down."

"Can I do anything for you?" said Septimus earnestly.

"Yes, sir," said Matt; "let me have my own way, please. You let me go my way, and I'll work the matter out for you if it's possible, so that it shall be in trim for the lawyers, and then I'll give up. But there, I won't do anything without consulting you first, and—no, thank you; I'd rather not. No; I like sausages well enough sometimes, but not to-day, thank you; I'm off in a moment. Don't you do anything, whatever you do, to put your uncle on his guard. Depend upon it, he thinks now, after all this time, that you've given it quite up; while, if things go on as I hope, we shall come down upon him one of these days in a way that shall startle him—shake his nerves so that he sha'n't find a tonic for them."

Old Matt shuffled off, once more steadily refusing to partake of any refreshment; while Septimus slowly and thoughtfully made his way towards the entrance to the Rents, pondering over his visit to the churches some weeks back, and then thinking that it would be better to settle down contentedly in his present state, for fear that after research, labour, and endless publicity, the words of his uncle should prove to be those of truth, and his condition worse than it was at the present time.

"Better the present doubt and obscurity," he muttered. "Octavius Hardon, Lavinia Addison, Ellen Morris—all witnesses to the truth, but dead, dead."

"Stop, stop!" cried a voice, as he turned into the Rents; and the next moment, with his hand to his side, old Matt stood by him, gasping. "I ain't the thing to-night, sir; I'm ill, but I've got it here—here somewhere," he said, tapping his forehead, "and I can't get it out. It's here, though. It's 'medicine and attendance, Mrs Hardon—so much,' isn't it? That's it, sir, ain't it?"

Septimus stared wonderingly at him.

"You may well look, sir," said Matt, panting still; "but that's it, and I've seen it somewhere, and I'll tell you where directly. It all came like a flash just after I left you; there it was, just as I saw it written down: 'Medicine and attendance, Mrs Hardon—so much;' and I can keep seeming to see the words dance before my eyes now. I saw them written down somewhere once, and I can't just now say where; but I seem to feel that I've got them all right, and I shall have it. Good-night, sir. Remember me to Miss Lucy;" and the old man staggered away, muttering aloud, "Medicine and attendance—medicine and attendance;" while more than one person in the street turned to look at the bent figure, to shake a sapient head, and mutter, "Or hospital."

For poor old Matt looked sick unto death, though Septimus Hardon, deep in his own thoughts, had taken but little notice of the old man's indisposition.

Volume Two—Chapter Eleven.

Lucy's Best.

Night after night, noticed by the curate during his wanderings, by *ma mère*, and by Mr William Jarker, birdcatcher, when distant trips had detained him until late hours, there still burned a feeble light in one of the windows at Bennett's-rents; and by its gleam, until the moon rose above the houses, and looked inquisitively down upon her paper, shedding a silvery light that seemed to quench the rushlight's sickly yellow flame, now sat Lucy Grey far into the long watches, with naught to interrupt her but the occasional long-drawn breath or sigh from the back-room, or the rumble of some vehicle through the distant streets. Once she started up and stood trembling, for a shrill scream rang upon the night breeze, but silence soon reigned again, and she retook her seat. Patiently bending over her task, with her large eager eyes strained to follow the work of her fingers, the pale girl was busily toiling on. Toiling on at what? Not at the sewing-machine, for its busy throbbing pulse was still, but carefully and slowly writing line after line in a common school copy-book to improve a handwriting already fine, delicate, and ladylike. A slate covered with figures lay too upon the table, while beside it was a French grammar, and the words written in the copy-book were in the same tongue.

And this had been Lucy's task night after night, till the red-rimmed eyes would keep open no longer, and, wearied out, she lay down to dream dreams that brought smiles to her lips, for her visions were of the prize for which she studied. But these nights of toil and the anxiety of her heart had told upon her, and upon this night, the one succeeding the journey to Finsbury, Lucy sat, looking more pale and wan than usual, and her work progressed but slowly. The place too, and the summer heat, had had their share in producing her sickly pallor, for in Bennett's-rents there was a faint lung-clinging odour that almost seemed to tell that Death had passed over the place to put his seal upon those soon to pass away. Or was it the foul incense men burn to his dread shrine, calling him to their homes—the thin invisible mist rising from filth and rottenness, to blight the rosy cheek of health? There was enough in Bennett's-rents to drive away health, strength, and youth; for premature old age lurked in the foul cisterns, rose from the drains, and dwelt in the crowded habitations, houses made to accommodate six, yet containing perhaps thirty or forty, souls. But Lucy was sick at heart as well. Months upon months had she dwelt in the wretched court, though until now its impurities had not seemed to touch her as she passed to and fro.

The work went on slowly, and, weary and sad at heart, she stopped at times, gazing up at the bright moon, till, recalling her wandering thoughts, she again bent eagerly to her task. Still her thoughts would not be controlled, and soon the slate took the place of the paper, and her pencil formed two words over which she bent lovingly, and yet with a shudder, as if it were ominous to her hopes that she had written these words, for the pencil gritted loudly over the slate, and the last stroke was made with a harsh grating shriek which sounded loudly in the silence of the night. Still she bent lovingly over the characters, until, drip, drip, drip, the tears fell upon them, and then, as her white forehead sank upon her hands, the long gleaming clusters of her bright hair swept over the slate, and the words were gone, while the girl wept long and bitterly, for her dream of the future seemed rudely broken—that happy dream of her life whose rosy hues had served to soften the misery of her lot. Toiling hard by day to supply the wants of her suffering mother, working by night to make herself more worthy—to raise herself if but a step nearer to him; and now it seemed to her that she had been roughly dashed from the point to which she had climbed, by the words and looks of a low ruffian whose very presence was repelling.

Suddenly Lucy raised her head, for the night was hot, and the window open, and in the stillness of the hour she heard approaching footsteps—steps that she seemed to know, and her pulses beat tumultuously as they appeared to stop at the end of the court for a few minutes, and then pass on; when, as if a weight had been removed from her heart, the poor girl sighed, breathed more freely, and again bent over her books.

An hour passed, and then once more Lucy looked up, for, clear and sharp, “tap, tap, tap,” came the sound as of something hard, a tiny shot, a pebble striking against the window-panes, and then once more there was silence.

Lucy rose softly, her cheeks pale and lips apart, and stole on tiptoe to the door of the back-room and listened.

All was silent there but the heavy breathing of sleepers, so she again crossed the room, and with the nail of one finger gave a sharp tap upon the pane, then hastily tying on her bonnet and drawing on a shawl, she once more stood trembling and eagerly listening at the back-room, her pale young face wearing a strange, frightened expression, and then slowly and softly she stole to the door, opened it quietly, and closed it again, to stand outside upon the dark landing gazing fearfully up and down, as if in dread of being molested.

Slowly down she then passed step by step, with the old worn boards now and again creaking sharply beneath her light weight, every rustle of her dress sounding loud and distinct in the silence—down slowly to the dark passage and the front-door, left always on the latch for the convenience of the many lodgers. And now Lucy’s heart beat heavily, for she had passed along the entry in an agony of fear, lest she might encounter someone sleeping upon the floor, for at times homeless ones had stolen in and rested there, glad of such a refuge from the night wind.

But Lucy stood at the door in safety, and raised the latch. The paint cracked loudly as the door opened, and admitted the faint light of moon and lamp, while now the wind sighed mournfully down the court. The next moment the door was closed, and a dark figure had seized Lucy by the hand, and drawn her towards one of the many gloomy entrances, as the heavy step of a policeman was heard to pass the end of the court, his ringing paces gradually growing fainter and fainter, till once more all was still but the moaning sigh of the night wind, as it seemed at times almost to wail for the miseries of Bennett’s-rents.

A quarter of an hour, half an hour, an hour passed; but save the occasional rattle of wheels in the great thoroughfare, all was silent. The many doorways in Bennett’s-rents seemed to frown darkly and mysteriously as the one lamp flickered, while, where the moonbeams did not fall, there were gloomy shadows. But at last came the light step of Lucy and the soft rustle of her dress as she crept up to the door, passed through to steal once more up the creaking stairs, to throw off bonnet and shawl, and sit down panting and trembling, her breath coming hardly for a while, till tears came to her relief, when she wept long and bitterly, the heavy booming of a neighbouring clock sending a shudder through her frame.

Now pushing back her hair from her forehead, she looked out angrily upon the night, now drooping and weeping bitterly, her head again sank upon her hands as the tears of hopeless misery gushed from her eyes. The moonbeams shed their silvery lustre upon her head as she bent there, playing amidst the riches of her beautiful hair, caressing it, hiding and glancing from amidst the thick tresses, lingering there, and seeming to shed a halo around. But slowly the radiant orb rode on till but half the bright tresses were in the light, and still slowly the shadows increased as the rays swept by, flooding first one and then another part of the room. Soon all within was darkness, while the court was light; and then slowly the shadow began to climb the houses on the other side, making their dingy walls less loathsome as seen through the silvery medium. But before the lower part of the court was quite in darkness, a heavy, slouching figure might have been seen to creep up to the house on the opposite side and enter the door. A few minutes after, Lucy Grey started and listened, for, in the strange stillness of the time, a rustling was heard upon the stairs, followed by a faint but laboured breathing; while, though her light was extinguished, Lucy crouched trembling in her chair, for it seemed to her that she had been watched, and that even now there was a piercing eye at the keyhole, which fixed her to her seat so that she dare not move. But at last, from sheer exhaustion, her fair young head drooped lower and lower towards the table, sinking upon her shapely arms; when once more came the rumble of a vehicle in the street, the heavy tread of the policeman upon the pavement—this time right along the court—in firm, ringing steps, that gave wrong-doers ample notice of his coming, and then again silence.

They were wild dreams that made fevered the sleep of Lucy Grey. Now it was Arthur Sterne; now *ma mère* and her son, or the low, bull-dog face of Jarker, that disturbed her rest, and she moaned in her sleep again and again as the night wore on. The writing upon her slate was gone; the copies were blurred and tear-blistered, and the poor girl slept heavily and painfully. Now she sighed, now she started, for her heart was rent and torn—as gentle a heart as ever beat in woman’s breast; but, like a blight, the breath of suspicion had rested on her, and she had shrunk back scathed before the man for whose coming it had been the pleasure of her life to watch.

What was there to live for now? she asked herself again and again. Was life to be only a dreary blank—a struggle for mere existence? And then she blamed herself for her folly and ambition. Had Arthur Sterne never crossed the light of

her life she could have patiently toiled on, never wearying of the plaints of her mother; but now, after months, almost years of hopefulness, to come to this! Well might the sleep be fitful, and the dreams those which brought trouble, for the sun of her life seemed clouded, and hope a thing of the past.

Again a sigh, and a few muttered words, and then the weary head was turned a little so that when the first grey dawn of the coming day crept down the court, and struggled into the room, driving forth shadow after shadow, it rested smilingly upon Lucy's cheek, pausing lovingly upon the first pure thing it had encountered that morning in the misery-smitten region around. Had Arthur Sterne known all, he would have given position, advancement, all, to have pressed his lips where the pale light now rested, and asked for pardon. But he knew only that which he had seen, and, racked by suspicion, he wearied himself with doubt and surmise without end.

Again a sigh, and again a restless turn, when the colour flushed through Lucy's pale cheeks. It was sunrise, and some hopeful thoughts must have come with its brightness; or was it that the words breathed far off above the rushing river had at length reached their goal? But the cheeks soon paled again, the sigh was repeated, and Lucy slept heavily.

"Tsu weet, tsu weet, tsweet, tsweet, tsweet!" sang in long and joyous trill the speckled-breasted lark, as, raising its crest and the plumage of its throat, it fluttered by the prison-bars, and poured forth that joyous song whose every note told of bright skies, pure air, and the daisy-sprinkled mead; of waving cornfields, rippling brooks, and many-tinted woods. "Tsweet, tsweet, tsweet!" sang the bird of the joyous heart-stirring song, prisoned here in a foul court, but panting for the elastic air and some loving mate.

Lucy started up and looked confusedly round, then gazing towards the sky she became conscious that Mr William Jarker was upon the housetop amongst his pigeons and sooty lathen architecture, gazing heavily down upon her window. There was a frown upon her brow as she slowly and wearily put aside books and slate, bathed her throbbing temples, and smoothed the escaped locks; and then she stole softly to the corner of the window, where, unseen from above, she could lean her cheek against the paintless frame, and listen to the song of the bird. Sighing heavily as it ceased, she uncovered her sewing-machine, wiped off the dust, and prepared her work for the coming day. Now she had to cross the room and make sundry little domestic arrangements; now to seek here, now there; but all was done silently, so as not to rouse the sleepers in the next room; though there was none of the old elasticity, for she moved about wearily, sighing as she went.

And now, first one and then another familiar sound told her that the time for labour—that morning was there once more; many steps were heard descending the stairs and passing along the court, the cooing of the pigeons came from the housetops, and the rattle of vehicles rose more loudly from the distant streets.

"Up and dressed, Lucy?" said a voice from the adjoining room.

"Yes, mother dear," was the reply; and now, after waiting some time for this signal, the wheel spun round, the keen needle darted up and down, and with its sharp click, click, click, sped on Lucy's sewing-machine.

Then the bedroom-door opened, and Septimus Hardon made his appearance—a worn expression struggling hard with the smile that greeted Lucy, as he tenderly kissed her, and then hurrying out, he went for his morning walk, to puzzle over his own weakness, his poverty, and the great problem of things in general.

Volume Two—Chapter Twelve.

In Hospital.

The more a poor and sensitive man confines himself within doors, the more he troubles himself with the fancy that everyone he meets is staring at and watching him when he stirs out; and this fancy was very strong on Septimus Hardon one day—one very miserable sloppy wet day, as he made his way towards Lower Series-place, on account of dilapidations in his boots.

Now experience has taught that holes or seediness generally of the other apparel may to a certain extent be managed, and something like a decent appearance made; the hat may be sponged and ironed, while the brown napless spots are inked, and the bruises, to a certain extent, rubbed out; holes in the coat may be fine-drawn, and a vigorous brushing will always do something towards renovating the nap, even as soap and flannel will remove the grease; then, too, a good button-up, and a paper collar neatly arranged beneath a clean face and shortly-cut hair, give a finish to a costume by no means rare in London streets. It is only when in company with dirt and squalor that long hair shows to its greatest advantage; and if the hair be long, vain are the efforts made to reform a shabby garb. Your artist may fancy he paints the better by saving the sixpences that should by rights find their way into the pocket of the man of the long tongue and sharp scissors; your poet with rolling eye may also find some hidden advantage, some Samson-like strength in flowing locks; and no doubt Italian liberty would suffer, and Vaterland be blotted and wiped out, if from foreign heads much of the collar-greasing, eye-offending, cheek-tickling appendage were shorn off. We know how the strength of the old judge lay in his locks, and when we meet some brawny hirsute fellow, we are apt to consider him a very Hercules of strength; but when we encounter long hair in a state of wealth, petted, perfumed, and glossed, after the fashion of the dandies of the Merry Monarch's time, how the mind will feel disposed to look upon the owner of the flowing locks, not as a star of the intellectual sphere, but as a comet of weak intensity; while, when the same lengthy locks are met with in a state of poverty, even the short prison-barber coiffure of the Jarker kind seems preferable.

Taught by adversity, Septimus Hardon had learned to contend with the dilapidations in his clothes,—at times quite ingeniously,—but, like far better men, he had not been able to control his boots. Custom has so much to do with matters of dress, that though shabbiness will pass unnoticed in the throng, any departure from the ordinary laws will

draw as much attention to the offender as if he were a visitor from some foreign clime. Sandal-shoon were of course once the correct thing for promenading the crust of the earth; but who now, unless he were an extreme Ritualist, would think of traversing our muddy streets with bare feet strapped to a sole, and great-toes working in a most obtrusive manner? Certainly not a man of Septimus Hardon's retiring disposition, though, had he felt so disposed, he could not have done so in the present instance, since his boots almost lacked soles. Their decay had been so rapid, that scarcely anything remained but the uppers. He had even taken to wearing his wife's goloshes, until the policeman became more attentive to his quiet footfall than was agreeable. But there is a stretch beyond which even the elasticity of indiarubber will not extend; and now, after putting up with much hard usage, the goloshes had succumbed, and, suffering under a complete reverse of circumstances, the indiarubber was itself completely rubbed out.

As before said, there are many little contrivances for bettering worn costume; but somehow or another a boot bothers the cleverest. String is a wonderful adjunct to garments generally, often acting as a substitute for buttons or braces; in fact, for a man wrecked on a desert island, there would not be the slightest cause for despair so long as he had string; but even it falls powerless before boots; glue is useless from the damp; while as to paste, it is no better than sealing-wax or grim. Taken altogether, boots are a great nuisance to a poor man; and when they have arrived at such a pitch that they are not worth mending, the best plan to adopt is not to throw them away, or offer them up as an odorous sacrifice to the goddess of poverty upon your household fire, watching their life-like contortions as the leather twists and turns in the hot blaze, but to do as Septimus Hardon did, with many a sigh, as though they had been old friends—sell them.

Septimus sold his boots to Isaac Gross, in Lower Series—place, after trying hard to get another day's wear out of them. It had been a fierce battle, and he had found the arguments adduced by his leather friends too strong to be resisted. He parted from them with regret, although they had never been to him the friends he tried to believe. To begin with, they had always pinched him terribly, raising blisters upon his heels, painfully chafing his toes, bringing a tender place upon one foot, and fostering a corn upon the other; but now they had been parted with in exchange, with so much current coin added, for a pair of Isaac Gross's translations.

It might reasonably be supposed that old Matt had introduced Septimus as a customer; but no, this would have been introducing him to the abode of which he was ashamed; and Septimus had long since discovered the spot for himself, and come to the conclusion that it was a place where he could well suit himself, or rather the requirements of his pocket.

Isaac was smoking away as usual, and giving the finishing touch to a boot-sole by means of a piece of broken glass, whose keen edge took off minute shavings of the leather. Mrs Slagg was busily carrying on trading transactions with a dirty man, and giving the best price for a barrowful of old newspapers; but both Isaac and Mrs Slagg seemed out of spirits, and when a customer presented himself in the shape of Septimus Hardon, the translator put down his work slowly, sighed, laid his pipe upon a shelf, and seemed to carry out his bargain with more than his usual heaviness. As a rule, Isaac was a man given to smiling—smiling very slowly, and bringing his visage back to its normal state, a solid aspect; but there was no smile visible now; and when his visitor for "three-and-nine and the old uns," became the lucky possessor of a pair—no, not a pair—of two Oxonian shoes, Isaac took the money with another sigh, put it in an old blacking-bottle upon the shelf, which he used as a till, dropped the old boots upon a heap close by, took up his pipe, smoked, sighed, and then scraped away at his boot-sole without taking a single peep at his neighbour.

For Isaac Gross was sore at heart concerning the state of his old friend Matt, as sore at heart as was his customer; and when, slightly limping and pinched, Septimus creaked away in his new shoes, Mrs Slagg having finished her paper purchases, and retaken her seat inside her door,—a seat she seldom quitted, making her customers perform the weighing and lifting when practicable,—she peeped round the door-jamb twice in vain; and though trade was prosperous as her love, in spite of its being enshrined so softly in fat, Mrs Keziah Slagg's heart was also sore, and she too sighed.

The feeling that everyone was watching him was stronger than ever upon Septimus Hardon that morning as he made his way along the big streets and alleys on his way towards one of the hospitals, and after letting the matter sleep as it were for some time, he had now awakened to the fact that he should like to prosecute his claim; though he told himself frequently that he was too weak and wanting in decision to go on without help—the help he could not now obtain. He knew that Mr Sterne would willingly assist him, but his was not the required help; and he shrank from making him his confidant, while he eagerly sought the aid of the old printer now it was not forthcoming.

There are some strange contradictions in the human heart; and at the present time, had old Matt presented himself to go on with the search in the unbusiness-like way already followed, the chances are that Septimus Hardon would have shrunk from it, or allowed himself unwillingly to be dragged into farther proceedings.

But old Matt was not present; and now, with the idea troubling him that much time had been wasted, and the matter must be at once seen to, Septimus Hardon made his way towards the hospital; not that he was ill in body, though troubled greatly in mind concerning the man who had been his friend in the hardest struggle of his life. For there were strong passions in the vacillating soul of Septimus Hardon, and he had been greatly moved when, after another long absence, during which he had anxiously waited for the old man, a letter had been delivered, telling how that Matthew Space lay seriously ill in a hospital-ward.

For the first few days after their parting, Matt's last words had strangely haunted Septimus, and he could not rest for thinking of them; but they grew fainter with the lapse of time; Matt came not to spur him once more to his task, and he sank lower and lower, while Doctor Hardon of Somesham, portly and smiling, grew great in the estimation of the people of the little town.

Septimus had tried more than once in his unbusiness-like, haphazard way to find out the residence of old Matt, at such times as the thoughts of his last words were strong upon him. "He said he was ill, and then talked of medicine

and attendance. He was wandering," said Septimus. "I remember I had great difficulty in getting him along. Perhaps he is dead. Well, well; so with all of us. Let it rest, for I'll take no farther steps."

A rash promise to make, as he felt himself when one day came the few lines written in a strange hand, asking his attendance at the hospital. Only a few lines in a crabbed hand, without a reference to the search; but now the desire had risen strong in him once more, though he called himself selfish to think of his own affairs at such a time.

Septimus was not long in responding to the note, but he found the old man delirious. The second time, Lucy begged to go and see her old friend, and wept bitterly over his shrivelled hand; but the old man was incoherent, and knew them not.

And now for the third visit Septimus made his way to the hospital, where he found the old man apparently sinking from the effects of some operation. The doctor had just left, when one of the nurses, a great, gaunt, bony woman, with a catlike smile, and a fine high colour in her cheeks, ushered the visitor to the bedside—a bed, one of many in the light, clean, airy ward.

Septimus Hardon was shocked at the change which had taken place in the old man, as he lay with his hands spread out upon the white coverlet of the bed, pale and glassy-eyed, and rather disposed to wander in his speech; but his face seemed to light up when he heard his visitor's voice.

"No; no better," he whispered. "Let's see, I told you, didn't I? Mrs Hardon, medicine and attendance, wasn't it? To be sure it was. Yes, medicine and shocking bad attendance here. That's it; and I can't tell you any more. I'm falling out of the forme, sir, unless some of these doctors precious soon tighten up the quoins."

"No, no," said Septimus cheerily, "not so bad as that; a good heart is half the battle."

"Yes, yes, yes, so it is," whispered the old man feebly; "but, I say, is she gone?"

Septimus told him the nurse had left the room, and the old man continued:

"You can't keep a good heart here, sir, nohow. I wouldn't have come if I'd known all I know now. You saw her, didn't you?"

"The nurse?" said Septimus.

"Yes, her," replied the old man, shuddering; "she's a wretch, with no more feeling in her than a post. She'll do what the porters shrink from, sir. They have to carry the—you know what I mean, sir—down to the deadhouse; and I've known her laugh at the young one, and do it herself in a way that makes your blood run cold. Just wink, sir, if you see her coming. She'll be here directly with my wine or jelly: says I'm to have some on the little board, don't it?"

Septimus looked at the board above his head, and found that wine was ordered.

"Yes," said the old man, "the doctors are trumps, sir, everyone of them; and no poor fellow out of the place could get the care and attention I've done here. My doctor couldn't do more if I paid him ten pound a day; and I always feel wonderful after he's gone; seems to understand my chronics, sir, as you wouldn't believe in. But those nurses, sir—don't tell 'em I said so, but they're devils, sir, devils. Medicine and attendance, sir; it's all the first and none of the last."

"Hush," said his visitor, seeing as he thought that the old man was beginning to wander, "Mrs Hardon would have liked to see you, and Lucy; but she could not leave her mother to-day."

"God bless her!" said the old man fervently. "He asleep in the bed there told me she came the other day, looking like an angel of comfort in this dreary place, sir. God bless her! Tell her, sir, that the old man's true as steel, sir; the old blade's notched and rusty, but he's true as steel, sir. Do you hear? tell her that old Matt's true as steel. But these nurses, sir," he whispered, holding by his visitor's coat, and drawing him nearer, "they're devils, sir, regular devils!"

"Not quite so bad as that," said Septimus, smiling.

"Not so bad, sir? Worse, sir, worse; ever so much worse. They'd do anything. There's no Sisters of Mercy here, sir, like they're talking of having at some places; they're sisters of something else—she-demons, sir, and one daren't complain or say a word. They'd kill a poor fellow as soon as look at him, and do, too,—dozens."

"Nonsense," said Septimus, smiling, "don't be too hard, Matt."

"'Tain't nonsense, sir," whispered the old man eagerly. "I ain't wandering now, though I have been sending up some queer proofs—been touched in the head, you know, and thought I was going; but it didn't seem to matter much if I could only have been easy in my mind, for I wanted to be out of my misery. But I couldn't be comfortable on account of the medicine and attendance, and your uncle. What business has he to get himself made head doctor here, sir, just because I came; and then to set the nurses against me to get me out of the way? He knows I'm against him, and mean you to have your rights, and he's trying with medicine and attendance to—no, stop, that's not it," whispered the old man, "I've got wrong sorts in my case, and that's not what I wanted to say." And then for a few moments it was pitiable to witness the struggle going on against the wandering thoughts that oppressed him; but he seemed to get the better of his weakness, and went on again.

"There, that's better, sir; your coming has seemed to do me good, and brightened me up. I get like that sometimes, and it seems that I've no power over my tongue, and it says just what it likes. Tell Miss Lucy I'm getting better, and that I want to get out of this place. I know what I'm saying now, sir, though I can't make it quite right about that medicine and attendance that we wanted to know about; for it bothers me, and makes my head hot, and gets mixed

up with the medicine and attendance here. But I shall have it right one of these days; I did nearly, once, but it got away again."

In his anxiety now to know more, Septimus drew out paper and pencil.

"Don't think about it now," he said; "but keep these under your pillow, and put it down the next time you think anything."

Old Matt smiled feebly, and drew forth his old memorandum-book, and slowly opening it, showed the worn stumpy piece of pencil inside.

"I'd thought of that, sir, and should have done so before, only I was afraid that I might put down the wrong thing—something about the nurses, you know, when they would have read it, and then, perhaps, I shouldn't have had a chance to say any more. And 'tisn't really, sir, it isn't nonsense about them. You think I'm wandering, and don't believe it; and it's just the same with the doctors—they don't believe it neither. There was one poor chap on the other side of the ward, down at the bottom there—he told the doctor his nurse neglected him, and drank his wine, putting in water instead, beside not giving him his medicine regular; so the old doctor called for the nurse, and—"

"But you must not talk any more," said Septimus kindly, "you are getting exhausted."

"I ain't," said the old man angrily; "it does me good, revives me; and you don't believe me, that's what it is."

"Yes, I do, indeed," cried Septimus. "Then let me finish," whispered the old man. "Doctor Hardon called and asked her where she saw the entry. There, now, there," whimpered Matt, "see what you've done: you made me upset a stickful of matter, and got me all in a pye again. No; all right, sir, I see, I see—he asked her about it before the patient, speaking very sharply, for the doctors mean well, sir. And then what did the old crocodile do, sir, but just turn her eyes towards the whitewash, smooth her apron, raise her hands a bit, and then, half smiling, looks at the doctor like so much pickled innocence, but never says a word; while he, just to comfort the poor fellow, told him to keep up, and it should all be seen to; and then there was a bit of whispering between the doctor and the nurse, and then he went off. But I could see who was believed, for I heard the doctor mutter something about sick man's fancies as he came across to me. That poor chap died, sir!"

Just then, Septimus gave the old man a meaning look, for one of the nurses came up with a glass of wine, and smiled and curtsied to the visitor.

"I hope he ain't been talking, sir?" said the woman, in a harsh grating voice with the corners a little rubbed down; "getting on charming, ain't he, sir? only he will talk too much.—Now drink your wine up, there's a good soul. Don't sip it, but toss it down, and it will do you twice as much good;" and while the old man, with the assistance of his visitor, raised himself a little, she gave his pillow two or three vengeful punches and shakes as she snatched it off the bed, the result of her efforts being visible in a slit across the middle, which she placed undermost.

"Yes," muttered Matt when the woman had gone. "Yes; toss it down, so as not to taste it. Why, that was half water—beautiful wines and spirits as they have here, sir. That's the very one herself, sir. She killed him."

"Killed who?" exclaimed Septimus, horrified.

"Don't shout, sir; leastwise, not if you want to see me again," said Matt grimly. "Killed that poor fellow I was telling you about. She never forgave him, and a week afterwards and there was the screen round his bed, and the porters came and carried him away. She killed him, sure enough, and I ain't agoing to tell you about the bother there was with his friends about the doctors, and what they did to him afterwards, it might upset you. It almost does me; not that I care much, for it don't matter when you're gone, and I've got no friends."

"Hush, pray; it can't be so," exclaimed Septimus, shuddering.

"No, of course not," chuckled the old man, brightening up from the effects of his stimulant, "O, no; sick man's fancies, sir, ain't they? Just what everyone would say; but she killed him all the same, just as dozens more have been killed here. It don't take much to kill a poor fellow hanging in the balance—him in one scale, and his complaint in the other. The doctor comes and gets in the same scale with him, and bears him down a bit right way; but then as soon as the doctor's gone, the nurse goes and sits in the other scale, and sends him wrong way again. Good nursing's of more consequence sometimes than the doctoring, I can tell you, sir, and if I'd had good nursing I shouldn't have been here at all. Ikey means well, you know, sir; and so does Mother Slagg, eh? but you don't know them, sir, and it don't matter."

"But had you not better be silent now?" hinted Septimus.

"No," said the old man testily; "being so quiet, and having no one to talk to has half-killed me as it is. I don't want to be killed, I want to get out, sir. And, mind you, I don't say about that poor fellow that she poisoned him, or choked him, or played at she-Othello with the pillow, sir; but there's plenty of other ways of doing it. The doctor knows the man's condition, and his danger, and orders him such and such things to keep him going, and bring him round, eh?"

Septimus nodded, for the old man paused for breath; though the wine he had taken made him talk in a voluble and excited manner, but still with perfect coherence.

"Well, sir; and who's got to carry out the doctor's orders? Why, the nurse, to be sure. Just push the pillow a little more under my head, sir; she's made it uncomfortable. That's it; thanky, sir. Well, you nor no one else won't believe that a nurse here would do anything wrong. But now, look here: suppose you see that a lamp wants trimming, what do you do? You give orders for it to be trimmed, sir, don't you?"

Septimus nodded again.

“Well, then,” whispered the old man, hooking one of his long fingers in a buttonhole of his visitor’s coat; “suppose they don’t trim the lamp; suppose it isn’t trimmed, eh? what then?”

“It goes out!” said Septimus.

“To be sure—exactly, sir; and there have been lots of lamps go out here. They won’t trim them, or forget to trim them, and tell themselves they’re only sparing the poor creatures misery, while no one dares to speak about it. Talk of death, sir, they think no more of it here, sir, than one does of snuffing out a candle. You see, decent women won’t come to a place like this to do the work these nurses do. It’s only to be done for money or love. Now it’s done for money, and while it’s done for money it can only be done by hard, heartless, drinking creatures who’ve got women’s shapes and devils’ hearts, sir. But the doctors are all right, sir, only that they don’t see all we poor patients see. If skill and doctoring will put me right, sir, I shall be put right, sir. But I’m scared about it sometimes, and half afraid that some of those beauties will weight the wrong scale so heavily that the doctors won’t pull me square. Sick man’s fancies, sir, eh? Wanderings, ain’t they?”

Septimus Hardon knew not what to say, but whispered such comfort as he could.

“Something ought to be done, you know,” said the old man feebly; “but don’t hint a word of what I’ve said, sir, to a soul—please don’t,” he said pitifully. “You see that all these goings on prey upon a poor fellow’s mind; and if he isn’t low-spirited lying in a hospital-ward, when is he likely to be? One wants sympathy and comfort, sir, and to feel that there’s someone belonging to you who cares for you, and is ready to smooth your pillow, and lay a cold hand upon your hot forehead, and say ‘God bless you!’ and I’ve no one, no one;” and the old man’s voice grew weak and quavering.

“Come, come,” whispered Septimus, “take heart, Matt; we’ll come as often as they will let us. And you are getting better; see how you have chatted. You are only low now from the reaction. Try and rest a bit, and get rid of some of these fancies.”

Old Matt’s eyes turned angrily upon his visitor as he exclaimed, “I tell you they are not fancies, sir, but truth. I wouldn’t have come if I’d known, for I’ve seen men drink, and women drink; but never anyone like these she-wolves. Would you trust anyone you loved to the care of a woman who drank, sir?”

“No!”

“They say they must have support, and I suppose they must; but it’s hard, hard, hard!” groaned the old man, and he shut his eyes, seeking out the hand of his visitor, and holding it tightly, until, by the rules of the place, he was obliged to leave.

Volume Two—Chapter Thirteen.

Mr Jarker is “A Bit Odd.”

There had been no occasion for Mr William Jarker to carry out the threat he had once made, for in all the long space of time during which Agnes Hardon’s child was in Mrs Jarker’s care, the money was always paid, faithfully and regularly, once a week, but at how great a cost to its mother none but the Seer of all hearts could tell; and always, in spite of sickness and misery, pain, and the hard bondage of her life, Jarker’s wife was tender and loving to the little one within her charge. Perhaps it was the memory of another pair of bright eyes that had once gazed up into her own, perhaps only the loving promptings of her woman’s heart; but when, by stealth almost, Agnes Hardon came to kiss her child, she left tearfully but rejoicing, for there was proof always before her of the gentle usage in the fond way in which the little thing clung to its nurse. The preference may have wrung her heart, but it was but another sorrow to bear, and, bending beneath her weight of care, she came and went at such times as seemed best for avoiding Jarker, the curate, and Septimus Hardon.

It was in her power to have let Lucy know where old Matt lodged; but of late they had met but little, and then, in their hurried interviews, his name was not mentioned, for the sorrows of the present filled their hearts.

But now Agnes Hardon was in greater trouble, for something whispered her that this sickness of poor Mrs Jarker was a sickness unto death, and her soul clave to the suffering, ill-used woman who had filled the place of mother to her child; while, at the same time, she trembled for the future of her little one after each visit—ever feeling the necessity, but ever dreading, to take it away, for truly there was a change coming; and time after time when she left the garret, it was with a shudder, for there seemed to be a shadow in the room.

It was almost impossible to ascend the creaking stairs to the garret tenanted by Mr Jarker without hearing Mrs Sims, who, through some spiritual weakness, had left the house in the square to return once more to the Rents—a court honoured by most of those unfortunates who, from unforeseen circumstances, fell from the heights of the square; while the latter was always looked up to, in its topmost or basement floors, for promotion by the more fortunate tenants of the Rents; and now an ascending visitor was almost certain to hear the melancholy, sniffing woman blowing her fire. Generally speaking, we see bellows hang by the mantelpiece, with a time-honoured, bees’-waxy polish glossing them, as though they were family relics whose services were seldom called into requisition; but *chez* Mrs Sims, the bellows had rather a bad time of it, and were worked hardly enough to make them short-winded. They already wheezed so loudly that it was impossible to take Mrs Sims’ bellows for anybody else’s bellows; and this was probably due to their having inhaled a sufficiency of ashy dust to make them asthmatic, while the nozzle was decayed and burned away from constant resting upon the specially-cleared bottom-bar; the left half of the broken

tongs doing duty for the vanished poker, borrowed once to clear the grating in the court, and never returned, for the simple reason that it found its way to Mrs Slagg's marine-store shop, where it stayed in consideration of the porter receiving the best price given, namely, twopence.

Your boots might creak, and, as was their wont, the stairs would crack and groan, but still there was the sound of the bellows to be heard as you ascended the staircase—puff, puff, puff; and the stooping woman's stays crackled and crumpled at every motion, for Mrs Sims, from always requiring support, external as well as internal, sought the external in whalebone, though for the internal she preferred rum. There was always "suthin' as wanted a bit of fire:" perhaps it was washing-day, which, from the small size of Bennett's-rents' wardrobes, happened irregularly, with Mrs Sims three times a week, when the big tin saucepan used for boiling divers articles of wearing-apparel, in company with a packet of washing-powder, would be placed upon the little damaged grate, upon which it would sit like Incubus, putting the poor weak fire quite out of heart, when it had to be coaxed accordingly. Sometimes the bellows were required to hurry the "kittle," a battered old copper vessel that never boiled if it could help it, and, when compelled by the said hurrying, only did so after passing through a regular course of defiant snorts, even going so far as to play the deceiver, and sputter over into the fire, pretending to be on the boil when many degrees off, and so spoiling Mrs Sims' tea—never the strongest to be obtained. Sometimes, again, the bellows were required to get a decent fire to cook a bit of steak for the master's dinner, or even "to bile the taters." At all events, of all Mrs Sims' weaknesses, the principal lay in her bellows, and she could generally find an excuse for a good blow, accompanied sometimes by a cry over the wind-exhalers, as she sniffed loudly at her task.

There is no doubt but that in her natural good-heartedness Mrs Sims would have operated quite as cheerfully upon any neighbour's fire as she did now upon the handful of cinders in Mrs Jarker's grate; for, in spite of her sniffs, her weakness for the internal and external support, and her whining voice, Mrs Sims was one of those women who are a glory to their sex. Only a very humble private was she in the noble army, but one ever ready for the fight: fever, cholera, black death, or death of any shade, were all one to Mrs Sims, who only seemed happy when she was in trouble. If it was a neighbour who could pay her, so much the better; if it was a neighbour who could not, it mattered little; send for Mrs Sims, and Mrs Sims came, ready to nurse, comfort, sit up, or do anything to aid the needy; and old Matt had been heard more than once to wish she had been a widow.

Poor Mrs Jarker would have suffered badly but for this woman's kindness; many a little neighbourly act had been done by Lucy, but Mrs Jarker's need was sore, and beyond minding the child for her occasionally, Lucy's powers of doing good were circumscribed. And now, one night, sat Mrs Sims, sniffing, and forcing a glow from the few embers in the Jarker grate as she made the sick woman a little gruel.

Mr William Jarker ascended the stairs after having had "a drop" at the corner—that is to say, two pints of porter with a quartern of gin in each; and upon hearing the noise of the bellows he uttered what he would have denominated "a cuss," since he bore no love for Mrs Sims, and her sniff annoyed him; but when, upon ascending higher, he found that the sound did not proceed, as he expected, from the second-floor, but from his own room, he began to growl so audibly that the women heard him coming like a small storm, and trembled, since Mr Jarker was a great stickler for the privacy of his own dwelling, which he seemed to look upon as a larger sort of cage in which he kept his wife.

But although forbidden to enter the room, Mrs Sims glanced at the pallid sufferer lying in the bed, with the feeble light of a rush candle playing upon her features; and muttering to herself, "Not if he kills me," resolved not to abdicate; and then, after a few final triumphant puffs, dropping at the same time a tear upon the top of the bellows—a tear of weakness and sympathy—she laid down the wind instrument upon which she had been playing, and thrust an iron spoon into the gruel upon the fire, stirring it round so energetically that a small portion was jerked out of the saucepan upon the glowing cinders, and hissed viciously, forming a fitting finale to Mr Jarker's feline swearing.

But the gruel did not hiss and sputter as angrily, nor did the erst glowing cinders look so black, as did Mr William Jarker when he found "the missus still abed," and Mrs Sims in possession.

"I have said as I won't have it," growled Mr Jarker; "and I says agen as I won't have it. So let people wait till I arsts 'em afore they takes liberties with my place. So now p'r'aps you'll make yourself scarce, Missus Sims;" and then the birdcatcher crossed over to, and began muttering something to, his wife.

But Mrs Sims was nothing daunted; she was in the right, and she knew it, and though her hands trembled, and more of the gruel fell hissing into the fire, as the tears of weakness fell fast, she stood her ground firmly.

"When I've done my dooty by her, as other people, whom I won't bemean myself to name, oughter have done, Mister Jarker, I shall go, and not before," said Mrs Sims. "It's not me as could sit down-stairs and know as that pore creetur there was dying for want of a drop of gruel, and me not come and make it, which didn't cost you a farden, so now then!" Here Mrs Sims bridled a great deal and sniffed very loudly; a couple of tears falling into the fender "pit-pat."

"Don't jaw," said Bill gruffly, making a kind of feint with his hand as he stooped down to light his short black pipe by thrusting the bowl between the bars.

Mrs Sims flinched as if to avoid a blow, to the great delight of Mr Jarker; but exasperated him directly after by sniffing loudly, over and over again, producing, by way of accompaniment to each sniff, a low and savage growl and an oath.

"Well, I'm sure," exclaimed Mrs Sims, "how polite we're a-growing!" But catching sight of the smouldering fire in the ruffian's eye, she hastily poured out the gruel, repenting all the while, for the poor woman's sake, that she had spoken; but upon taking the hot preparation with some toast to the invalid she found her kindness unavailing, for though Mrs Jarker sat up for a minute and tried to take it, she sank back with a faint sigh, and with an imploring look, she whispered her neighbour to please go.

"Not till I've seen you eat this, my pore dear soul," said Mrs Sims boldly, though, poor woman, she was all in a tremble, and kept glancing over her shoulder at Jarker, who, with his back to the fire and his hands in his pockets,

glowered and scowled at the scene before him. Mrs Sims passed her arm round the thin, wasted form, and supported the invalid; but, after vainly trying to swallow a few spoonfuls, the poor woman again sank back upon her pillow, sighing wearily, while the sharp, pecking sound made by one of the caged birds against its perch, sounded strangely like the falling of a few scraps of soil upon a coffin—"Ashes to ashes—dust to dust." And then, for some minutes, there was silence in the room, till Mrs Jarker turned whisperingly to her friendly neighbour, to beg that she would go now and not rouse Bill, who was a bit odd sometimes.

So, saucepan in hand, Mrs Sims wished the invalid "Good-night;" and then, trembling visibly, sidled towards the door, evidently fearing to turn her back to Mr Jarker, who was still growling and muttering, as if a storm were brewing and ready to burst; but Mrs Sims' agitation caused her first to drop her iron spoon from the saucepan, and then, as she stooped to recover it, to flinch once more, to the ruffian's great delight, as he made another pugilistic feint—a gymnastic feat that he had learnt through visiting some marsh or another when a fight was to come off between Fibbing Phil and Chancery Joe—a feat that consisted of a violent effort to throw away the right fist, and a quick attempt at catching it with the left hand. But Mrs Sims managed to get herself safely outside the door, and lost no time in hurrying down, the stairs, breathing more freely with every step placed between her and the ruffian; but she shrieked loudly on reaching the first landing, and dropped both saucepan and spoon, for the door was savagely thrown open, and the bellows came clattering after her down the stairs; and all in consequence of Mr Jarker being a bit odd.

"A bit odd!"—in one of those fits which had often prompted him to strike down his weak, suffering, patient wife with dastardly, cruel hand, and then to kick her with his heavy boots, or drag at her hair until her head was bleeding—oddness which made the tiny child in the room shrink from him; while before now it had been traced on the poor woman's features in blackened and swollen bruises. But shrieks, and the falling of heavy blows, were common sounds in Bennett's-rents, and people took but little notice of Mr Jarker's odd fits.

Bill took no heed to the weary, strangling cough which shook his wife's feeble frame, but smoked on furiously till the fire went out. She would not get up to put on more coals, and he wasn't agoing to muck his hands; for, as has been before hinted, Mr Jarker had soft, whitish hands, which looked as though they had never done a hard day's work; and at last, when the place looked more cheerless and dull than usual, he prepared himself for rest.

"You're allus ill," growled the ruffian, who had had just drink enough to make him savage; "and it's my belief as you wants rousing up." But there came no answer to his remark. The little one slept soundly upon the two chairs which formed its bed, and, with half-closed eyes, the woman lay, breathing very faintly, as her lips moved, forming words she had heard from Mr Sterne.

Bill felt himself to be ill-used, and was very sulky, a feeling which made him kick his boots to the end of the room, where one knocked over a linnet's cage, when, still growling, the owner had to go and pick it up, which he did at the expense of his dignity, and there and then shook the cage till the unoffending bird rustled and fluttered about, panting and terror-stricken, to be half-drowned by the water he poured into its little glass the next minute. For, what business had his wife to be ill and allus having parsons and Mrs Simses a-pottering about in his place? Hadn't he made a row about it when she came when the kid was born, and hadn't she allus come at uncomfortable times since? Didn't she come when it died, and weren't things uncomfortable now, and she a-making them worse? He wouldn't have it—that he wouldn't; and, growling and swearing in a low tone, Mr Jarker divested himself of a part of his attire, and threw himself upon the bed.

The rushlight danced and flickered, and a few drops of rain pattered against the window as the night breeze sighed mournfully down the court; first one and then another bird scraped at its perch, roused as it had been by the noise and light, so that it sounded again and again like the earth upon the coffin-lid; some loose woodwork amongst the pigeon-traps upon the roof swung in the wind, and beat against the tiles, and then all was very quiet and still in the wretched attic.

"Bill—Bill, dear," murmured a voice after a while—a strange harsh-sounding voice, as if it came from a parched and fevered throat; "Bill!"

No answer, only the heavy breathing of the ruffian, and the pattering as of earth upon the coffin-lid.

"Bill—Bill, dear—water!" whispered the voice once more; but there was no answer, only the restless pattering noise of the birds. Then again silence so still and profound that it seemed hardly to be London. But the silence was broken by a little liquid trilling laugh, the laugh of the child, as some bright-hued happy dream passed over its imagination; though there was silence again the next moment, to be broken once more by the strange husky voice, a voice that seemed new to the place, as in almost agonising tones it whispered:

"Kiss me, Bill!"

But there was for response only the sound as of the earth pattering upon the coffin-lid more fitfully and hollow. While now, slowly and timidly, a thin white arm was raised, and, seen there in the dim light, it was as though it was waved threateningly above the drunken ruffian's head; but no—there was no threat in the act—no calling down of judgment from on high; for the arm was passed lovingly, tenderly, round the coarse bull neck, and still there was no response to the appeal.

"Kiss me, Bill!" was once more whispered; but a long, deep-drawn, stertorous breath told that William Jarker slept heavily, as the arm lay motionless, clasping his neck; and then came a sigh, as piteous and heart-rending as ever rose from suffering breast.

On sped the hours; the rushlight burned down into the socket, flickered once, and expired; the distant sounds of traffic floated by once or twice; the customary heavy tramp of the policeman was heard to pass along the court; and now and then the ruffian breathed more stertorously than usual, or ejaculated some unconnected words in his sleep.

Then the child started and whimpered for a few minutes, but sank to sleep again; and still through the night came that restless, pattering noise, that hollow rattle as of dry earth—“ashes to ashes, dust to dust”—the sound as of dry earth falling upon a coffin-lid.

The stars paled as they set; the morning came, and the red-eyed lamplighter hurried from post to post, extinguishing the sickly-looking gas-jets; the noises in the streets grew louder and louder, and many a weary client lodging near woke to wonder whether his case would come on that day. The men in Bennett’s-rents who had work slowly tramped to it, many who were without rose to seek it, while others, again, to use their own words, took it out in sleep, and amongst these was Mr William Jarker.

“Mammy, mammy!” at length rang in pitiful tones upon the ruffian’s ear, and as he woke to the sensations of a hot, aching, fevered head and furred tongue, he tried to clear his misty, spirit-clouded faculties.

“Mammy, mammy!” again cried the child, who had climbed upon the bed, and was shaking her foster-mother; “mammy, mammy!” she cried more pitifully, and then burst into a loud wail at her inability to wake her.

“Yah-h-h-h!” roared Bill without moving; when, at the dreaded sound, the little thing ceased its cry, and, cowering beside the sleeping woman, laid a sunny head upon her cheek, and passed two tiny, plump arms round her neck, in a soft, sweet embrace that has power in its innocent love to warm even the coldest, though futile here.

“Blame it, how cold!” growled Mr Jarker, trying to raise the arm that had lain upon his neck the long night through; but it was stiff and heavy; and, shrinking hastily away, the frightened man sat up, gazed for an instant at the face beside him, and then leaping, with a howl of terror, from the bed, rushed half-clad from the room.

And why did he flee? Was it that there was still the sound as of falling earth rattling upon a coffin-lid? For what was there to fear in the pale face of that sleeping woman, with the earthly pains and sorrow-traces faded away, to leave the countenance calm, softened, and almost beautiful; for there had come back something of the old, old look of maidenhood and happier times, when she had looked with admiration upon the stalwart form of the ruffian she had wed, and believed in him, wedding him to become his willing slave? Hers had been a hard life; born in misery and suffering, growing under sorrow and poverty and vice; yet had she been a woman with a woman’s heart. But now she slept, to wake, we hope, where justice is tempered by mercy, and the secrets and sorrows of every heart are known. But now she slept, and her sleep must have been peaceful—happy—for the lines of sorrow had passed away, and there was a smile upon her lip.

Nothing to fear. Guilt fled, but Innocence stayed, and the soft, silky curls of the child were mingled with the thin dark locks of the woman, as a tiny smooth round cheek rested upon the marble temple, and a little hand played in the cold breast that should never warm it more.

Nothing to fear; though the simple people who soon assembled in the room spoke in whispers, passing in and out on tiptoe, many with their aprons to their eyes; while poor Mrs Sims, when she returned to her own room with the child, quieted it by means of a large slice of sugared bread-and-butter, and relieved her own mind by sitting down to have a good long, soft blow at the fire, what time the tears pattered down plenteously on the bellows.

Nothing to fear; for calm and still was the face of the sleeping woman, who with her latest breath had rendered the love she had sworn to her husband, and now in peace she rested; but still through the long day, through the long night, and when the hard, harsh shape of the coffin stood in the room, there came at intervals the sharp, hollow, rattling noise, as of earth falling upon its lid, when the listeners’ ears would strain to catch those awful accompanying words—“Ashes to ashes, dust to dust!”

Volume Two—Chapter Fourteen.

Sick Man’s Fancies.

There was a strange battle in the breast of the Reverend Arthur Sterne about this time. Now he would feel satisfied in his own mind that he had obtained the victory over self, while directly after, an encounter with Lucy, or some little incident that occurred during one of his visits, would teach him his weakness. Pained, and yet pleased, he left Septimus Hardon’s rooms on the day after Mrs Jarker’s death, for he had been gazing upon a picture that an artist would have been delighted to copy: Lucy Grey weeping over the sunny-haired child she had just fetched from Mrs Sims’ room. He was pained, for the scene had brought up the thoughts of its mother, and her strange intimacy with Lucy, though the gentle, loving interest shown for the helpless, worse than orphan child, made his heart swell and beat faster as he thought of the mine of wealth, the tenderness the fair girl could bestow were she all he could have wished.

But the pain and sorrow predominated as he left the house and slowly descended, for he encountered *ma mère* upon the staircase, and he felt the colour mount to his temples as he met her sardonic smile and thought of her words; and then he hurried away, feeling at times that he must leave the place and seek another home, for his present life was wearying in the extreme. He would have done so before but for one powerful thought, one which he could feel would maintain its sway, so that he would be drawn back and his efforts rendered useless—efforts that he made to break the chain that fettered him. For her part, Lucy avoided him, meeting him but seldom, and then with flushed cheek and averted eye; while though in any other instance he would have declared instantly that flush to have been that of shame or modesty, yet here, tortured by doubt, he could not satisfy himself, for at such times as he tried to be content came the memory of the scene in the Lane, and the words of the old Frenchwoman.

Lucy had fetched the child from across the court, but it was only admitted by Mrs Septimus under sufferance, for she was in one of her weak fits that day, and if it had not been that Septimus encouraged the act, the little thing would

have remained in Mrs Sims' charge.

"Keep her, at all events, till I come back," Septimus had said, and his evident desire to go out had somewhat shortened the curate's visit, for the desire was strong now upon Septimus to gain fresh information touching the legitimacy of his birth. The more now that obstacles sprung up, the more he felt disposed to assert his right; but he acknowledged to himself that it was but a passing fit, and that he would soon return to his old weakness and despondency. Still there was a warm feeling of friendship for Matt to prompt him to revisit the hospital at an early day, and, soon after the curate had left Bennett's-rents, Septimus was on his way to the sick-bed of the old man.

He thought a great deal of old Matt's assertion that he had seen an entry somewhere; but the more he thought, the more it seemed that this was merely a hallucination produced by his illness, for he could not but recall how he had confused it with matters of the past and present.

The old man slept when Septimus reached his bedside, and some time elapsed before he unclosed his dim eyes, and then they gazed blankly into his visitor's before he recognised him, when a light seemed to spread across his features, and he smiled faintly.

"Come again? That's right. I wanted to ask you something, sir," he said.

"Indeed!" said Septimus eagerly, for he felt that it had to do with the matter in which he was interested.

"Why," said the old man, hesitating, "it was about the nurses, and your father, and—do you think that they had anything to do with the rats?"

Shuddering, and with the cold sweat breaking out upon his face at the bare recollection, Septimus laid a hand upon the old man's breast, and gazed wonderingly at him.

"Hush," said Matt in a whisper, "don't speak loud, sir. I've been trying to put it all into shape. I think they had; and it's that woman who drinks my wine that knows all about it. They're keeping you out of your rights, sir, and they're all in the plot. Stoop down, please, a little closer; I want to whisper," and he drew his visitor nearer to him, so that his lips nearly touched his ear. "Medicine and attendance, sir, eh? That was it, wasn't it?"

Septimus felt his heart sink with disappointment, as he slowly nodded his head.

"I've found it out, sir," continued the old man; "found it out for you after travelling all over London. They think I've been here all the time; but, bless you, I've been out every night, and had it over with the posts in the street. They don't know it, bless you; but I've been tracking that entry, and, after the doctor has dodged me all over London, I've followed him here. It's not Doctor Hardon, sir, and yet it is, you know; but I've not quite separated them, for they're somehow mixed up together, and I've not had time to put that quite right; but I'll do it yet. Interest for that shilling you once gave me, sir, just at the time I was that low that I'd nearly made up my mind to go off one of the bridges, and make a finish. But just see if either of the nurses is coming, sir, and tell me, for they're all in it, and they'll keep you and Miss Lucy out of your rights. Tell her I'm true as steel, sir, will you?"

"Yes, yes," said Septimus anxiously, for the old man seemed to be growing excited.

"But about that doctor, sir, and the entry," he continued, "it's here, sir; it's the house-surgeon, and I saw him make a memorandum here by my bedside: 'Medicine and attendance: Mrs Hardon.' He put it down in his pocket-book, after sharpening his pencil upon a bright shining lancet; and he did not know that I was watching him. Take him by the throat, sir, as soon as you see him, and make him give it to you."

"Try and compose yourself, Matt," said Septimus sadly, for he now felt that the whole history of the entry was but the offspring of a diseased mind. For a while he had suffered himself to hope that by some strange interposition of chance, with the old man for instrument, the whole matter was likely to be cleared up; but now the air-built castles were broken down—swept away by the sick man's incoherent speeches, and, after seeing him turn upon his side and close his eyes, the visitor rose to leave.

But old Matt heard the movement of his chair, and unclosed his eyes directly.

"You'll come again, sir, won't you?" he said, speaking quite calmly. "That always seems to make me clearer—shutting my eyes and having five minutes' doze. I'm weak, sir—very weak now; but I'm getting right, and I'll turn that over in my mind about the entry against you come again, when I can talk better, and try to set it right. But stop; let me see," he exclaimed,—"stop, I have it. I remember now, I did think all about it, and where it was I saw the entry; and for fear it should slip my mind again, I did as you told me, and as I always meant to do—put it down in my pocket-book under the pillow here;" and he drew forth the tattered memorandum-book, and held it out to his visitor.

Septimus turned over the leaves with trembling hands, coming upon technical references to trade matters,—amounts in money of work done; calculations of quantity in pages of type. Then there were the baptismal and marriage entries they had made out, and beneath them some tremblingly—traced characters, evidently formed by the old man when in a reclining position; but, with the exception of the one word "Hardon," they were completely illegible. He then turned to the old man; but his eyes were closed, and he seemed sleeping; so he replaced book and pencil beneath the pillow, and then, passing between the beds of other sufferers, each intent upon his own misery, he came suddenly upon the smiling nurse, evidently waiting to see if there was a gratuity ready for her hand.

It was hard work parting with that shilling; but Septimus felt it to be a duty to slip it into the Jezebel's hand, and to whisper a few beseeching words that she would be kind and attentive to the old man.

"A quiet, patient old creature; you may rest quite happy about that, sir," said the nurse. "I'll treat him just as I would

my own brother."

"He will get better?" said Septimus interrogatively.

The woman screwed her lips up very tightly as she said she hoped he might, but Septimus thought of the expiring lamp and its supply of oil; and it was little of his own affairs, and the possibility of there being an entry locked in the old man's clouded memory, that he thought of as he stammered, "Pray do all you can for him. I am sorry I can offer you no more."

"Bless you, sir, you needn't even have done that. If it had been a guinea, it would have been all the same, and I shouldn't have thought a bit the better of you. We have a painful duty to perform here, sir, and it's an unthankful task, for there's no gratitude from the patients; but when a friend or relative makes one a little offering, why, setting aside the value, sir, it does seem to make things better, and to sweeten the toil. We never do expect any praise; while as to some of the tales the patients make up, you'd be surprised. Poor things! you see, their minds wander a bit, and they always seem to take a dislike to those who are like mothers to them. But there, sir, I always says to myself, I says, it's no use to take any notice of the poor things' whims, so long as we know we do our duty by them."

"I suppose," said Septimus, "their complaints weaken their intellects a good deal?"

"Wonderfully, I do assure you, sir. Now I shouldn't be a bit surprised if that poor gentleman, your friend, has been telling you all sorts of things?"

Septimus did not believe all that Matt had said, but he evaded the question.

"You'd be surprised, sir, if you only knew one-half the tales they make up, sir. There, I can't help it, sir; I laugh, I do, when I think of them; for we must be able to eat and drink like bore-constructors, sir, to manage a quarter of what they says. They say we eat their chicking and jelly, and drink their wine, and gin, and fancy things the doctors order for them. Some even goes further than that; but then the doctors know what people are in such a state, and don't take any notice of them."

"'Mrs Hardon; medicine and attendance.' I wonder whether it's true, or only a sick man's fancy?" muttered Septimus aloud, as he went down the steps, and stood once more in the open air, feeling as though a weight had been raised from his spirits. "Poor creatures, poor creatures! left to the tender mercies of those women, and often neglected and left to die."

"No, no, no! pray don't say so," sobbed a voice at his elbow. "It's bad enough, I know; but not so bad as that, please!" And then a burst of sobs choked the speaker's utterance.

Septimus started, for the voice seemed familiar, and he saw beside him a tall, well-dressed female, with a thick wool-veil drawn down over her face, so that he could not distinguish her features.

"I knew you again, Mr—Mr—Mr—you did tell me your name, but I've forgotten it; and I asked him, and he said—but dear, dear," she sobbed, "can you see that I have been crying? And have you been in that dreadful place?"

"Yes," replied Septimus; "but I really do not know to whom I am talking."

"O dear, O dear!" sobbed the woman, "it's me; you know me, that you called on in Chiswell-street; and I can't take up my fall, for my poor eyes are so red with crying, and people would see. Registry—office for servants, you know; and O dear, O dear!" and she sobbed more loudly than ever.

"Indeed, I beg your pardon," said Septimus kindly; "but I could not know you through that thick veil."

"Then you could not see that I had been crying?" sobbed the poor woman.

"No, indeed," replied Septimus, "and—"

"Don't speak to me yet," ejaculated Miss Tollicks; "I'm almost heart-broken, and you set me off saying those cruel words. I'd give anything for a place where I could sit down and have a good cry, if it was only a doorstep, where people could not see me. I'm nearly blind now, and can't tell which way to go. It's ever so much worse than any trouble I ever had with my business."

"Take my arm," said Septimus gently, after an apologetic glance at his shabby clothes. "Lean upon me, and we'll walk slowly down this street. It is quieter here, and you will feel relieved soon."

"O, thank you, thank you," exclaimed Miss Tollicks, taking the proffered arm, and still sobbing loudly; "but you are sure that people cannot see I have been crying?"

"Certain," said Septimus as they walked on.

"And so you think," said Miss Tollicks, "that they are neglected and die, do you, Mr Hardon? and I'm afraid the poor things are. I've just been to see my poor sister that the doctor recommended to go in, and she's been telling me such dreadful tales about the nurses; and I can't tell whether it's the truth, or whether the poor thing is only light-headed. It was horrible to listen to her, that it was; and you've been to see some one too, Mr Harding?"

"Yes," replied Septimus, "the poor old gentleman who was with me when I called upon you."

"Dear, dear, dear, what a sorrowful world this is!" sobbed Miss Tollicks; "nothing but trouble, always trouble; and how is he, poor man?"

“Not long for this world, I fear,” said Septimus softly.

“And did he say anything about the nurses too?” sobbed Miss Tollicks.

“Yes, yes,” said Septimus hastily; “but it can’t be true. No woman could be such a wretch.”

“O, I don’t know, Mr Harding; but is my veil quite down? there—thank you. We’re strange creatures, and we are either very good or else very bad—especially servants, Mr Harding,” sobbed Miss Tollicks. “I’m afraid that it’s all true enough, and if they’d only let me stop and nurse my poor sister, I wouldn’t care. The business might go and take its chance, for what’s the good of money without life? But O, Mr Harding, I did ask my landlord, and he said—and he said—but O! you must not ask me now.” And here the poor woman burst out sobbing, quite hysterically, so that more than one person turned round to gaze upon her; but her troubles attracted little notice, for this was no uncommon scene in the long dreary street: the inhabitants were too much accustomed to the sight of weeping friends coming from the great building, where, but a few minutes before, they had been taking, perhaps, a last farewell of a dear one whom they would see no more—a dear one whose face was perhaps already sealed by the angel of death; a sad parting, maybe, from one whose hopeless malady had rendered it necessary for the interior of the hospital to afford the attentions that took the place of those that would have been supplied at home. Poverty and sickness, twin sisters that so often go hand-in-hand, brought here their victims to ask for aid; and those who dwelt hard by paid little heed to pallid out-patients seeking their daily portion of advice, some on crutches, some leaning upon the arms of friends, some in cabs. They were used to painful scenes, and knew by sight patient, student, and doctor; and therefore hardly bestowed a thought upon the sad couple passing slowly down the street, at the end of which Septimus saw poor weeping Miss Tollicks into a cab, and left her unquestioned to pace slowly back towards Bennett’s-rents.

He walked on and thought—thought of all his troubles, and the want of decision in his character; of how he ought boldly to have investigated his uncle’s claim, setting aside his own feelings for the sake of those dependent upon his arm for their support; and he sighed again and again as he took himself to task. And then a prayer rose to his lips as he recalled the scene which he had left—a prayer fervently breathed there in the midst of London’s busy flowing stream, as fervent as ever emanated from devotee kneeling in some solemn fane—a prayer that, for the sake of those at home, he might be spared from the smiting of sickness; and then he shuddered as he remembered his father’s words, and thought of his wife’s increasing helplessness.

“Stark mad! Yes, I must have been,” he muttered; “and yet no, why was I to crush down my unselfish love?” And then he stopped short to examine himself as to whether his love had really been unselfish. But he passed on again unsatisfied, lost in abstracting thoughts, heedless of being jostled here, pushed there, a walking ensample in his short walk of what he was in his longer journey of life, a man whom everyone would expect to give place, while he full readily made way. Now he was shouted at by a cabman as he crossed the road, then dragged back by a crossing-sweeper as he was about to step in front of an omnibus. But he looked elate, and thoughts of a brighter future rose before his mind as something seemed to whisper that all would yet be well; and as brighter thoughts came lighting in upon his heart’s dark places, he saw old Matt well, and finding the entry that should restore him to ease and comfort; his wife and Lucy happy and smiling upon him; and then his head was lifted, his form grew more erect, his nerves and muscles became terse, and, swinging his arms, he strode forward till, turning down a side-street, he set off and ran—ran hard to the bottom, in the lightness of spirit that had come over him. He had no object in view, no reason for hastening, and the act seemed one of folly in a man of his years; but he felt the desire come upon him, and he ran, inflating his chest with the free air; and perhaps there have been times when, moved by similar impulses, men of the present day have felt, if they have not acted, the same as Septimus Hardon.

On again once more, this time to come in contact with a baker, whom he swung round basket and all, and when sworn at he apologised so cheerfully, and with such an aspect of genuine contrition, that the baker closed his voluble harangue with “Well, don’t do it again, that’s all.” And perhaps, after all, the acts of Septimus Hardon were not of so very insane a character. True, they seemed strange for a man who had just come from a bed of sickness, and whose own affairs were in a most unsatisfactory state; but may there not have been something reactive after the oppression of much sorrow, the elasticity of life asserting itself? Be it what it may, certain it is that Septimus Hardon, aged fifty, acted as has been described, though it seemed strange conduct in a man who had suffered as he had.

Breathed again, he once more ran on, full of resolutions for the future, touching the vigorous prosecution of his claim, smiling, too, as he made the vows in doubt as to their fulfilment, for he knew his weakness; but he ran on, feeling more light-hearted than he had felt for years, till suddenly he stopped and proceeded at a more moderate pace; for he trembled for his shoes, in whose durability he had not much faith, trusting their strength but little, for, placing the standard of boot-strength at twenty-six shillings, he remembered that he stood at three shillings and ninepence, plus his old ones, and he trembled.

Near home at last, where he arrived just in time to encounter *ma mère* the sinister, with her poodles, starting to give select entertainments through the evening in the far West; and, as he turned into the court, his light-heartedness passed away, the many hopeful thoughts vanished, and he sighed, for truly it was being under a cloud literally, as well as figuratively, to enter the precincts of Bennett’s-rents.

Volume Two—Chapter Fifteen.

The Common Lot Again.

All the renters appertaining to Bennett’s were either out in the court, or at door and window, on the day that Mrs Jarker was buried; while Lucy gladdened the heart of Jean Marais by taking charge of the little golden-haired child and carrying it up to his room to see the birds and dogs. Women stood in knots talking, with their arms rolled in their aprons, and a strong smell of rum, of the kind known as “pine-apple,” and vended at the corner, pervaded these little

assemblies. The sports of the children were interrupted, and slapping was greatly in vogue in consequence of mothers never having known their offspring to have been so tiresome before. Hopscotch was banished from the court, tops and buttons confiscated, and there was not a boy or girl present who, in the face of so much tyranny, would not have emigrated to some more freedom-giving district, but for the fact that there was a “berryin;” and the shabby Shillibeer hearse, and its doleful horse and red-nosed driver, already stood at the end of the court, where the public-house doors were so carefully strapped-back for the convenience of customers.

The time at which the funeral would take place was already well-known, but for hours past the court had been in a state of excitement which prevented domestic concerns from receiving due attention. It was an observable fact that quite a large trade was done at the chandler’s shop in halfpenny bundles of wood, consequent upon fires being neglected, and doing what fires will do, going out. Babies screamed until they were hoarse, and then fell asleep to wake up and scream again. There were no bones broken, on account of the elasticity of the juvenile framework; but several children in the quadrupedal stage of development were known to have fallen down flights of stairs during their maternal search; while another diversion had been caused by a morsel forcing its foot through the grating over the drain, and refusing to be extricated. It was also observable that there were very few men about, and those visible confined themselves to the cellar-flap of one of the public-houses, only looking down the court at intervals.

At last there was an increased interest, for Mr Pawley and one of his men had entered the house, women parting left and right to let them through. Then there was a buzz of excitement, for Mr Jarker had been seen to enter the public and come out, to stand wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, apparently undecided as to which way he should go; but at length, pale and scared-looking, walking up the court and following the undertaker.

And now the Jarkers were thoroughly canvassed, and many allusions made concerning Bill’s treatment of his poor wife. Worn, dejected, hard—featured women, whose lives had been as hard a bondage as that of the one passed away, but who made their brick without straw unrepining, told of her sufferings, and of how she had always been weak and sickly; while it was on all sides allowed that though, as a matter of course, a master might be a little hard sometimes, Jarker had been too hard, as she was so sickly. One thought it was the drains, another fancied the place wasn’t quite healthy; but all agreed that there was nothing better to be had at the price; while the market was *so* handy. What was to become of the child too, formed a surmise in which Mrs Sims took great interest; while, as soon as that lady’s back was turned, it was universally agreed that she was “a good soul.”

Another buzz of excitement. Mr Jarker has been seen to come out with a crape scarf fastened upon his fur-cap, while a short skimpy cloak hangs awkwardly from his ample shoulders. Mr Jarker is very low-spirited, and finds it necessary to take something short once more in the way of a stimulant, and imbibes half-a-quartern of gin at the public-house, his emblems of woe inducing a great amount of respect being paid to him by the occupants of the place, while one end of the scarf will keep getting in his way.

Mr Jarker is a very great man this day, and comports himself with much dignity; he feels that he is being looked up to, and that he deserves it, but for all that he seems nervous and uncomfortable, and is now fetched back by the undertaker, who regularly takes him into custody, for he rightly fears that very little would make Mr Jarker run off altogether and show himself no more for some days, when perhaps there might be a difficulty about the payment of the expenses. Not that Mr Pawley has much fear upon that score, for there was always a certain pride respecting a decent “berryin” at Bennett’s-rents; and supposing any one was very much pressed, there were always friendly hands ready to add their mites, with the understanding that one good turn deserved another. Mr Pawley never suffered much in his transactions at the Rents, of which place he had the monopoly; and he always made a point of insisting that all funerals should be not only what he termed economic, but strictly respectable.

“It’s a dooty we owe to the departed,” he would observe, while never once could he recall a dissentient, though assistance was often called in to defray the cost, and the well-known avuncular relative of the poor appealed to. Not that Mr Pawley had very hard work to induce the poor of the district to do their “dooty” by the departed, for the desire was always there to pay the last sad rites decently and in order, even those who were obliged to stoop to get an order for a parish coffin often raising a tiny fund to induce Mr Pawley to embellish the hard outlines of the common plain elm shell with a plate and a few rows of nails, to take off the workhouse look of the charity they grudged to accept.

Mr Pawley managed to get Jarker safely back to the house, and then the excitement increased, for after the former gentleman had prisoned his client in a lodger’s room he came down wiping his eye, that seemed more moist than ever, and stood mute-like at the door, surrounded by half the inhabitants of the court, whom he calmly informed that *they* were coming down directly. Mr Pawley spoke slowly and impressively, for he was a man who had not much to say, but who made the most of it, as if his words were gold and to be beaten out to cover the largest space at the least possible cost. He considered his words of value, and as he doled them out people listened eagerly, looking upon the day’s performance as something of which not the slightest item should be lost; while Mr Pawley made much of his funerals, regarding each one as an advertisement to procure another, as he laboured hard to impress upon the dwellers of Bennett’s-rents how friendly were his feelings towards them, and how little he thought of the money.

“Now they’re a-coming!” he whispered, motioning the people away right and left—a very marshal of management—and then there was the shuffling of feet, the creaking and groaning of the stairs, and the chipping of the wall, as down flight after flight the coffin was carried, resting at the landings, and more than once some neighbour’s door was sent flying open. Mrs Sims’ was the first, as one of the bearers backed against it, and a lodger’s on the first-floor was the next; but the occupiers were down in the court, and so escaped being disturbed.

At last, with the top covered with the powdery whitewash chipped from wall and ceiling, the coffin stood in the passage, then in the court for an instant, before being borne into the shabby Shillibeer hearse; while, amidst a suppressed hum of voices, more than one genuine tear was seen to fall, and more than one apron to be held up by those who saw the poor woman’s remains borne away. Then back came Mr Pawley on tiptoe with his handkerchief to his eye, and disappeared in the house, from which he soon reappeared with his prisoner, followed by two relatives;

and, as Bill Jarker was marched down to the hearse with his ill-fitting cloak, and long crape scarf hanging from his fur-cap, he held his hands together in a strange, peculiar way—a way that, but for the trappings of woe, would have suggested that Mr Jarker was really in custody, and bore steel handcuffs upon his wrists.

Then there was a crowding towards the entrance of the court to see Mr Jarker shut in, Mr Pawley mount beside his red-nosed driver, and then the old broken-kneed horse went bowing its head and shambling along through the streets, with no more way made for it than if its doleful load had been so much merchandise.

Septimus Hardon had stood at his window watching the proceedings, as he slowly wiped again and again his pen upon a coat-tail; for the scene brought up a sad day in Carey-street, and he could not but recall the bright-eyed, yellow-haired child he had lost, and this set him thinking of the little one up-stairs in Lucy's charge. But Septimus Hardon never thought very long upon any one particular subject; and, sighing deeply, he returned to his writing, while the people in the court slowly flocked back to form groups and talk until such time as it was necessary to get "master's tea." There was a considerable amount of thirst engendered though, and the public-houses at the top and bottom of the court must have done quite a powerful stroke, of trade that day in cream-gin and pine-apple rum; for the dull soft bang of the strapped-back doors was heard incessantly. For now, *à la militaire*, people's feelings seemed to undergo a reaction; children played and hooted again unabashed; the organ-man played the Olga waltz to a select circle of youthful dancers, while admiring mammas looked on and smiled; a party of "nigger" serenaders arrived at the lower public-house, and played and sang for a full hour, the coppers rattling in the reversed banjo freely, after the fortunes of the celebrated Old Bob Ridley had been musically rendered by a melodious gentleman of intense blackness, who had thrummed the wires of his instrument until his fingers were worn white. Then, too, after the departure of the sable minstrels, a lady volunteered a song; but she sang not, for an interdict was placed upon the proceedings by the landlord, who "couldn't stand none o' that, now." Then an altercation ensued, which ended in an adjournment, and the voluble declaration of some half-dozen departing matrons that they'd have no more to do with the goose-club.

But Mrs Sims was not there. Ten minutes after the starting of the shabby funeral she went up to Septimus Hardon's rooms to fetch the little girl, but had to ascend to the attic, where she found her leaning against Lucy, who was seated upon the floor, laughing at the little thing's delight as first one and then the other of the poodles stood up and carried a stick in its mouth, while the dark eyes of Jean were fixed upon the beautiful group before him, ardently though with a speechless admiration.

With many thanks Mrs Sims bore away the tiny girl, whose sleeves Lucy had tied up with bows of crape, and, as she accompanied the woman down the stairs it was only by an effort that she refrained from snatching the little one back and bearing it into her own room. But Mrs Sims bore the prattling little thing away and seated it upon the carpet in her lodging, when, preparing to relieve herself after so much sorrow, she took up the bellows: but as the fire was out she only made a dust, and, laying the pneumatic comfort aside, she took to "spazzums," which necessitated the sending of Marry Hann, a neighbour's child, for half-a-quartern of rum, which relieved the pain so much that she repeated the dose more than once, and, carrying the little girl with her, went down again for a social chat, being now insensible to pain. Half-an-hour had not elapsed, though, before a fresh twinge induced her to try another instalment of her "spefizzick," and now she not only became insensible to pain but to everything else. Mr Jarker did not at once return after the funeral, but parted with his fellow-mourners without a word, after stopping at a public-house honoured by Mr Pawley, and settling the expenses readily over some gin and beer, accompanied by pipes; and, though more than one neighbour declared they saw him enter the door quite late, and come out early next morning, it was certain that he did not go up to his attic, a place which for some time he shunned after dark.

Mrs Sims declared she saw nothing of him, and doubtless her testimony was very trustworthy, for she had not the slightest recollection of what took place that night after the last administration of the "spefizzick," nor of how she came into her own room till her angry husband explained. For when in the dusk of evening Lucy returned from the warehouse with a fresh pile of work, she found Mrs Sims seated nodding upon the doorstep with the sleeping child in her flaccid arms, and in momentary danger of falling upon the broken flags. So taking the little thing, Lucy bore it to her own room; and from that time forth it often came to pass that she crossed the court when Mr Jarker was from home, and attended to the wants of the little neglected child.

Volume Two—Chapter Sixteen.

A Battle: Science Wins.

"What! another operation?" said old Matt with a groan.

"To be sure," said the house-surgeon cheerily; "why not?"

"But I'm so much better," said Matt; "and I've no end of work to get through."

"I daresay, my man," said the surgeon sadly, "and so we all have; and I fear that when the day comes upon which we are called away, we shall have as much to do as ever."

"But I'm so much better now; all but my head, sir, and I can't quite think as I used to. Things bother me, and when I want to remember one particular matter, I get confused."

"We shall put you all right this time, my man, and then start you off to make room for someone else. We don't want a parcel of great lazy fellows here, fattening on our wine and jelly."

Old Matt smiled grimly as he said: "I say, sir, is it really necessary?"

“Why, of course, my man. We did you a great deal of good last time, did we not?”

“Ye-e-e-s, yes,” said Matt; “you did, certainly, sir; but is it necessary that my poor old carcass should be touched again? It ain’t for the sake of experiment now, is it, sir? I’m afraid, you know, you’ll kill me; and, just for the sake of being fair, as you’ve had one turn at me, wouldn’t it be better to try it on someone else—on some other subject?” And “O, dear!” thought the old man to himself, “what a difference between a Queen’s subject and a doctor’s subject!”

“Pooh, nonsense, old friend!” said the surgeon, laughing; “we’ll make a man of you again; so cheer up, or you’ll be working your nerves too much. Why, you’ve picked up wonderfully this last day or two.”

“What’s the use of picking up, sir, if you get knocking me down again, eh, sir?”

The surgeon smiled and continued his round, and old Matt sat and grumbled by his bedside, for he was now up, and able to walk about the ward.

“Now let’s see,” muttered the old man. “I always did fancy, and it always seems so, that the more you try to think straightforward of a thing, the more it bothers you; so let’s try and get round to it back-way, if I can. Well, here goes. Now here’s Mr Septimus Hardon—a man—well, not clever, but what of that? I hate your clever men; they’ve no room to be amiable, or time to be generous. He’s a good one, and that’s sufficient. Well, he’s kept, say, for sake of argument, out of his rights by his rogue of an uncle. Now he proves his baptism and his father’s marriage, and then he wants to prove the date of his birth to have been after the marriage. Easy enough that seems; but how to do it when t’other party has took possession, and declares all the other way. Doctor’s books will do it, failing any other means; and as we do fail other means, why we want the doctor’s books. I tell you what it is; I believe we have both bungled the matter from beginning to end, and ought to have gone to a good lawyer. But there, what’s the good of talking? We had no money, and people without money always bungle things. Now where’s the doctor’s books, or the doctor? Doctor’s dead—safe; but then are his books dead—cut up—burnt? That’s the question. I say no, because I’m sure I saw that entry somewhere; and here’s the nuisance. When I was situated so that it would have been almost a blessing to be shut up here in hospital, I wasn’t ill; now I want all my energies, I’m chained by the leg. I’d give up bothering about the thing, but I’m sure I read it somewhere, and I’m sure, too, I recollected once where it was; and it was while I was so bad,” he said, pulling out his tattered memorandum-book, and referring to the hieroglyphics it contained. “No,” he said, after a long inspection; “I have read a good deal, and taken some copy in my time, but I never thought I should live to write stuff I couldn’t read myself. There, it’s of no use; it’ll come some day.” And he closed his eyes, and leaned his head upon his hand; for his brain seemed weary and restless with his long and painful illness.

A morning or two after, the old man was again seated at his bedside, trying to amuse himself with a book; but with little success, for his eyes were weak.

“I shall let well alone,” growled the old man; “and if they want to operate, they may cut and carve someone else. I shall do for the few years I have to live; but they might find a poor fellow a scrap of snuff, hang ’em!”

“Here, you Number 19, into bed with you directly!”

“Why, I’m only just up,” grumbled Matt, who was the said number.

“Never mind, old fellow,” said the speaker; “be smart, for they will be after you directly.”

Old Matt shivered and trembled, and his lips moved as he slowly returned to his bed, and there lay waiting. He had almost determined to be content, and bear his burden to the grave; for, said he, “I can’t live much longer.” But then he thought of the wondrous skill and care of those in whose hands he would be, and of the rest that would afterwards be his were his life spared.

“I won’t turn coward now,” he muttered, letting his eyes rest upon some flowers in a window near his bed, and gazing at them in a strange earnest way,—“No, I won’t turn coward, not even if they kill me. But that’s hard to think of, that is. Mine has been a rough life, and I’ve put up with a deal; but I never tired of it—not to say thoroughly tired of it, though I’ve been very near more than once; and I should like to keep grinding on for a long time yet. Life’s sweet, somehow, when you’ve got friends, and I seem to have found ’em at last. I should have liked to have helped him out with that entry, though. Where did I see it?”

The old man paused thoughtfully, and kept passing his hand across his dew-wet forehead; but the memory was still defective, and he sighed wearily: “Why didn’t I begin sooner, or make him begin? Ah, that’s it—that’s it! why don’t we begin hundreds of things sooner, and not leave them till it’s too late!”

The old man paused again, and his lean, bony fingers clutched and clawed restlessly to get at the flowers. But his old train of thought now seemed to have returned, for he continued: “Don’t often see anything about hospital operations, but I have had copy about them—‘Death from the Administration of Chloroform.’ What an ugly word that first is, and what a shiver it seems to give one when we think of it in connection with ourselves, though it seems so little when it has to do with anyone else! Wonder whether any of the old ’stab or piece hands would get hold of it to set, and feel sorry for the battered old stamp they used to laugh at, and whether it would get into the papers if I was to—”

The old man stopped once more, and wiped the dew from his wet forehead.

“Well, well,” he said half-aloud, “what is to be will be. God help me well through it all, for I’m a miserable coward; and if it’s to be the end of old Matt, why, I don’t think I’ve been so very bad, and—there, hang it!” he whined, “they might have left me a pinch of snuff. Here, I say, though,” he cried, rousing up, “this won’t do. I’m on the wrong folio, and shall have to re-set.”

“I wonder whether it’s hard to die?” he muttered, after another pause. “Don’t seem as if it was, for they look almost as if they were asleep, and wanting to be woke up again. One must go sometime or another; but it would have been happier like to have had hold of someone’s hand, and seen two or three faces round one’s bed, faces of people sorry I was going—going. There, there,” he gasped, “I can’t stand it. They sha’n’t touch me. It’s like running headlong into one’s grave. They sha’n’t touch me, for I must live and find out about the doctor, for that poor helpless fellow in the Rents; or he’ll never do it himself. They sha’n’t touch me, for I am nearly clear now, and I can grub on as I am; while, if my chronics kill me in time, why they do, and there’s an end of it. They sha’n’t—”

“Now, Number 19,” said a voice, and to his dismay poor old Matt saw a couple of porters enter the ward with a stretcher.

The old man moaned and closed his eyes, muttering the whole while as he resigned himself, meekly as a child and without a word of opposition, to the men, who tenderly lifted him upon their portable couch, and then bore him along the whitewashed passages, whose walls seemed so familiar to him, and struck him as being so particularly white and clean—white as were ceiling and floor. He only saw one cobweb, and that was out of reach in a far corner; and in his nervous state this greatly attracted his attention, so that he could fancy the large spider grinned at him as if he were a larger kind of fly in the trammels of a net. He felt that he should have liked for the men to set down the stretcher and remove that cobweb, but he stifled the desire to speak. Then he noticed how strangely the hair of his foremost bearer grew, and this, too, troubled him: there were no short hairs on the poll, and for some distance up the back of his neck was a barren land. Then he fell to studying the man’s coat-buttons, the depth of his collar, and how easily he tramped along with the handles of the portable couch, whose motion was so easy with the light, regular, springy pace of the man; while the dread of what was impending seemed quite to have passed away, and he began, now the peril was so near, to think of himself as though he were someone else in whom he took an interest; and then came a very important question:

How would they bring him back?

Would he be lighter with the loss of blood, and would he be gradually stiffening, and growing colder and colder, till the icy temperature of death pervaded him through and through? And then, too, what would they do with him? He had no relations—no one to come and claim his body. And even this thought seemed to trouble him but little, for he smiled grimly, muttering to himself:

“Cause of science, sir, cause of science; and besides, it won’t matter then.”

On still, with a light swinging motion and an easy tread, the porters bore their load, and in the minute or two the removal occupied old Matt thought of the last time he had made that journey, and his sensations then: how that he had looked upon it all as a dream, and felt that he should soon wake up to find himself in bed. But the old man’s musings ceased as he was borne into the theatre, save for an instant when the thought flashed across his mind, Suppose he died without seeing the entry? and this troubled him for a few moments; but directly after he was gazing up with anxious eye at the tier upon tier of benches, some crowded, some nearly empty, and looking from face to face; but there seemed not one that sympathised with him, as, after a glance when he was first borne in, a quiet light, chatty conversation was carried on in an undertone. Then there was almost perfect silence, and the old man felt himself to be the centre upon which every eye was fixed. His heart told him now that in the low-murmured buzz of conversation that rose, students who had again and again stood at his bedside were discussing his case, and that if the operation were unsuccessful or unskilfully performed, they would merely say that the patient did not rally, and then go home or to their studies, regardless of the little gap left in the ranks of life; while Septimus Hardon would probably never succeed in his endeavours to recover his lost position.

Then he half-smiled as he thought of the importance with which he rated himself, and looked eagerly round. Close by he could see the earnest, study-lined faces of several older men, many of them grey-haired and thoughtful-eyed—men of eminence in their profession, but strongly imbued with the belief of the man of wisdom, that we are ever but learners. Then he looked straight above, even at the skylight, where he could see that the sun illumined the thick ground-glass; and now once more, in a quiet musing vein, he set to wondering how it would be after the operation.

Plenty of faces round, but mostly cool, calm, and matter-of-fact. Here were the hospital dressers and assistants, standing by the table—a curious-looking table in the centre of an open space; and a hasty glance showed him sponges, and water, and cloths, and lint, and mahogany cases, that at another time, if some other sufferer were to have been operated upon, would have caused him to shudder. But all that was past now, and he merely looked earnestly round till his gaze rested upon a stout grey-haired, keen-eyed man, whose black clothes and white neck-tie were spotless, and who now advanced to the table with a quiet business-like aspect, as he bowed somewhat stiffly to the assembled surgeons and students, and then spoke a few cheering words to the patient as he felt his pulse.

“I hope he won’t turn nervous over it,” thought Matt. “Be serious to a man in his position, with so many looking on.—Can’t I have the chloroform?” he then whispered to a dresser by his side.

“Yes, of course: here he is with it,” said the man; and for the second time in his life Matt gazed curiously at a polished mahogany box which was being brought forward.

“I say,” whispered Matt earnestly to the man at his side, “if anyone comes afterwards—afterwards, you know, and asks for me, you’ll say, ‘Medicine and attendance,’—there, don’t laugh—it’s particular—you’ll say, ‘Medicine and attendance;’ and that old Matt tried to think it out to the last. You’ll do that for me?” he whispered earnestly.

The man repeated the words over, and smiled as he made the required promise.

“Tell him not to give me too much,” said Matt, now with the first display of anxiety, as he glanced at the inhaling apparatus.

The time since old Matt had been brought into the theatre might be reckoned by moments; and now, in the midst of a profound stillness, the grey-haired man calmly raised his eyebrows, turned up his sleeves, and then walked a step or two from the patient, now inhaling the wondrous vapour of that simple-looking limpid fluid, whose first effect was to cause him to push away the apparatus and struggle feebly with those who administered it. But there was a strong hand upon his pulse and a pair of stern eyes watching him, and, as the mouthpiece was kept firmly against his face, old Matt gave one or two more inspirations and became insensible. Then every eye was fixed upon the calm, business-like man, whose nerves seemed of kindred material to the blades he drew from their delicate purple-velvet resting-places and quietly inspected for an instant, his eyes flashing brightly as their grey-hued blades—knives whose keen edges were formed of the finest-tempered metal that human skill and ingenuity could produce.

A breathless silence ensued, and the gay thoughtless aspect was gone from the young faces crowding the benches. Here and there an assumed cynical smile could be seen, but the effects of a strange clutching at the heart, a curious vibration of the nerves, was visible in the pallor of cheeks and fevered aspect of the onlookers of the upper seats. Two young men right at the back surreptitiously drank from small flasks, and when wiping their lips paused, too, to pass their handkerchiefs over their damp foreheads, before thrusting them in their moist palms as the great surgeon —one who had climbed by slow degrees to his present eminence in the profession, and upon whose knowledge and skill now depended the life of a fellow-creature—gave his quick, sharp orders, and changed the position of one or two assistants at the operating-table, pointing, like a general preparing for battle, with the keen blade he held in his hand. Short, quick orders as he grasped the flashing steel and made ready for the fight—for the *combat à l'outrance*, with the grim, slow-crawling, dragon disease—a fight where skill and genius took the place of physical force and daring.

A painful silence, and then, while every eye was fixed upon his movements, the great surgeon gave a hasty glance round to see that all was in readiness for the time when moments were more than grains of gold, and would add their weight in one scale of the balance—life or death; but all seemed there, ready hands and the many appliances for checking the rapid flow of life's stream, and then, with almost an air of nonchalance, he stretched out his arms to secure freedom of action.

Not a whisper, not a movement, the spectators of the scene with craning necks, immovable as groups of statuary, as they gazed from their tiers of benches in this modern amphitheatre down upon the gladiatorial combat taking place, even as of old the Roman citizens may have watched some fight for life or death.

A keen bright flash of the blade in the softened light, and the surgeon thoughtfully describing an imaginary curve in the air with the point just above the insensible patient; then, with a satisfied nod, he leaned forward. There was once more a bright flash of the knife, followed by a bold, firmly-directed cut, deep and long, but clear of vital parts in the wondrous organisation. Then came the spouting gush from many a vessel as the old man's life-blood rushed from its maze; busy fingers at work, here upon arteries to stay their waste, there applying sponge; one blade changed for another, more manipulation, and orders performed after being given in a calm impressive whisper; a few more busy moments, and the throbbing flow of life arrested; rapidly-moving fingers with sponges, silk, strapping, towels; and the great surgeon softly wiping his hands, cool, calm, and unruffled.

"Very little loss, Mr Grant," to the next general in command.

"Extremely little," with a bow and a smile; "most successful operation."

"Well, well, I think so," said the great man, unbending somewhat as he arranged his cuffs and brushed off an imaginary speck of dust. He then felt the patient's pulse for a few moments, nodded with a satisfied air, said a few words to the chief of his staff, bowed once more, and by the time the hospital-dressers had finished their task and the patient was lifted back upon his portable conch, the operator was in the brougham waiting in the street.

Then came once more the murmuring buzz of voices, the reaction and the pallor tried to be laughed down, the porters, and then in a few minutes old Matt was once more in his bed and comfortably arranged before he recovered consciousness.

The house-surgeon and an assistant were beside his bed as he opened his eyes and stared vacantly about, trying to recall what had taken place.

"How sick and faint—what a nasty dream!" he muttered; "but I don't know, sir,—been as well if it had been true."

"What would?" said the surgeon, smiling.

"Why, I dreamed, sir, that—why, so it was—so it was, then," muttered the old man fervently; "thank God, thank God!"

A calm heavy sleep soon fell upon Matt, but he was not free from trouble then. There was the entry continually worrying him; now he knew he had seen it, now he felt that it was only a dream, or a dream within a dream. At last, though, a change came over the scene, and all was prosperity; he had entered into partnership with Septimus Hardon, and purchased the copyright of the Times, whose columns they regularly filled every day with a complete exposure of Doctor Hardon.

But the dream was not founded upon fact, for Septimus Hardon, with hope in his breast, had been to the entrance of the hospital, thinking that now Matt was so much better he would perhaps be ready with some information. But the visitor had been told of the operation, and the old man's present critical state, while being advised not to see him at that visit; and receiving a promise that a message should be sent in the event of a change for the worse, Septimus Hardon slowly, and sadly disheartened, returned to his law-copying.

End of Volume Two.

Volume Three—Chapter One.

The Breaking of a Barrier.

It was about this time that Aunt Fanny, in the large room at Surrey-street, took to complaining of her neck, and wore a narrow strip of flannel beneath the stiff white-muslin kerchief, while night and morn her servant had to rub the said neck with hartshorn and oil. And truly the old dame's neck was stiff, and cold might have had some share in producing the stiffness; but undoubtedly it was principally caused by the many sage shakes she gave her head when pondering over her nephew's state; for in spite of all the medicaments which he patiently allowed her to administer, the old lady effected no cure, and was in consequence sorely troubled in her own mind.

But she was not so sorely troubled as the object of her interest, who angered himself in vain because of the chaotic state of his mind. Battle, battle—ever the same useless struggle, till he was ashamed of his weakness and want of self-control. To-day victor, to-morrow vanquished; now reviling himself for his want of faith and cruel suspicions, which he owned were almost baseless; the next day a slave to duty, and forbidding his heart to harbour further thoughts of her he now called his enemy. Work seemed the only refuge, and he toiled on. Study he could not; but he visited from house to house in the fold of Bennett's-rents, where the tainted sheep of his flock were gathered; and hiding from himself his real feelings—a shallow pretence—he knew the while how anxious he was respecting that little ewe-lamb.

But he drew a mask over his face, telling himself it was his true countenance; and with a calmness that was but on the surface, he called frequently to see the invalid mother, timing, however, his visits that they might be made while Lucy was absent—for duty's sake (and he now knew pretty well when she was likely to visit the warehouse); while, when he had visited the Bents, and returned without seeing her, he credited duty largely, and praised his own self-denial. All steps, he flattered himself, towards the final conquest which he would achieve; but though casting out the weak thoughts, he told himself that it was his duty to satisfy his heart concerning the doubts which so constantly tormented him.

How often the hours came when he scorned his dissimulation, and tore off the mask, none knew; but his face grew more pale and livid, and the grey hairs that sprinkled his temples were thicker than of old.

It happened one day, though, when he and Lucy had not encountered since he saw her bending over the child from Mrs Jarker's room, that, visiting from house to house and room to room, Mr Sterne stood in front of Mrs Sims'; but that lady was from home; so hearing the merry voice of the laughing child, he had ascended the stairs to find Lucy in the bird-catcher's attic. For the little face had been pressed against the blackened window, and a pair of bright little eyes had peered, hour after hour, from beneath the tangled golden hair, watching the busy fingers at the sewing-machine, till with heart aching for the neglected babe, and to study her mother, who objected to its being brought into the room, Lucy had crossed the court, and gone up and played with the little thing, laughing merrily at the child's delight, though a tear stood in her eye more than once as she evaded the child's eager, oft-repeated question of "When mammy come back?" Bill had gone out with his nets, and most probably would not be back until night; so the child had been left alone with some food in the dreary room, to play or cry itself to sleep, unless Mrs Sims should be there to attend to its wants. But there was that one spot by the window where she could look down upon Lucy; and there, day after day, she would stand without murmuring, attracted by that wondrous sense which draws children to the loveable and true. Lucy's heart yearned as she gazed up from time to time at the child, and she longed earnestly for the season when its mother should make fresh arrangements; but for some reason she came not, and Lucy had not seen her since Mrs Jarker's death.

And now the golden hours for which the little soul had longed had come again. Lucy was with her, and, herself a child for the time, she laughed merrily at the little one's delight.

Panting, tumbled, and flushed with exercise, Lucy stood at last, returning an escaped curl to its bondage, a bright smile playing round her ruddy lips, which parted to display the white teeth beneath, when the door opened, and, with a frown upon his brow, the curate stood in the entrance gazing upon the scene before him.

"In that ruffian's room—there of all places in the world!" doubt whispered to him; at a time, too, when their chance meetings had been attended by a cold reserve on Lucy's part—a reserve which his doubting heart misinterpreted; for he could not in his blindness see the cost at which it was maintained. And yet this reserve had pleased him while it pained, for he at times acknowledged the interest he took in her welfare. But it mattered not, he said, for his desire was but to try and save her from evil, nothing more; and the oftener he listened to these delusive whisperings the stronger grew a voice within, telling him that his reasoning was false, and that he was forgetting duty, position—all, in a love for one who grew colder and more distant at every meeting. Wearily, though, he kept on building up a wall between them—a wall built upon the sand. Stone by stone he laid, telling himself that it was for duty's sake, as he toiled on helplessly at his self-imposed task. True, he might have satisfied himself of the motive for Lucy's actions, which to him wore a blurred and strange aspect; but to others her name seemed a sealed book, one which he shrank from opening, lest he should at the same time reveal the secret of his own heart.

And now he stood at the door of that beggarly room, where was the bed over which he had so lately bent to whisper comfort to the suffering woman, or knelt by its side to ask mercy for the poor sufferer and a blessing on the helpless child. There was the same bare look of misery in the wretched place; but as the sun streamed through the great leaden lattice, all seemed glorified and brightened by the presence there. Unseen he gazed on, while the glow of orange light flooded the room, and played round the graceful form of Lucy, as, starting again, she was pursued by the laughing child, varying her attitude each moment as she eluded its grasp.

Suddenly the child struck itself sharply against a chair, and broke into a whimpering cry; but the caressing arms, the

words of endearment, and the loving kiss soothed the pain instantly, and a smile came over the sunny face once more; when Lucy stood as if transfixed, the merry light faded from her eyes, the smile from her lip, and then the blood flushed to her temples, but only to retreat and leave her deadly pale, for in an instant the wall so laboriously built up, and at so great a cost in suffering, was swept down by the flood of passion. Arthur Sterne knew that the battle had been in vain, and that he was but man; while doubt, everything, was cast to the winds as he was by her side, her hands clasped in his, telling her of his beaten-down love, his hopes, his fears,—all, all in the impassioned burst of words raised by the tempest of a strong man's love; for the sandy foundation was undermined, and the last trace of the barrier swept away.

And what said she? No words came in reply to his appeal. At first, startled, confused, overcome, she shrank from him, pale and trembling; but as his words came pouring forth, making cheek and neck burn, she knew that no greater bliss could be hers; and the trembling lids of her dark-blue eyes were slowly lifted to meet his, when, as if scathing her once more, came the recollection of his bitter, contemptuous look, his long coldness, and even scorn; and snatching away her hands, she burst into tears and darted from the room.

Pale and troubled in mind as to what to attribute Lucy's behaviour, his brain in a whirl of doubt, Arthur Sterne stood gazing at the door, until, turning, he became aware that the opposite attic window was being opened. The lark began to twitter as the hand of Jean Marais secured it outside; and then he saw the wild dark eyes of the youth begin to earnestly watch the room.

Turning with a few kind words to the astonished child, who crouched in a corner, Arthur Sterne made his way from the house; and a sad evening spent Aunt Fanny, in her anxiety for the "wilful boy" who angrily rejected her advice. He was not ill, he said; but the good dame nipped her lips together; while, retiring at last, the curate spent the night pacing his chamber-floor, trying to examine the tangle in his heart, but only to conclude that, come what might, difference of position should be no bar between him and Lucy; for, driving away, as he thought successfully, the doubt that still assailed him, he declared to himself that she possessed virtues before which birth and dowry paled and became as naught.

"Unstable as water," muttered the curate to himself, though, days after, when meeting with Lucy alone in the front-room of their place in Bennett's-rents, the barrier was again broken down—the barrier that time had forced him to renew—while the words he could not but utter came pouring forth, to bring no response.

Septimus was away with his boy, and Mrs Hardon slept in the back-room; and the words of Arthur Sterne were low and deep as the passion that prompted them. But there was no response—no loving look in reply—naught but the pale cheek and quivering eyelid, tears and looks of half-anger; for still clung to Lucy the recollection of his scorn and contempt, his misinterpretation of her motives; and the hands he clasped were cold and drawn away.

Then anger took the place of love—a foolish, mad anger, which robbed him of his self-control, and made him utter words beneath whose passion the poor girl bent as bends flower before the storm. He uttered words then that an hour after he would have given anything to recall; telling her angrily of *ma mère* and her slighting hints, of Jarker's familiarity, and lastly of the meeting he had witnessed in the Lane; unheeding the hands held up so deprecatingly, the appealing looks, and the tear-wet, pallid cheeks; for, as he told himself again and again that night, he was mad—mad in his passionate love for one unworthy—mad in his words; and he writhed as he recalled the way in which he felt that he had lowered himself.

"I insist—I hold it as a right!" he had exclaimed; "tell me, Lucy, who was that woman? Do you know her character?" And he clutched her wrist angrily as he spoke.

He said no more then, for Lucy's face was aflame, and she started hastily to her feet, facing him almost as it were at bay, and vainly trying to free her hand from his grasp.

"Do your parents know of your meetings?" he exclaimed.

"No, no, no!" she cried excitedly, as she glanced towards the back-room door.

"Then I must—nay," he added with almost a cowardly look of triumph, for the weakness of the man was triumphant that afternoon, and he yielded to all that he had hitherto triumphed over—"I will tell them," he said, "for your good."

"For pity's sake," whispered Lucy, "Mr Sterne. Ah, pray, sir, stop—pray stay! Do not think ill of me—"

But there Lucy ceased, for she was alone; and once more scornfully, with the cold bitter look, Mr Sterne had dashed her hand from him in contempt and turned from the room, into which Mrs Hardon now came to find Lucy weeping as though her heart would break.

Volume Three—Chapter Two.

Snuff.

Old Matt did not wake again for many hours, but, as the days slipped by, he partook with avidity of all that was allowed him, and grumbled for more. His friend the house-surgeon, whom he could look at now without imagining that he took notes inimical to his friend Septimus Hardon's interest, reported favourably of his condition; while Septimus himself came again and again, each time more eager to get at that which was hidden by the confusion in old Matt's brain.

"If he had only been so jolly anxious about the Somesham affair, first start off, what a difference it would have

made!” grumbled Matt.

But it seemed useless to try and draw the old man’s attention to things he had talked of in the days shortly before his entry of the hospital, for here all seemed blank.

“Well, yes, sir,” Matt would say, “I have some faint recollection of saying something about medicine and attendance; but do you know, sir, I begin to think that one’s memory is in one’s blood? and they took so much out of me that last time, that I can’t remember anything at all. ‘Medicine and attendance,’ did I say? Why, it must have been the medicine and attendance here, and those old cats of nurses. My thinking apparatus is terribly out of order, sir; and when I try to look back at anything, it’s like peeping at it through a dirty window. P’r’aps it won’t come bright and clean again, eh?”

“Don’t try to think,” said Septimus with a sigh. “You will recollect some day; so let it rest.”

“Well, sir, that’s just what I should like to do; but since you’ve asked me, I can’t; for things won’t go just as I like, and I feel all in a muddle. Let’s see, now: you said something about this at your last visit, didn’t you, sir? when I asked you about that talking woman and the office for servants; for I do recollect that, you know.”

“Yes,” replied Septimus, “at every visit.”

“Just so,” said Matt; “I thought you did; but I can’t tell a bit about it now. Sometimes it seems that I heard it; sometimes that I read it, or saw it against a wall, or dancing before my eyes; but let’s see,” he said vacantly, as he held his hand to his head, “what was it we wanted to find?”

“The doctor’s books, or the doctor,” said Septimus.

“To be sure,” said the old man; “I haven’t got it right yet; and really you know, sir, this isn’t a first-class place to get right in, and they won’t part with me yet, though I do long now to be well, and at liberty for a peep at the old law-courts and Lincoln’s-inn once more. I mean to have a holiday, and spend it among all the posts in the old square as soon as I’m out; I’m getting so light-hearted and jolly, sir. Why, it will be quite a treat to be somewhere amongst a bit or two of dirt once more; we’re so clean here.”

“Only a little longer, Matt,” said Septimus smiling.

“You see,” said Matt, “there’s so much to upset one about. What with the screen round this bed, and the screen round that bed, and the groans and sighs, ah, and even shouts sometimes, there’s plenty to make a poor fellow feel low-spirited. Now there’s a chap over there in that bed seems to have taken it into his head that he suffers more than anyone who ever came into the place, and howls and goes on terribly; while the bigger and stronger people are, sir, the more weak they seem to me to be in bearing pain. I believe, after all, you know, sir, that the little weak women beat us hollow.”

“Ah!” said the patient spoken of, surmising from Matt’s gestures that he was being referred to—“ah! Mr Space, you are talking about me, sir, and my groans, and it’s very hard and unfeeling, sir. You may suffer yourself some day.”

The visitor felt uncomfortable; but old Matt took it up directly.

“That’s cool, anyhow,” he gasped; “why, what do you mean? haven’t I suffered as much as any of you, and been through two operations, and lived ’em out too? Why, what more would you have? It would have killed a big fellow like you, I know.”

The patient replied with a groan, and began muttering about the unfeeling behaviour of those about him, from whom, he said, he had expected a little sympathy.

This roused the ire of a neighbour who had lost a leg through being run over by a coal-wagon, and he now took up the matter, followed by several others; so that a wordy warfare seemed imminent.

“That’s it, go on,” growled Matt in an undertone. “They’re all getting better, sir; and, consequently, they’re as cross as two sticks. What a thing it is! There seems to be no gratitude amongst them; and really, sir, if it wasn’t for the nurses, it wouldn’t be such a bad place to come to—that is, for a man with strong nerves, you know. Now just look at ’em, how they are going it!”

The murmurings and dissensions of the other patients seemed to have quite a good effect upon old Matt, who forgot his own pains in the troubles of those around him.

“You don’t know how much longer you will be here?” said Septimus.

“Not for certain, sir; but I think only for a few more days. But it’s wonderful what a difference they have made in me. I mean to go in for a fortune, sir, as soon as I’m out; and then I shall make my will, and leave half to the hospital. Now I’ve got the worst of it all over, I amuse myself with taking a bit of notice of what goes on around me, and listening to what’s said; and it’s wonderful what an amount of misery comes into this place—wonderful. I’ve known of more trouble since I’ve been in here, sir, than I should have thought there had been in the whole of London; and that’s saying no little, sir. Lots die, you know; but then see how many they send out cured. I don’t see all, but one hears so much from the talking of the nurses. I expected when I came here that there would be plenty of accidents, broken bones—legs, arms, and ribs, and so on; but there, bless you, the place is full of it; and they’re getting to such a wonderful pitch now, with their doctoring and surgery, that they’ll be making a new man next, out of the odd bits they always have on hand here.”

“I suppose so,” said Septimus drily.

“Ah, you may laugh, sir,” said Matt; “but it’s wonderful to what a pitch surgery has got. Now, for instance, just fancy —”

“There,” cried Septimus, “pray stop, or I must leave you. I fancy quite enough involuntarily, without wishing to hear fresh horrors. It’s bad enough having to come into the place.”

“Lor’ bless you, sir,” said Matt, “you should listen to the nurses, when one of ’em happens to be in a good humour. Do you know when that is, sir?”

“When pleased, I suppose,” said Septimus.

“Just so, sir; the very time. And when do you suppose that last is?”

Septimus shook his head.

“You don’t know, of course, sir. Why, when the patients are getting better.”

“I might have supposed that,” said Septimus wearily.

The old man chuckled, and looked brighter than he had looked for weeks. “Yes,” he said, “it’s when the patients are getting better, and there’s plenty of port-wine and gin on the way. That’s the time to find the nurse in a good humour; and she’ll tell you anything, or do anything for you.”

Septimus Hardon looked weary and anxious, and fidgeted in his chair, as if he longed to change the conversation, but the garrulous old man kept on.

“Tell you what, sir, these nurses seem to get their hearts hardened and crusted over; and then when you give them a little alcohol, as the teetotallers call it, the crust gets softened a bit, and things go better. I used to growl and go on terribly at first; but it’s no use to swim against the stream. I used to grumble when I found that they drunk half my wine and watered my gin; but I’m used to that sort of thing now: for which is best—to drink all one’s liquor, or keep friends with the nurse? Last’s best; and they say I’m a dear patient old creature. I look it too, don’t I?” said the old man with a grim smile.

“But,” said Septimus, “I must soon go; and I should like a word or two about my affairs first.”

“All right, sir; we’ll come to that directly. I’m an invalid, and you must humour me. But this is the way of it. My nurse comes to me, like an old foxey vixen as she is, and—‘Now, my dear, how are we?’ she says. ‘Only middling, nurse,’ I say. ‘I’ve brought you a glass of wine to cheer you up,’ she says. ‘Don’t care about it a bit,’ I say; ‘don’t feel wine-hungry.’ ‘O,’ she says, ‘but the doctor ordered it. Now, take it, like a good soul. You must want it.’ ‘Not half so bad as some people do,’ I say. ‘Toss it off, nurse; and just punch my pillow up a bit, it’s got hard and hot.’ ‘Bless my heart, no,’ she says, ‘I couldn’t think of such a thing!’ so she sets the wine down, and puts my head a bit comfortable. ‘The wine’s for you; so, now, take it directly; I couldn’t touch it—I don’t care for wine.’

“‘Of course you don’t,’ I say to myself; and then I begin to talk to her a bit, and to tell her that she must have a sad wearing life of it, when the old tabby sets up her back and purrs, and likes it all—looking the while as tigerish, and sleek, and clawey, as the old cats can look. Then I tell her she wants more support, and so on, when all at once she finds out that there’s some one else to attend upon, and I must drink my wine directly; so I take the glass and perhaps drink it; but more often I only just put it to my lips and set it back upon the tray, when she’s satisfied. Of course, you know, it would be instant dismissal for a nurse to drink a patient’s wine or spirits if it was known; but any thing left is different altogether. You know, sir, it’s a dreadfully beggarly way of going to work, only as the saying goes, you must fight some one we know of with his own weapons: and now we are the very best of friends possible. You’d be surprised how we get along, and all through going without a glass now and then. The best of it is, though, that she never thinks of watering it now, like she would for another patient; so that what I miss in quantity I get in strength, and, you know, she’ll do anything for me in a minute—that is, if she feels disposed.”

“But,” said Septimus, “it seems strange that you should be so left at the mercy of these women.”

“What can you do?” said the old man.—“There, I ’ve just done, sir, and we’ll go into that directly.—Who can you get to go through what these women do, unless it’s these Sisters of Mercy, who many say are to become general? Suppose there was a strike, eh? Look how few people you can get to come and run the risk of fevers and all sorts of diseases. Sisters of Mercy, eh? God bless them for it then, if they will; but I hope I may never want their help, all the same. But there, we won’t talk about it, only you want iron women a’most to go through it all, and it’s not a life to be envied. Why, if it ain’t almost leaving-time, sir, and you’ve kept me chatting about my affairs here, and yours are nowhere. How are you getting on?”

“Badly, Matt, badly. But I’ve very little to say, Matt, for I was unable to get on without you,” replied Septimus, smiling at the old man’s coolness.

“‘Spose so,” said Matt laconically; “let’s see, sir, I think you never went any more to Finsbury?”

“Where was the use,” said Septimus drearily; “who can tell where a day-book fifty years old can be?”

“True,” said the old man thoughtfully; “butter-shop, most likely; and it wouldn’t pay to go all over London buying half-pounds of ‘best Dorset,’ on the chance of getting the right sheet. I can’t see it yet, sir; and still I seem to fancy we shall do it, though everything about it seems to be all in a muddle.”

Septimus Hardon seemed to be of the same opinion, for he sighed, took his hat, and went homeward in a frame of mind that made him feel disposed to bury the past and its cares, and look only to the future; while old Matt picked up

a newspaper, and began mechanically folding it into small squares—butter-shop size.

“No,” he muttered, “not much chance of finding that particular scrap of paper, if we don’t get hold of the book through the old doctor’s heirs, executors, administrators, and assigns. And that’s where we ought to begin; putting ads in the *Times*, and setting private inquirers to work, and all on to that tune; only, to play that tune, sir, you want money. Some careless hussy has burnt that scrap of paper, sir, long ago, to light a fire; or it has been used for twisting-up screws of tobacco, or ha’porths of toffee, or hundreds of other things as some beggarly shop or another is licensed to deal in. Only fancy someone lighting his pipe with that valuable little scrap of paper! ‘Medicine and attendance, Mrs Hardon, two, twelve, six!’ I’ll be bound to say that was the figure, and I’d give something to get hold of that bit. Wonder whether it’s selfishness, and thinking of what it would be worth to me? S’pose be; for this is a rum world, and I’m no better than I should be. But who’d ever have thought this would have come out of my going to his office and asking for a job? Don’t matter, though, about what I feel, for he’d have come to see me here safe enough, even if it had not been about his affairs; for he’s a trump, sir, a trump: but all the same, it’s a pity he ain’t got more in him—worldly stuff, you know.”

Old Matt sat very thoughtfully for awhile, and then began to mutter again.

“Wish I had a pinch of snuff once more. There now; I’m blest. Only to think of that! me having my box in my pocket, and to forget all about it—shows what my head’s worth now. Bravo! though; that seems to clear one’s head wonderfully. I shall recommend its use in lunatic asylums for mental diseases; fine thing, I believe. Only to think, though, for me to get that into my head about that entry I had seen, and trying to write it down, and then for it to be clean gone once more! S’pose I did think of something of the kind, or see it, or something. Heigho!” he sighed; “I must have been precious bad though, sir, confoundedly bad. Thank goodness it’s all over, though, for this time; and I’m going to walk out soon, instead of, as I expected, being taken to the students’ lodgings in small pieces, wrapped up in paper—paper—waste-paper—by jingo! though, I’ll have a go at the waste-paper everywhere. I’ll search every waste-paper shop in London, beginning at Mother Slagg’s—beg her pardon, Gross by this time I suppose, and—and—hooray!” he shouted wildly, to the intense astonishment of the fellow-patients, as he tossed his newspaper in the air. “Snuff for ever! that pinch did it. Only let me get out of this place. At last!”

Volume Three—Chapter Three.

Mr Jarker’s Traits.

Men of business cannot afford to continue their grief for any length of time, hence at a very short date after the death of his wife, Mr William Jarker, bird-fancier, bird-catcher, and pigeon-trapper, to be heard of at any time at the Blue Posts, Hemlock-court, by such gents as wanted a few dozen of blue-rocks or sparrows for the next trap-match at Wormwood Scrubbs, stood before a piece of looking-glass nailed to the wall of his room with three tin-tacks, a ragged, three-cornered, wavy-looking scrap, from which, if a little more of the quicksilver had been rubbed off, it would never again have been guilty of distorting the human face divine. Upon this occasion it played strange pranks with the expressive countenance of Mr Jarker, as he stood, with oily fingers, giving the required gloss and under-turn to his side-locks, which were of the true “Newgate-knocker” pattern, their length denoting how long a time Mr Jarker had been running fancy free without troubling her Majesty’s officials for his daily rations and lodging, in return for which he would scrub, polish, and clean to order. Mr Jarker seemed to take extra pains over his toilet, arranging his neck-tie and the silver-mounted lens, buttoning-up his red-plush waistcoat with the fustian back and sleeves, cleaning his finger-nails with the broken-out tooth of a comb, before he stood in front of the glass and smirked at himself.

Now this was a mistake on Mr Jarker’s part, for his was a style of countenance that would not bear a smirking; there was too much stiffness of contour in the various features, a blunt angularity which resisted the softening sweetness of a smirky smile, and the consequence was, that if he had smirked at a stranger, the said stranger would have flinched, from a very strong impression that Mr Jarker was rabid and about to bite. However, mistaken or not, Mr Jarker smirked several times, and after various patterns, before he frowned, which gave a much more respectable cast to his countenance, the scowl being most thoroughly in harmony. Mr Jarker frowned, for one of the side-locks would not keep in position and retain the required bend when he had crowned himself with his slouchy fur-cap; so the erring hair had to be again oiled, combed, and wetted with a solution of brown sugar, which the operator moistened in a natural way in the palms of his hands, then the lock was smoothed and tucked under, and proved a fixture; and now the cap was again placed in position, and displayed a thin wisp of crape fastened round it by means of a piece of string; for being a soldier engaged in the battle of life, Mr Jarker did not doff his uniform, but confined himself to the above slight manifestation of the fact that he was a widower.

Apparently satisfied with his aspect, which was a little more villainous than usual, Mr Jarker turned his attention to the child, who crouched in a corner of the room with a piece of bread in her hand, watching him with her large blue eyes, very round and staring, but evidently pressing her little self as far away from the fellow as possible.

“Ah! and so she comes and plays with the kid when I’m out, does she?” said Mr Jarker, in a ruminating tone. “Ah! we knows what that means, my chicking, don’t we?”

The little thing pressed herself closer to the wall, and Mr Jarker stood very thoughtfully at the window for a few minutes, gazing down at where Lucy’s sewing-machine beat rapidly; but Mr Jarker was not aware that in his turn Jean Marais was watching him fiercely, his dark eyes seeming to flash beneath his overhanging penthouse brows, as he eagerly scanned every motion of the ruffian, looking the while as if prepared to spring across the court at his throat.

“Ah! we knows what that means, don’t we, my chicking?” repeated Mr Jarker, turning once more from the window. “Come here to yer daddy, d’yer hear!”

But though hearing plainly enough, the little thing only shrank back closer into her corner; when, with an oath, the fellow took two steps forward and seized the little thing by its pinky shelly ear, and dragged it, whimpering and trembling, into the middle of the attic, where he made “an offer” at it as if to strike, but the frailty and helplessness of the little one disarmed even him, and as his eyes wandered to the window to see that no opposite neighbour could watch them where they stood, his arm fell to his side as he sat down.

“Now, then!” cried Mr Jarker, “no pipin’; don’t you try none of them games with me, my young warmin’. ’Cos why, it’s ware hawks to yer if yer does. Now hook it back to that there corner.”

The child’s eyes were turned timidly and wonderingly up to his, as it shrank back once more to the corner of the attic.

“Now, then!” cried Jarker sharply, “come here again.”

Like an obedient dog in the course of training, the little thing crept back to his side, and then the tiny face grew more wondering and timid, the eyes more round, and it was very evident that the little brain, soft, plastic, and ready to receive any impression, was working hard to understand the meaning of the ruffian’s words. Bright and beautiful as the faces shown to us on canvas as those of angels, the little countenance, shining the brighter for the squalor around, was turned up more and more towards Jarker, gazing so fixedly and earnestly at him that he grew uneasy, fidgeted and shuffled his feet, and then his eyes sank, guilt cowering before innocence; for, quite disconcerted by the long, steady gaze, the ruffian rose and turned away, growling and muttering, “She’s gallus deep for such a little un.” He then took a short peep at his pigeons, walked back to the window, and stared long and heavily at the white hands he could see busy at the sewing-machine, and then turned once more to the wondering atom, trying to soften himself as he stooped down, but the child only flinched as from a coming blow when he patted the soft, bright curls.

“Here, come here,” he said gently, and he drew the child between his knees as he sat down.

“Now mind this here: nex’ time she comes and plays with you, my chickin’, perhaps she’ll say, ‘Would you like me to be your new mammy?’ she’ll say; and then, ‘Yes,’ says you; d’yer hear? ‘yes,’ says you. Now say it.”

But the little one only continued her wondering gaze till the fellow left her, and slouched out of the room, after raking the last cinder from the fire, in performing which he knocked the bottom of the grate from its frail hold, and then, in his endeavours to replace it, burned his fingers, and ejaculated so loudly that the eyes of the child were turned upon him more wonderingly than ever.

And then—was it that sympathy for the child moved the inmate of the opposite attic, or that he had a natural hatred for Jarker? Jean turned angrily from the window to a cage of half-a-dozen linnets the fellow had brought him an hour or two before, and to his mother’s rage and astonishment, seemed about to wreak his fury upon the birds. He seized one in his hand, and was about to wring its neck, but *ma mère* leaped forward to stay him, when his fierce gesture sent her back to her seat to watch him. But he did not kill the birds, but carried the cage to the window, and then let them go, one by one, till the last bird hesitated at the wire door for a few moments, and then fled, with a wild chirp of joy, far away into the smoky air.

“Jean, Jean! but you are *bête—fou*!” exclaimed his mother, trembling with fear and rage at this folly, as she thought of the money he had given for the birds.

“I hate him, I hate him!” hissed Jean furiously, while, watching him through her closed eyes, the old woman nodded quickly to herself, as she muttered and thought of her own early days, and it seemed to her that Jean’s heart was as easy to read as that printed book at his side.

But at this time Mr Jarker was slouching out of his room, and shouldering his way down the stairs, stopping the blowing of Mrs Sims’ fire for an instant, as he growled audibly in passing; then down into the court, where the index fingers of his hands were thrust into his mouth, and he was about to make a long and piercing whistle for the delectation of some passing pigeons as they flew over the strip of heaven seen from the flags of the court; but a glance at the first-floor window where dwelt the Hardons checked him. The next minute, though, the birds repassed, and Bill whistled loudly again and again; but the birds would not listen to this shrill voice of the charmer, the charmer himself, side-locks and all, went and stood at the bottom of the court, against the bright blue gilt-lettered boards of the public, where he rubbed the shoulders of his sleeve-waistcoat shiny, as he stood slouching about, and sucking one end of his spotted neck-tie.

“Whatcher going to stand, Bill?” said a gentleman of his acquaintance, a gentleman with a voice singularly like one that had been heard in the old Grange at Somesham upon a memorable night. This gentleman had a piece of straw in his mouth, and his hands in his pockets, his coiffure being of the same order as that of Mr Jarker, while, being evidently of a terpsichorean turn of mind, he enlivened the street with a “pitter-patter, pitter-patter, pit-pit, pat,” toe-and-heel dance upon the cellar-flap of the public-house, where, his boots being stout and well-nailed, and the flap very hollow beneath, his efforts were attended with so much noise that the potboy of the establishment thrust out a closely-cropped head between the swing doors, where he held it as if in the process of being shorn off, at the same time requesting the light-heeled gentleman to “Drop that ’ere now, come!”

But instead of standing anything to quench the thirst of the new-comer, Mr Jarker stood upon the order of his going; for just then, laden with a large parcel of work, Lucy Grey passed out of the court and encountered Mr Sterne, who saluted, and then turned with a grave, pained countenance to gaze after her, as he saw Jarker follow, slouching along as if his boots were soled with lead, diver fashion, and he of so ethereal a nature that the ponderous metal was necessary to prevent him from shooting up into heaven like a stickless rocket minus the tail of fire.

The curate turned thoughtfully up the court, and began his round of visits, listening to complaints here, supplications there, but finding nowhere rest. He went thoughtfully through his round of duties that day, hearing and speaking mechanically, for always before his eyes there was the light, graceful form of Lucy, followed by the hound-like Jarker,

and as he thought the lines grew deeper and deeper in his forehead. He listened to Mrs Sims' praises of the child—praises delivered in a lachrymose tone, as a strong odour of rum pervaded the place. He listened to *ma mère's* complaints of Jean, and felt an insinuation against her fellow-lodger's fair fame stab him as it were to the heart; while surprised he gazed upon the fury with which the son turned upon his mother; and then descending, his task nearly done, the curate sat by the bedside of Mrs Hardon.

There stood the sewing-machine in the next room; there was the chair in which Lucy had been so lately seated, and where even now he could picture her form. But, silent and abstracted, he listened for the twentieth time to the story of the murmuring woman's troubles, and what she had suffered since they had been in town. He listened, but he was asking himself the while whether Lucy merited the love he would pour at her feet—asking himself whether it was possible for a pure, fair, spotless lily to bloom amidst the pollution around. Still, too, came the remembrance of the words of the old Frenchwoman—"Our beauty, some of us." Once admitting doubt to his breast, the strange thoughts teemed in, bringing up the woman he had seen and tracked in vain, and above all the low ruffian whom he had seen dogging the fair girl's footsteps but that very day, when love had whispered, "Follow!" and pride cried, "Nay, stand aloof!" for he recalled their last interview. Then, again, he asked himself how dared he believe words that slurred her fair fame, when his conscience whispered to him that they were like their source—vile; but, surrounded as he was by vice and misery, might he not well wonder whether Lucy's fair face spoke truth in its candour-tinged aspect, or was like the hundreds he encountered in his daily walks—fair to view, but with a canker within?

He told himself that he could watch her no longer—that he could not play the spy; and once again he prayed for strength to conquer the passion that seemed to sway him at its will; for he could not comprehend the behaviour of its object. Love he had thought to be buried for ever with his betrothed; but from her grave the seed seemed to have returned to him untainted by time, and with all its quickening, germinating powers ready to shoot forth and blossom in a wealth of profusion for another. And he knew that it must be lavished upon Lucy, even though she still repulsed him. And now, again, his eye brightened as, dashing down the sinister thoughts, he would see only her faith and truth, smiling at poverty when he called up the riches of her heart—riches that he saw poured forth for the murmuring parent, for whose wants she toiled on incessantly, winning for her many a comfort that the sick woman could not else have enjoyed; and even then with the overflowings of her young heart ready for the neglected child.

"For the neglected child!" What a gloomy starting-point for another train of thought, embracing its mother, tall, dark, and rouge-cheeked; Jarker, the ruffian, tracking Lucy's steps; and lastly, *ma mère*, who seemed even then whispering in his ear, "Our beauty, some of us!" Arthur Sterne acknowledged that he was weak, though he fought hard with his soul-assailing enemies; while the track of the storm he was encountering was marked in his face, as he strolled slowly homewards, but only to pause startled at the mouth of the court.

Volume Three—Chapter Four.

Lucy's Trouble.

Lucy's eyes turned very dim as soon as she had passed Mr Sterne, and things wore a strangely blurred aspect. She would have given worlds to have thrown herself upon his breast, and told all—of Agnes Hardon and her sorrow, confided to her alone, as the suffering woman begged of her to love her for her child's sake, and not to turn upon her the cold bitter eyes of the world at large; and again and again Lucy had taken the passive, wasted, tearful face of Agnes to her breast, in the rare and stealthy meetings they had had, and wept over her, little knowing that Agnes possessed a secret which she felt that she could not divulge for the sake of those whom she had injured. Again and again Lucy had implored her leave to confide in Septimus Hardon, but Agnes had refused so firmly, telling her that the day her presence was betrayed would be that of their last meeting—telling her so angrily, but only to kneel at her feet the next moment, and ask her to bear for a little longer with an erring woman, whose stay in this world might not be for long. And so Lucy toiled on, bearing the scathing breath of calumny; pointed at by suspicion; and wounded again and again in her tenderest feelings by the only man she had ever felt that she could love. They were her own words, poor girl, though little had she seen of the world at large. She told herself that it was cruel of him to treat her as he did; but what could she do? And then she shivered as she thought of stolen meetings by night—meetings which should take place no more—while she wept bitterly as she hurried through the streets thinking of the misery of her lot.

She had no veil to her shabby bonnet, and it was only at last by a strong effort that she forced back the tears; for she felt that people were staring hard at her as she passed. But it was no unusual thing for people to look hard at Lucy Grey, while there was variety in those glances; there were, from women, the glance of envy, the look of sisterly admiration, and that bordering upon motherly love; and there were the hard stare from puppydom, the snobbish ogle, looks of love and respect, every glance that could dart from human eye; but the poor girl hurried on as in a dream, seeing nothing, hearing nothing, but bent upon the object of her journey. It was nothing to her that behind at a few yards' distance came Mr William Jarker, favouring everyone with a fierce scowl in return for the glances bestowed upon her, as he tracked her with the pertinacity of a bloodhound, turning when she turned, crossing when she crossed. Once only on her way back did Lucy tremble, when a fiercely-bearded, middle-aged dandy half stopped in front of her, so that she was compelled to turn a little out of her path, as with a heightened colour her eyes sunk before the fellow's insulting stare. But she did not hear his words, as, fervently wishing old Matt were by her side, she hurried on.

It sometimes happens, though, that those who are working for their own devices do us many a good turn; and it was so here, for as the studiously-dressed and bejewelled dandy turned and followed the fair girl, he suddenly became aware of a rough shoulder forcing him aside, when turning angrily, with umbrella raised to strike, he gazed full into the heavy, bull-dog countenance of Mr Jarker, whose white teeth gleamed beneath his flattened nose as though he were preparing to fasten on his victim.

The next moment the lemon-gloved hands were covering chain and pin, and the heavy swell of the London current subsided slowly and disappeared, leaving Lucy unmolested as she hurried on, followed still closely by her self-constituted bodyguard, of whoso presence she was ignorant; while, five minutes after, he made a side-bound into a doorway, where he stood peering round the post and smiling like some hideous satyr of old, as Lucy encountered Agnes Hardon, and stopped in the quiet street where they then were.

The sight must have been very gratifying to Mr Jarker, for he stood leering, and rubbing his soft, whitish hands, pausing every now and then to have a good gnaw at the nails, already nearly worn down to the quick; and then stepping lightly from his concealment, he passed close behind Agnes as she was whispering:

“God bless you! Don’t stay talking to me; go now. I’ll get it away directly he will let me. I have been five times already; but he was either there, or some one of his companions waiting about.”

Mr Jarker gave a short, husky, forced cough as he passed, when, turning hastily, fear and anger seemed to combine in Agnes Hardon’s face, as she caught Lucy’s hands in her own, interposing herself, as if for protection, till Mr Jarker had disappeared, when she hurried her away by another route, and hastily took her leave. But Lucy did not see her troubled, anxious face following at a short distance, and keeping her in sight till she reached the end of the court in time to encounter Mr Sterne, who saw almost at one glance Lucy, with Jarker standing aside to let her pass as he bestowed upon her a familiar smile and nod, and Agnes Hardon some fifty yards beyond, turning hastily and hurrying off; but her he followed angrily, and with a suffocating sensation at his breast, as if he were, knight-errant like, about to attack one of the evil genii who shadowed the life of her he loved. Fifty yards in advance, though, was Agnes, when he commenced following her steps, till a crowd around that common object of our streets, a fallen horse intercepted his view; and, when he had passed the throng, the figure he sought had disappeared.

“O, this weary, weary deceit!” sobbed Lucy, throwing herself on her knees by her bedside and weeping bitterly. Then, sighing, she rose, folded her mantle, and bathed her eyes before going to the sitting-room, where in a few more minutes her sewing-machine was rapidly beating until Septimus came and, with one loving hand laid across her red eyes, took away the candle.

Volume Three—Chapter Five.

Matt’s Discovery.

“Hold hard here!” cried a voice from a cab-window; and the driver of as jangling a conveyance as ever rattled over London stones drew up at the corner of Carey-street, Chancery-lane.

“I’ll get out here,” cried the voice; and very slowly, and with the aid of a stick, old Matt extricated himself from amongst the straw, a part of which he managed to drag out into the road.

The next minute the cabman was paid and had driven off. The boy who, with a basket slung across his back, had stopped to witness the disembarkation, and cut his popular song in half the while, resumed the refrain and went on along the Lane; while, with a smile on his pale face, old Matt slowly made his way down Carey-street, stopping to rest at the first lamp-post.

“Here I am,” he said; “King Space come back to my dominions. I wasn’t going to ride and lose the pleasure of seeing it all. Thank God there’s no whitewash here, and everything’s just as I left it; things looking as if they hadn’t stirred a peg; and I don’t suppose they have, if they haven’t been costs, which certainly do grow and flourish well here. Lord, sir, how beautiful and smoky and natural everything looks once more! There’s Hardon’s old printing-office—ah, to be sure! ‘Grimp, Deeds copied.’ That’s the trade to flourish here. Now then, sir, good-morning! Let’s get on a bit farther.”

According to his old custom, and heedless now of its being broad daylight, Matt made his way slowly to the next post, making his crippled state an excuse now for stopping, though there was hardly a soul to be seen in Carey-street, and those who passed were too intent upon their own affairs to notice him.

“Slow work, sir,” said Matt, stopping again, “glad to see you, though, once more. Thought at one time, if ever I did it would have been upon a cork-leg, sir; for I couldn’t have stood a wooden peg, sir, anyhow; a cork-leg all springs and watchwork, like old Tim Christy’s, as used to squeak with every step he took, just as if, being of cork, someone was trying to draw it; and he never oiled that leg, for fear it should go too easy. But there, I’m all right again,” he continued, taking a pinch of snuff, “and I call this real enjoyment, sir—real enjoyment. Only wait till I’ve put him all right upon that point, and I’ll have a bit of dissipation. Let’s see: the Vice-chancellor will be sitting like a great god, listening to the prayers of the petitioners in Chancery. I’ll have an hour there, sir, and then take a sniff of the ink in one of the old offices; and confound it all, sir, I wish you could join me! I’ll have half-a-pint of porter in Fetter-lane. I’m in for a regular round of dissipation, I am, just to make up for all this being shut up.”

On again went the old man, rather short of breath, till he was well in sight of the hospital at the end of the street; when, raising his eyes just as he was about to stop, he caught sight of a pale, weary face at one of the windows, and shuddered and turned away; but the next moment he had stopped and turned, and was waving a hand to the patient gazing from his prison-window.

“God bless you, mate!” said Matt aloud, “and may you soon be out of it!” And then there was a reply waved to his salute, and the old man turned down the courts to the left, and soon stood in Bennett’s-rents.

“What, Matt!” cried Septimus Hardon, hurrying to open the door as he heard his slow step upon the stairs; while Lucy took the old man’s other hand and helped him to a seat.

“What’s left of me, sir—what’s left,” said the old man cheerily; “and here I am right and clear-headed, and I did see it all, sir: and I’ve recollected it, and got it all put down here, so as you can read it, and safe in my head too. It wasn’t fancy, it was all right; and I did see it, as I told you, in what must have been the old doctor’s books.”

“But where? when?” cried Septimus eagerly.

“And there was the name—‘Mrs Hardon, medicine and attendance, so much;’ but of course I thought nothing of it then.”

“But,” cried Septimus, as he hooked a finger in a button-hole of the old man’s coat, “where was it?”

“Gently, sir, gently,” said Matt, unhooking the finger; “mind what you’re after: stuff’s tender. But there: you’ll fit me out with a new suit when you’re all right—won’t you, sir, eh?”

“A dozen, Matt, a dozen!” cried Septimus eagerly.

“And Miss Lucy here’s to have as full a compassed pianner as can be got, without having one as would burst and break all the strings—eh, miss, eh?”

Lucy smiled sadly.

“But where did you see it, Matt—where was it?” exclaimed Septimus, inking his face in his excitement, and totally destroying his last hour’s work.

“Why, sir, no farther off than at my lodgings,” cried Matt triumphantly. “I did mean to be of use to you if I could, and I’ve lived to do it, sir, and I’m thankful; but come along, sir—come along. I’m weak and poorly yet, and there seems to be a deal of water collected in my system—a sort of dropsy, you know; and it all flies to my eyes on the least provocation, and comes dripping out like that, just as if I was a great gal, and cried, d’ye see?”

There was a tear in Septimus Hardon’s eye as he warmly wrung the old man’s hand, and ten minutes after they were standing in Lower Series—place, with Matt smiling grimly at a freshly-painted set of skeleton old bone letters upon a glossy-black board, announcing “Isaac Gross, Dealer in Marine-stores;” but that was the only alteration visible, for Isaac and the stout lady occupied the same places as of yore, and were at that very moment engaged in an affectionate, smiling game of bo-peep.

“Might have waited for me to dance at the wedding,” muttered Matt.

But there had been very little dancing at the said wedding; while the trip necessary upon such occasions was one made to the Rye House, where Isaac’s attention was principally taken up by the jack-boot shown amongst the curiosities—a boot which filled his imagination for days after, as he sighed and thought of the evanescent nature of his own manufacture.

The greeting was warm on both sides, Isaac smiling at a quicker rate than had ever before been known. But the visitors meant business, and Matt exclaimed:

“Now, Ike, we want to go over the waste-paper.”

Matt was outside as he spoke, and then Mrs Gross, whose head had been stretched out to listen, found that what had been her property was in question, so she cried, “Stop!” and waddled from her seat to where Matt stood, seized him by the arm, and waddled him into Isaac’s workshop, from whence she waddled him into the back-parlour, where his bed, now the only one in the room, was neatly made up, and the place somewhat tidier than of yore, though the waste-paper heap was bigger than ever.

“Now,” said Mrs Gross, with a very fat smile and a knowing twinkle of her eye as she sank her voice to a whisper, “Is it deeds?” and then she looked at Isaac as if for approbation, that gentleman having followed them into the room and being engaged in vain endeavours to thrust a very large finger into his very small pipe-bowl.

“Who married the kitchen-stuff?” shouted a small voice at the door, and Mrs Gross angrily waddled out in pursuit, to the great delight of half a score of the small inhabitants of Serle’s-place, one of whom danced a defiant *pas seul* in a tray of rusty keys as he fled, laughing the while at the fat threatening hand held up. But Isaac stirred not, from having been accustomed to the gibes of the juveniles of the place, and his skin being too thick for such banderillos as “Waxy,” “Welty,” or “Strap-oil,” to penetrate, so he merely stood wiping his nose upon his leather apron till his partner returned.

“Is it deeds?” whispered Mrs Gross again, and then in a parenthesis, “Drat them boys!”

“No,” said Matt gruffly, “it ain’t.”

“Then it’s bank-bills,” said the lady mysteriously, as she slily winked at everyone in turn, her husband smiling at her acute business perceptions.

“No, nor it ain’t them neither,” said Matt.

“Then it’s a will,” said Mrs Gross in a disappointed tone; “and there ain’t a scrap of that sort in the place, for I sold out last week.”

“’Tain’t a will, I tell you,” growled Matt.

“Then it’s dockymens,” said Mrs Gross triumphantly, and she nudged Matt in the side.

“No it ain’t; nor receipts, nor letters, nor nothing of the kind. If you must know, it’s them old doctor’s books; that’s what it is. Now, where are they?”

But Mrs Gross, though she had not the slightest idea as to what doctor’s books were meant, was not yet satisfied, but cried:

“Halves!”

“What’s halves?” said Matt.

“Why, we goes halves in what turns up,” said Mrs Gross, who had a famous eye for business, though she would keep dimming its...

Some lines missing here from the scans.

“Gross!” cried a sepulchral voice, which made Septimus start, till he found that it had proceeded from Mr Isaac himself, though his face did not betray that he had spoken.

“Gross, then,” growled Matt. “Now look here,” he continued; “it’s nothing but an old entry as I once saw in some doctor’s books on your counter here, and we want to see it; for I hadn’t sense then to know it was any good; but if we find it, and it’s what we want, my guv’nor here will stand a sovereign, I dessay.”

“Put it down on paper, then,” said Isaac, “and make him sign;” to the great admiration of his partner, who patted him upon the back for his display of business ability; and then, before a paper was touched, Septimus Hardon, greatly to Matt’s disgust, signed a promissory and conditional note for the amount named.

“Ikey,” growled Matt, “I didn’t think you had been such a Jew. If you haven’t let my rooms, you can get yourself a fresh tenant.”

But Isaac only smiled, and the task commenced—no light one—of turning over the huge stack of waste-paper piled up before them. Dust, dirt, and mildew; brief-paper, copying-paper, newspaper, old books, old magazines and pamphlets, account-books with covers and account-books without; paper in every phase; while eagerly was everything in the shape of an account-book seized upon, and the search continued until, faint and weary, they had gone through the whole heap, when with a despairing, doleful look Septimus gazed upon Matt.

“I’ll take my Bible oath it was in a book I saw laid upon that heap. Now then, where’s some more?” and the old man said it feebly, as if nearly exhausted.

“No more anywheres,” said Mrs Gross assuringly, as she smoothed her husband’s oily hair.

“Sure?” cried Matt.

Mrs Gross nodded, and retied the ribbon which confined her husband’s locks.

“Where is it, then?” cried Matt.

“Where is it?” repeated Mrs Gross. “Why, if it ain’t here, in this heap, it’s everywheres. It’s sold, and burnt, and wrapped round ’bacca, and butter, and all sorts.”

“Hadn’t we better go, Matt?” whispered Septimus, dreamily washing his hands together after his dry custom.

“S’pose we had,” muttered Matt. “Just, too, sir, as I’d made so sure as it was all coming right, and for the second time, too. Never mind, sir, it’ll all come right yet. Third time never fails. What do you say to hunting up the Miss Thingumy at Finsbury, and hearing what she’s got to say?—plenty, depend upon it. News, perhaps, and it can’t do no harm.”

But Septimus Hardon was in a weary, absent fit, and went away muttering homewards, as, worn-out and weak, Matt sat down upon the waste-paper ruins of the palace he had built in his own mind, and grimly listened to the congratulations of his friends upon his return.

Volume Three—Chapter Six.

Weakness and Strength.

For a good hour together Mr Jarker would rest in a broken-bottomed chair, smoking a short black pipe, his hands supporting his heavy chin, and his elbows making pits in his knees, as, like some hideous old cathedral gargoyle, he sat gazing fixedly at the little wondering face of the child. From time to time he reversed his position to re-refresh himself with a draught of his favourite beverage—gin and beer, a beverage which always produced a loud smack from his thick negro lips. If there was no fascination in the child’s face for Bill Jarker, there was most certainly fascination in the ruffian’s face for the child; and unconsciously imitating his attitude, it would rest its dimply plump cheeks upon its tiny fists, and gaze again wonderingly, without a thought of moving, till the lids slowly sank over the violet eyes, and the little golden-haired, soft, lovable head sank sideways, with all those prettiest of pretty motions seen in one of the most beautiful sights in nature—a child dropping off into its simple trusting sleep of innocence; but soon it would start into wakefulness again, with a frightened air, and its little face drawn and ready to cry; but a

glance at the hideous face before it subdued the disposition, and once more the same long, weary gaze commenced.

This took place day after day, and a stranger seeing it might have fancied that in this case innocence was exercising its power over guilt; but one who knew Mr Jarker well would have arrived at the right idea, namely, that this gentleman was making his plans. A pipe or two of tobacco, a pint of beer strengthened with gin, and a long stare at the face of his wife when living, a cat, a dog, or of late the child, had been the preliminaries of more than one desperate burglary in a country place somewhere within a circle of fifty miles' radius, taking Saint Paul's as the centre. Bill's *confrères* in the bird-catching profession contented themselves with trips countryward to the extent of eight or ten miles; but, though on the whole Bill and his two or three companions caught fewer birds, he never let distance interfere with his pursuits, and used to boast that the birds he netted were of a rarer kind. Bill would travel third-class almost any distance to find good pitches for his nets; and even then, perhaps, after a three or four days' trip, and returning with hardly a bird, he seemed to be so infatuated with the place and its prospects, that he would gather together his two or three intimates, and go down again, travelling slowly by road, setting off too in such a hurry, in a miserable cart drawn by a wretched-looking hack, that friends and self would entirely forget nets and call-birds, when they would console themselves with the remark that they might take a few nightingales.

So that Mr Jarker was not undergoing a softening process as he sat staring at the child, for he was really making his plans; and this time these plans had nothing to do with either birds or nocturnal visits. There was something particular in Mr Jarker's head, or else he would not have burdened himself with the child for a single day; while he had carefully retained it in his custody now for many weeks; and the ruffian's ideas must have been of a somewhat strange character, for now and then he would shake his head at the drowsy child, and say:

"Yes, my little chickin', you do for a bait."

So of late, apparently for the sake of the child, Mr Jarker had suffered the bellows; and, in consideration of a small sum weekly, Mrs Sims had sniffed about the room, and, to use her own expressive words, "done for him." But now, probably from too much spiritual exercise, Mrs Sims was ill, and no one dared go near the ruffian's room but Lucy, whose heart bled for the little thing. Left still for hours together alone in the dreary room, sometimes but half fed, afraid to do more than whimper softly, her sole amusement was to press her little face against the closed window, and watch until she could catch a glimpse of her neighbour, when the tiny hands would be clapped with glee. The neighbours said it was a shame; but they had their own affairs to attend to, and said no more. While, as might be expected, Lucy seized every opportunity of tending the child most lovingly; watching for Jarker's absence, and then hurrying up and spending perhaps an hour in the miserable attic.

"She must be ill," Lucy would think, "or something is wrong; for surely it was fancy on her part that he should wish to retain the child;" and, though anxious that it should be better tended, she looked forward with dread to the time when it should be taken away; while, as anxiously she watched for a visit from Agnes. Night after night the candle burned in her window, as she worked on at some exercise; but Agnes Hardon came not, telling her weary heart that it was for Lucy's good.

Sometimes Jarker would omit to turn the key he always left in his door, as if to provoke inquiry into his affairs, and to show the guilelessness of his life; and then, after waiting until his footstep became inaudible, the child would steal softly down step by step, fleeing back if she heard a door open or a foot upon the stairs, but only to persevere till, unobserved, she reached the entrance, when, watching till the attention of the children of the court was directed elsewhere, she would dart across the pavement, enter the opposite house, creep up to the first-floor, and then crouch down by the step which led into the front-room, and peer beneath the door, through the opening made by the long hard wear of feet for a century and a half-watching, perhaps for a couple of hours, the bright guiding spirit of the sewing-machine. But at last Lucy would catch sight of the two round bright eyes, peering beneath the door; and to her mother's great annoyance at one time, and supreme satisfaction upon another, she would fetch in the child, when according to Mrs Hardon's mood she would act; for if the invalid was fretful and weary, the little thing would be taken up to Jean, where she would stay willingly amongst the birds, as the cripple eagerly tried to be of service to his beautiful neighbour. But there were difficulties here, for Jean could only render this aid when *ma mère* was absent, though this was more frequently now since Bijou had learned to stand upon his head, and so brought in more remuneration, without taking into consideration his later accomplishment of climbing two chairs, rail by rail, forefeet upon one, hindfeet upon another, and then smoking a tobacco-less pipe in triumph upon the summit, as he spanned the distance between the two chairs, and turned himself into a canine arch. But Bijou doubtless did not enjoy his pipe for remembering how that he was *bête*, and for thinking of the whip, and the rapping his poor legs received before he was able to obey his mistress's commands—that is if dogs can think.

There seemed to be a tacit understanding between *ma mère* and Lucy; an acknowledged dislike upon the old woman's part, which made the latter carefully avoid her, shrinking back into the room if she heard her footstep, so as not to encounter the quiet bitter smile and sneering gaze of the old woman, while *ma mère* reviled Jean angrily, calling him nurse-girl, *bonne*, when by chance she learned of his past occupation. But Jean cared not, so long as there was something that should bring Lucy to his attic, where he could feast greedily upon her bright face and graceful form; and, could he have gone about, he would have followed her like a dog.

Jean's lark sang more loudly than ever, and Lucy's eyes had brightened as she told the cripple again and again how she loved its sweet notes; and, watching her press her lips once to the cage-wires, inviting the speckled bird to take a seed from the rosy prison, Jean's eyes dimmed as he gazed at her with a reverence approaching adoration. Visitor after visitor came to that attic, and went, buying and selling, and the little prisoners were constantly being changed; but the lark was there still, though more than once of late Jean had pressed its acceptance upon Lucy Grey; but with a sweet smile she had thanked him, begging that he would keep it for her sake; and he kept it, in spite of many an angry word from *ma mère* when some advantageous offer had been made by a visitor; and it still whistled from its perch in the window.

"I will sell the bird myself; it is waste, it is pity, when we are so poor," *ma mère* would exclaim; and then Jean would

turn upon her a peculiar soft, sweet smile, and whisper, “No, *ma mère*, you will not sell my bird, because I love it;” when passionately the old woman would now scold, now fondle the cripple, as she hung over the back of his chair.

One evening when the moon hung high in air, waiting the fading of day before shedding her pale light, Jean sat in his usual place in the window, dreaming of scenes of which he had read, and thinking himself in some sweet woodland home, forgetting the presence of squalor and misery, and even of the cages, as he listened to the twittering of the many birds hung around his head. There was a brightness in his eye and a smile upon his lip, for he was gazing across the court at just such a scene as once almost spellbound the curate. Merrily romping with the child, he could see Lucy in Jarker’s room, flitting backwards and forwards past the open window. The child’s happy laugh could be heard mingled with its shouts of pleasure, for the pent-up joyousness of its little nature was now having free vent.

All at once Jean’s look of quiet enjoyment changed to one of unutterable rage and despair; the lips, but now apart in a soft smile, were drawn, as if by some fearful pain, his teeth were clenched, and his eyes wild and dilated. He tried to rise, but his helplessness was such that he sank back in his chair panting; but, raising his crutch, he struck savagely on the casement, shivering two or three of the little panes. He tried again and again to get up, and inarticulate sounds came from his lips. It was pitiful to gaze upon the struggle between the strong mind and the weak body, which would not obey his will as he tried again to rise; till, with a savage, guttural cry, more like that of some disappointed beast of prey than a human being, he threw himself towards the open window, as in his efforts his chair was overturned and he fell upon the floor, where he lay agonisingly writhing in his impotence, as he absolutely foamed at the mouth.

Just then the door behind him opened, and, with a book beneath his arm, Mr Sterne entered the room; when seeing, as he thought, the cripple in a fit, he sprang forward and raised him in his arms to place him in a chair, at the same time running over in his own mind what would be the best course of action. But as he gazed in the poor fellow’s dilated eyes, and saw their look of unutterable despair, one of Jean’s hands was fiercely clutching his shoulder, and the other was pointing and waving frantically towards the open window.

The next instant, as if some strange suspicion had flashed upon his mind, the curate was gazing across the court, to utter almost the counterpart of the cry that had issued from the throat of Jean, as he caught sight of Lucy, frightened and horror-stricken, backing towards the room door, and Jarker, evidently half-mad with drink, holding her tightly by one arm; for he had returned unexpectedly, and taking advantage of the girl’s preoccupation, had stolen softly into the room and closed the door.

Arthur Sterne saw this at one glance, and his face turned pale as ashes with the thoughts that this hasty look engendered. The next moment he had half-climbed from the window and stood holding by one hand, measuring the distance across the court, as he stooped, lithe and elastic, ready for the bound; but reason told him that it was utter madness to attempt so wild a leap—a leap certainly death for himself, and probably worse than death for her he sought to save; and dashing back into the room he tore down the staircase.

Recovering somewhat, Jean now let himself slide down upon the floor, and, panting heavily, began to walk painfully across the room; for a moment he looked at the window, but the next he was making for the door, and then lowering himself from stair to stair. But before he was down the first flight, there was rescue at hand for Lucy. Bounding up the frail old staircase of the opposite house, Arthur Sterne dashed frantically on, so that at every leap the woodwork cracked and trembled as if ready to give way. The height never seemed so great before, as landing after landing was passed, till he reached the last, to launch himself against the frail door, which, driven from its hinges, fell with a crash; and the next moment, dropping like some inert mass from the blow which fell upon his face, Jarker made the old place quiver beneath his weight. And there he lay, stupid and helpless from the sudden shock; the effect of the blow being apparently enough to destroy life, for the ruffian did not move.

Hardly breathing, and uttering no sound, the child crouched fearfully in a corner; while Lucy, trembling and half-fainting, clung to the curate, as sob after sob burst from her breast; and at last, as if stricken by death, she sank back pale and inanimate upon his supporting arm.

But there were no looks of love in Arthur Sterne’s face; for, with brow knit, nostrils distended, and every vein in his face swollen and knotted, he stood with his heel crushed down upon Jarker’s bull-throat, no mean incarnation of vengeance. Soon, though, the breath he had drawn with difficulty as he stood there holding the fainting girl to his throbbing heart, came more lightly, the expression of rage fled from his features, and as he gazed tenderly upon the pale face so near his own he pressed his lips reverently upon her forehead.

“Lucy, my poor dove,” he whispered, “will you not give me the right to protect you, and take you from this place?”—“Our beauty, some of us,” seemed sighed at his ear.

“A lie, a base lie!” he muttered fiercely; though even then a change came over his face, the veins swelled once more in his forehead, and an agony of strange thoughts passed through his breast. And now, pale and anxious, two or three of the women lodgers came trembling to the door, amongst whom was Mrs Sims, ready to take possession of the child, as, hurriedly passing through the wondering group, the curate bore his light burden to her home.

Volume Three—Chapter Seven.

A Meeting and its Result.

It was late before Arthur Sterne left Bennett’s-rents that night. Septimus Hardon had been terribly excited—talking long and wildly of his poverty being the cause of the insult offered to his child. He had walked hurriedly up and down the room, gesticulating and threatening the scoundrel who had so repaid Lucy’s kindness; and again and again it was upon the curate’s lips to speak of the little one, and of Lucy’s strange intimacy with its mother; but his spirit revolted

from the task. In another case he would have spoken instantly; but here duty seemed to move in fetters that he could not break. In all concerning the poor girl he seemed bound to preserve silence till such time as some explanation should be given, and through all he had been in constant dread lest he should give her pain.

“I must prosecute the villain!” exclaimed Septimus.

“But the pain—the exposure—your child?” said the curate.

“What! would you have him go unpunished?” exclaimed Septimus.

“I would say ‘No!’ directly,” replied the curate; “but I cannot help thinking of the painful scene in court, the public examination, and the cross-examination by the prisoner’s counsel; and these men can always among themselves manage to get some able person to undertake their cause. It would be a most painful position in which to place your child. Her actions would be distorted to suit a purpose; and such a scene—”

Mr Sterne’s speech dwindled off, and became inaudible; for he felt that he had spoken unadvisedly, and a strange chill came over him as he thought, in the event of the affair being in court, what hold the opposing counsel could take of certain acts in Lucy’s life; for, let them he ever so innocent, the light in which they would place her would be of the most painful character; and his lips were rather white as he said, “Sleep on it, Mr Hardon, sleep on it.”

“I will,” said Septimus proudly. “We are poor, Mr Sterne; but there is no act in my dear child’s life that will not bear the light of day.”

“Doubtless, doubtless,” replied the curate in a low tone; “but, believe me, my advice is given with the best of wishes and intentions, Mr Hardon. Have I not always tried to be a friend? And if there was somewhat of selfishness in my advances, I feel no shame in owning to you that I am moved by a feeling of more than esteem for Miss Grey; to whom any proceedings would, I am sure, be as painful as to myself.”

Septimus Hardon started, for this was as sudden as unexpected. Such a thought had never entered his breast, and he gazed wonderingly at the calm, pale face before him; as in the silence which ensued they both sat listening to the painful, low sob which came now and again from the next room, where, forgetful of her own infirmities, Mrs Hardon had been trying to soothe the agitated girl.

And then, hour after hour, Septimus sat talking with Mr Sterne—for the first time now giving himself up entirely to his advice, and promising to give up all thought of prosecution, while he sought at once for some more suitable home for his wife and child, though, as he thought of his narrow, precarious income, he made the latter promise with a sigh. He talked long and earnestly, too, about his own affairs, being ready now to take the counsel that Mr Sterne so freely offered; and when, with a lighter heart, the curate rose to leave, Septimus shook hands, with a puzzled expression upon his face, as if he hardly believed in the events of the past evening.

Upon slowly descending and reaching the door, Mr Sterne drew back, asking himself whether he should be content, or seize the opportunity that now offered for him to know that of which it was evident, from his language, Septimus Hardon was still ignorant. The desire was strong to know more, and he yielded to it; for there before him, standing in the open court, and gazing anxiously up at the lighted window, was the woman who had caused him so much uneasiness; but neither he nor the woman saw that in the shade of the opposite doorway a villainous pair of eyes were on the watch.

Again and again he had encountered this woman since he had determined to question her—upon the bridge at early dawn; by night, in the crowded streets, dressed in the extreme of fashion; shabbily dressed by day; but she always fled, and contrived to elude him. Who was she? What was she? How came she intimate with Lucy? Was it merely for the child’s sake? Then why Lucy’s dread?

The opportunity was here, he told himself, and he would know; and then, as he formed the determination, he stepped quickly out; but no sooner did Agnes Hardon catch sight of the curate’s pale, stern face by the sickly flicker of the one lamp than she turned and fled, while, without pausing to think, the curate closed the door and pursued her.

A dark, gusty time, late, for two had struck but a minute before by church after church—some sending their booming announcement clearly out upon the night air, others discordantly, and jangling with the bells of others. Turning towards the end of the court, Agnes ran swiftly, her dress rustling, and fashionable boots pattering upon the pavement; but her pursuer was quick of foot, and followed her along the end row, through Harker’s-alley, Ray’s-court, along one labyrinth and down another of the old district, now falling beneath the contractor’s pick, till they had nearly returned to the point from whence they started. But flight was of no avail, and soon Arthur Sterne overtook the panting woman, himself breathless, and, heedless of her fierce looks, caught her by the wrist.

“Come with me,” he said sternly, as he drew her towards the entrance of the dark court where they stood.

“Why, why?” she exclaimed passionately, struggling with him the while. “Why do you stop me? Why do you pursue me—you, too, a clergyman?”

The answer to the taunt was a cold look, which Agnes Hardon saw and felt; for the next moment she was weeping passionately. “Why do you track and follow me, sir?” she exclaimed through her tears. “Let me go; you hurt my arm!”

“Will you stand and answer my questions, then?” said the curate, as they now stood at the entrance of the court—a dark, gloomy archway, with a doorway here and there.

“Yes, yes,” exclaimed Agnes wearily, “if you will be quick; but there, I know what you would say, and it is of no use; I

am past all that!”

“Past all what?” cried the curate sternly.

“Hope of better things,” said the woman with so weary and despondent a wail, that her hearer shuddered.

“Hush!” he said; “you speak rashly, and without thinking;” and releasing her wrist, he laid his hand gently upon her arm. “Listen,” he said; “you have your woman’s feelings yet!”

“No,” she replied hastily, “all—all gone; driven out of me—dead. Let me go, please; it’s late, sir. I am a wretch, and it is useless to talk.”

“But why do you pursue that young girl?” he said, pointing across the street to where Bennett’s-rents debouched. “Would you tempt her to be your companion?”

“No, no, no; my God, no!” half-shrieked Agnes, as she caught at his hands; “don’t think that, sir.”

“Then you *have* some womanly feeling left,” said Mr Sterne.

“Towards her, perhaps, yes.”

“And your child?”

“Yes, yes, yes,” wailed Agnes; “but don’t torture me. What do you know?—what do you wish me to do?—why do you follow me?”

“What is your name?” said the curate sternly; “and how came you to know her?” and he pointed again towards Bennett’s-rents.

“Don’t ask me, I cannot tell you,” sobbed Agnes.

“But you bring misery on her and on her home. You have some hold upon her?”

“No, no, no,” sobbed Agnes hysterically; “none, none; but she knows who I am, and pities me and my poor child. God’s blessing on her!”

“Amen!” muttered the curate under his breath, and his companion sobbed so convulsively that she could not speak, while, as they stood in the dark entry, a policeman came slowly by, flashed the light of his bull’s-eye upon them for an instant, recognised the curate and passed on, and, till he was out of hearing, Agnes Hardon clutched the curate’s arm.

“You are not afraid of the world and it’s opinions,” she said bitterly; “it cannot hurt you. Stay with me and I will tell you all, for I believe you mean me well.”

The curate bowed his head.

“I am miserable, wretched,” she sobbed, “and what can I do? That man in the court has my poor child, and for some reason he will not give it up. I have tried to get it away again and again, even to stealing it, sir—my own little one; but something has always prevented me, and he watches me till, hardened as I am, I am afraid of him, for he comes over my spirit like the shadow of some great horror about to crush me. I love my child, my pure little angel, for—O sir, have pity on me, have pity!—I am its mother, and what else have I here to cling to? Can you not think how I must love it though I left it with that poor dead woman? But she had a mother’s heart, and was kind to it always. I could see it in my darling’s blue eyes even when it racked my heart; but I was glad, though it would not come to me, and called her mother. I was happy then, for did not she—she you say I injure—watch over it for me, and tell me of its bright eyes and sunny hair and winning ways, while, when I have listened to her, the tears have come gently to quench the fire in my brain, and I could think of home and the past, while she—she who loves my little one—lets me weep upon her breast, and I forget for a while that I am lost, lost, lost for ever!”

“Lost, lost, lost for ever!” She uttered these words so hopelessly, with such a wail of agony, that they seemed to echo along the archway, and to float off upon the night breeze, rising and falling, an utterance never to fade away, but to go on for ever and ever while this world lasts; to smite upon the sleeping ears of the cruel, the dissolute, and the profligate; to awaken here, perhaps, one sorrowful thought for wrong done, one thought of repentance; there, a desire to pause, ere it be too late, on the brink of some iniquity that should break a trusting woman’s heart.

Tenderly, and with such a strange feeling of compassion in his heart as might have pervaded that of his Master whose words he taught, Arthur Sterne took the weeping woman’s hands in his, as, sobbing more bitterly than ever, she sank upon her knees on the cold stones at his feet, weeping as though her heart would break; nay, as if through the torn walls of that broken citadel the flood of tears went seething and hissing, the ruins yet smouldering and burning with the fire of the fatal passion that had been their fall.

“What shall I do, sir?” she cried at length, wearily looking up in the face that bent over her. “I would take my little one away and go near the place no more, for I have been seldom lately, not liking that he should see me with her, for he followed us once, and I did not like it. I would have told her not to go near my child, but there is a woman sometimes there. He will not let me take it away. But tell me what to do, sir,” she said wearily, “and I will do it.”

“What!” she cried, starting up, “what!” she half-shrieked, as he related to her the incident of the past night; “and this through me? Am I to bring misery everywhere? O God, O God!” she cried, “that my weakness, my sin, should be ever growing and bringing its misery upon others! But stop, sir; listen,” she exclaimed huskily, as she clung to his arm;

“what shall we do? If I could have seen this, sir, I’d have died sooner than it should have happened; believe me, I would.”

The curate bent his head once more, as they stood facing the street, and said, in low, impressive tones, “I do believe you;” but he took no heed to a light, stealthy pace in the alley behind.

“What shall I do, sir?” cried Agnes eagerly.

“Take the child away at once,” replied Mr Sterne, “and leave this life. But will you?”

“If the gates of heaven were opened, sir, and One said, ‘Come in, poor sinner, and rest,’ should I go?”

The stealthy step came nearer, but was unnoticed.

“Now tell me your name, and how came the intimacy of which I complain,” said Mr Sterne.

“I—I knew the family; I knew Lucy—Miss Grey—before her father—and—pray, pray ask me no more,” gasped Agnes appealingly. “I will do all you wish, sir. Help me to get my child, and I will go anywhere you may tell me; but don’t ask me that, sir.”

“Nay,” said Mr Sterne, with beating heart, for he felt that her reply would drive away his last doubt, “tell me now; you may trust me.”

“Yes, yes,” sobbed Agnes; “I know, but I cannot.”

The step sounded very close now, while the light from the lamp in the alley was for a moment obscured.

“I will do all that you ask,” sobbed Agnes. “Tell me what else you wish, and I will be as obedient as a child, but—”

“Prove it, then, by telling me how began your intimacy with Miss—”

There was a wild scream from Agnes Hardon as she thrust the curate aside; but too late, for a heavy, dull blow from behind crushed through his hat, and stretched him upon the pavement, where, for an instant, a thousand lights seemed dancing before his eyes, and then all was blank.

It was no unusual sound that, a woman’s shriek, especially the half-drunken cry of some street wanderer; but one window was opened, and a head thrust out, whose owner muttered for a moment and then closed the sash, for though he had seen a woman struggling with a man, he did not hear the words that passed, nor could he see that the man was trying hard to extricate himself from the woman’s grasp; but there were other wakeful eyes upon the watch.

Volume Three—Chapter Eight.

Waste-Paper.

“Well, yes, sir,” said Matt, standing hat in hand, “’tis snug and comfortable, sir; and I’m glad to see the change, and I’m sure I wish you long life to enjoy it. Glad you’ve got here all right, sir; and sorry I was too weak to help you move. I’ve got the address down all right in my memo-book: look here, sir—150 Essex-street, Strand, sir.”

“And now we’ll go, then, Matt,” said Septimus, rising.

“Go, sir?” said Matt.

“Yes,” said Septimus, “if you will; for the thing has been too long neglected already.”

“Very true, sir,” said Matt: “but you told me as the parson, sir, Mr Sterne, was going to take it in hand; and if so—”

“Now, Matt,” said Septimus appealingly, “isn’t he lying upon a bed of sickness, weak and helpless, and unable to move?”

“Well, yes, sir, that’s true; and a rum start that was, too. Wonder who would have a spite against him? But I thought that now, sir, as you’d—”

Septimus Hardon took the old man by the arm and placed him in a chair; for it was evident that he was a little testy and jealous of other interposition in the matters in which he had taken so much interest; but the cordiality of Mrs Septimus seemed to chase it away; while Lucy, returning from a walk, beamed so happily upon the old man, that he looked his old self again, and owned to the feeling that, as he expressed it, he had expected that he was going to be “pitched overboard,” now there were new friends.

It was partly by Mr Sterne’s advice that Septimus had sought out and asked Matt to accompany him this day; for though much hurt, and weak from loss of blood, the curate had taken great interest in the future of the Hardon family. At his request Septimus had sought and removed to lodgings in Essex-street, and since then passed an evening by the curate’s bedside; for he had been found by a policeman perfectly insensible, and carried home; and, though nearly certain of who was his assailant, he felt indisposed to take any steps in the matter for fear that affairs might be made public which he wished concealed. He had not seen Lucy since; but somehow there was a feeling of repose and content within his breast that it had not known for months; and he longed for the time when he could again meet with the woman whose words would have, he now felt, set him at rest for ever.

There seemed, too, a brightness in Lucy foreign to her looks, as Septimus leaned over her and whispered a few words before leaving; then, after kissing her tenderly, he descended to the street with old Matt, who, though weak, still refused sturdily every offer of a ride, and they trudged steadily on till they reached Finsbury.

“Hallo!” said Matt, “what d’ye call this? Same name, but the business is changed, and that’s her a-cutting up paper. To be sure—why it is her! I thought I knew her face, but I was in such a muddle just then that all my letter was mixed, and whenever I wanted a p, I got a q, and all on like that. Why, she came and chattered away, and bought an old set of tobacco-jars and covers and a heap of waste-paper of Mother Slagg, just before I went into hospital; and there they are, sir—that’s them, fresh varnished and painted, and stuck on the shelf. Ikey took ’em home for her, and I remember asking myself ever so long as to where I’d seen her before. Well, come on, sir. I want a bit of snuff, so that’s an excuse for going in. P’r’aps, after all, she’s bought the very paper.”

The visitors made their way into the old formal registry-office, turned into a very smart little shop, fitted up with some taste; where Miss Tollicks herself was busily weighing and packing a pile of those little rolls of tobacco known as “screws.” Fine thick paper, too, she was using, such as would weigh well and add to the rather fine profit she obtained upon her fragrant weed. For there was no mistake: Miss Tollicks had executed her threat, turned the registering out of doors, and taken to the business most popular in the streets of London. No seat now existed for maids to sit and wait to be hired from ten to four; no green baize; no intense air of respectability, but all quite the correct thing as established by custom in the weedy way. There was a monster cigar outside, set perpendicularly, with an internal gas-jet, and a transparency bearing the legend, “Take a light.” On the other side of the door was a little, freshly-varnished, red-nosed, chip-elbowed Scotchman, taking snuff in the imperfect tense, with his fingers half-way to his nose; an imitation roll of tobacco hung over the door; while just inside, upon a tub, stood a small black gentleman in a very light feather petticoat, smoking a pipe about double the length of his body. Then there were clay pipes, crossed and tied into diamond-pattern d’oyleys, swung in the top panes of the windows; while beneath them “so gracefully curled” a perfect anaconda of a hookah—one that it would have taken a bold Turk to smoke. There were meerschaums and brier-roots, cutty- and billiard-pipes; glass, cherry, and jasmine stems; tobacco-pouches of india-rubber, looking like fresh-flayed negro-skin; snuff-boxes of all sorts and sizes, embracing miniature, scene, and tartan of every pattern; stacks of cigar-boxes carefully branded but very European in their look; bundles of cigars tied with fancy ribbon; the day’s playbills on the walls; rows of snuff- and tobacco-jars, as pointed out by Matt, and labelled from “Scotch” to “Hardham’s 37,” and from “Returns” to “Latakia.” There was a whole tubful of odorous shag, and a stack of packets of Bristol bird’s-eye; the scales were of the glossiest, the glass-case of the cleanest, and altogether the shop owned by Miss Tollicks seemed to be of the most prosperous; for things looked smart and well attended to—a rare sign of plenty of business, as, according to the old saying, “the less there is to do, the worse it is done;” but there was a strong smell of varnish, and it was evident that Miss Tollicks had been picking up her fittings here and there at various secondhand stores, or, as Matt Space called it, “on the cheap.”

Matt advanced to the counter and asked for his penn’orth of snuff.

“Then you’re not dead!” exclaimed Miss Tollicks, putting down the jar in a most businesslike way, with motions rapid as her speech; for she had banished the black-velvet blackbird and deportment along with the green baize; but, not quite used to her business, in spite of her ability of adapting herself to circumstances, she sneezed loudly as she lifted the lid. “And how do you do?—there, dear me, how I do sneeze!—and I thought I had quite conquered it, for it does look so—tchisher-er—so—er-tchisher! There, I’m sure I beg your pardon. And how do you do? and you’ve got well again, like poor Mary did, in that horrible place, who was dying too, and didn’t. And Mr Harding too! and I’m so glad to see you, for you were *that* kind to me, I don’t know what I should have done else. Now you’ve come to ask me about the doctor again—now haven’t you?”

Septimus said he had.

“Well, now, I hadn’t forgotten it, and you were both right, you know; but I shall never forget your kindness, Mr Harding, for but for you that day, everyone must have seen that I had been crying. But you were right; and the doctor did live here, and died here too, ages ago; and then his widow went to live somewhere in one of those quiet streets by the Strand, going down to the river, you know; and then she died, and there was a sale, and that’s all; and it isn’t much, is it?”

Septimus said it was not, certainly.

“But then, you know,” said Miss Tollicks, “it’s no use to try and make more of things of that sort, is it? No, he didn’t know the street, nor anything more about it, for he bought the lease of the house of someone else.”

As for Matt, he did not speak, but took snuff ferociously, and glared at the paper squares upon the counter.

“But there, do come in,” cried Miss Tollicks; “and, dear me, Mr—Mr—I don’t know your name, but don’t, pray, take snuff like that; you’ll make yourself ill. But there, do come in;” and in spite of refusals Miss Tollicks soon had her visitors seated in her bower, in company with a spirit-bottle and a couple of tumblers and sugar, a tiny kettle upon the fire singing merrily.

“I do suffer so from spasms,” said Miss Tollicks as she placed the suspicious-looking spirit-bottle upon the table; but all these preparations were not made at once, for, from her many pops in and out of the shop, and the rattling of the scales, it was evident that Miss Tollicks had chosen the right business at last, and was prospering famously. The decanter was brought out of a Berlin-wool-worked overgrown dice-box on one side of the fire, the glasses from its ditto on the other, the kettle out of a window-locker, and divers other ways of economising space were shown; while the visitors were informed that so much of the house was let off. “It all helps so,” said Miss Tollicks; “for London rents are enough to kill you; and you doing nothing but feed your landlord.”

Old Matt grunted acquiescence.

“Now one each, please,” said Miss Tollicks, “just to be sociable; and then you can speak up for the quality of my goods. How do you find the snuff, Mr —?”

“Space, ma’am,” said Matt. “Good; very good, ma’am, but not durable.”

“That’s right,” exclaimed Miss Tollicks, as she pressed the two mild Havannas she had brought in upon her visitors. “Don’t mind me, pray—I am trying to get used to smoke as well as snuff.”

Septimus and Matt were both non-smokers, but as they exchanged glances they came to the conclusion that they could extinguish their cigars as soon as they were outside. So Septimus set the example, with a very ludicrous cast of countenance, by placing the little vegetable roll in his mouth, and Miss Tollicks tore off a piece of paper from a square on the counter, doubled, lit, and handed it to the smoker.

Septimus Hardon’s face was a regular study as Matt, grumbling to himself, “Why didn’t she make it snuff?” watched him trying to light his cigar—a new feat to him entirely.

“The other end first, sir,” growled Matt; and in a rather confused way Septimus made the requisite alteration, and then sucked and puffed so vigorously that he extinguished the light, which he re-lit at the fire. But the next moment his face changed from one of comical resignation to a state of intense wonder, as old Matt, under the excuse of helping himself to a light, was turning over some leaves of a heap of waste-paper on a chair by the door.

Suddenly Septimus dashed the lighted paper upon the table, hurriedly extinguishing it with trembling hands, but not without oversetting his glass of spirits-and-water.

“What is the matter? Have you burnt yourself?” cried Miss Tollicks.

“Is it, sir?” cried old Matt, reaching across the table.

But Septimus Hardon did not move for a few seconds, but stood with his hands pressed down over the roughly-folded piece of paper, into which the spirits-and-water was now soaking, as it made a way between his fingers.

“Why didn’t I give you a splint!” exclaimed Miss Tollicks, whose mind was full of goose-grease, starch-powder, and cotton-wool. “Is it very bad?”

But Septimus Hardon did not speak, only slowly and with palsied hands unfolded the soaked paper; but even then he could hardly read it for the mist that swam before his eyes. Old Matt, though, not to be behindhand, pulled out his glasses, and stretched out his hand to reach the paper; but Septimus shrank back, and then read with difficulty, for the ink had begun to look blurred with the wet:

> S. Hardon,
> Medicine and at-dance 2.

And that was all. Septimus turned it over carefully and found a list of names, but no other entry; there was a figure, part of a date evidently, at one edge, but it was charred, and as he touched it and held it towards the window it crumbled away into brown tinder. He read the entry again and again, and then looked at the ashes of the paper to see if anything could be made of them. Then, as if for a forlorn hope, he turned to his hostess, saying in a strange, husky voice:

“The date’s burnt off. Where did you get this?”

“O, what have I done?” exclaimed Miss Tollicks. “What is the matter?”

“Nothing, nothing,” said Septimus, looking in a dreary, bewildered way at Matt. “It’s of no use; it’s my usual ill luck, and it’s of no use to fight against it.”

“I never saw such a thing in my life!” cried Matt, bringing his fist down upon the table so that the glasses jumped again. “Put it in a book, and no one would believe it: and yet there it is. I wouldn’t have believed it myself if I had not seen it with my own eyes.”

“But where is the piece you tore it from?” exclaimed Septimus, trembling still.

“To be sure!” cried Matt exultingly. “But I was right—I did see it, and she bought it, and Ikey brought it here, and it’ll all come right yet.—Where’s the piece you tore it from, ma’am?” and he again greatly endangered Miss Tollicks’ glasses by thumping the table.

Miss Tollicks hastily produced the other half of the square of paper; but on one side the list of names was continued, while upon the other there was the tail of a flourish, the tops of a few letters, and the rest was blank.

“Have you any more of these sheets—these book-leaves?” exclaimed Septimus; when Miss Tollicks hastily took up the little heap on the chair by the door, the same that had excited Matt’s curiosity, and into which he had been quietly peering.

“Those are not the same,” said Septimus despondently; “this is thicker.”

“Yes,” said Miss Tollicks dolefully, as she examined the few remaining squares upon the counter; “these are all different, too, and I don’t know how that scrap came to be left. I used all that thick paper first, because it weighed well, and I used it for screws.”

“But,” stammered Septimus, “it is a part of the very man’s books—the very man who lived here, and about whom we came to ask you.”

“Bless me!” said Miss Tollicks dolefully, “and I’ve been letting it go for weeks past in screws to the Sun, and the Green Dragon, and the Duke.”

“But let’s see if there’s any more,” said Matt. “A leaf would almost do all we want if it has only got the right dates.”

Matt’s advice was taken: screws were examined, turned over, unrolled; the tied-up squares of paper were looked at; Matt went down upon his knees behind the counter and routed about amongst some rubbish; the squares freshly cut up were looked over; and then once more the heap on the chair in the room was scanned, leaf by leaf, but only one more fragment was found, evidently a portion of the same book; but it bore a date four years prior to the marriage of Septimus Hardon’s parents.

“Makes worse of it,” muttered old Matt to himself; “but perhaps he was only a young doctor, and one book lasted him a long time. S’pose we go and have a look round at some of the publics,” he said aloud, “eh, sir?”

Septimus jumped at the suggestion, and together they noted down the names of Miss Tollicks’ principal customers for screws, for she said that she was sure the thick paper had been used entirely for that purpose; but on making inquiry at the different pewter-covered bars, one and all of the stout gentlemen in shirt-sleeves and short white aprons declared that they were sold out, and could have got rid of “twiced as much.”

“I suppose,” said Septimus to one red-faced gentleman, “it would be of no use to ask you who bought the screws?”

The man stood, and softly rubbed with a strange rasping noise his well-shorn range of stubble on chin and cheek; then pulled open the screw-drawer, looked in it, then at the counter, then at Septimus, as if doubtful of his sanity, and said:

“Well, no, sir, I don’t think as it would.”

They returned to the little tobacconist’s shop, Septimus holding tightly to the newly-found scrap of paper. And yet it was useless—waste-paper; no more. There could be no doubt about it’s being the entry made when he saw the light; but now it was found, with his own hand he had destroyed the most precious part, for without date it was of no avail.

Septimus Hardon felt sick at heart when he again sat down in Miss Tollicks’ room, and gazed with woebegone looks in his companion’s face. The prize as it were within his reach; his old troubles swept away; his legitimacy proved—the cup almost at his lips, and then dashed away. It was in vain that Miss Tollicks vented her well-meant platitudes, and shone with hospitable warmth; Septimus Hardon seemed crushed, and Matt had scarcely a word to say.

“Have a little more sugar,” said Miss Tollicks to the man of the bitter cup. “What a tiresome world this is! And only to think of me buying that very paper, and the great dirty ruffian of a man bringing it home, and wanting to buy half-a-pound of tobacco before I began business and had a license; and then asking me if I had any old boots, while he chipped two of the jars shamefully.”

“Only think,” muttered old Matt as they went slowly homewards, “for me to have had that entry under my very nose, and then only turned it up and wouldn’t look at it.”

Volume Three—Chapter Nine.

By Night.

Old Matt Space had a certain amount of pride in his composition, and, like most people, he suffered for it. He would gladly have received assistance of the most trifling nature from Septimus Hardon the day they returned from Finsbury; but his companion seemed so dejected and doleful that he had not the heart to bring forward his own troubles, and so it followed that the same night he was complaining to himself about hard times—those ever-recurring, inhospitable seasons when mental storms beat upon the rocks of a man’s faith, and many a shipwreck follows. Hard times—times that the science, charity, and statistics of our days soften so little. Warm sunshine, genial rain, bright skies, have but little influence, and the times keep hard for some, though others, by means of softening mediums, contrive to remain uninjured.

In his dry way old Matt would sometimes say that if he did not cut up well when he died, he should certainly cut up streaky—like thin bacon; for times so fluctuated with him that before a small layer of fat was well established, the lean would again commence; while, if it is fair so to speak of a man whose life had been one long struggle for bare existence, Matt had been somewhat improvident. What he called runs upon the bank were common events with the old printer—times when there were no deposits made, and trade was slack; it was a pleasant trade, printing, he said—nothing to do to-day, and to-morrow busy, up all night afterwards, and then perhaps another long rest.

Old Matt stood in front of the Royal Exchange that night at eleven o’clock, weak from his long illness, tired and faint too, as he lingered there thinking of how he would like to make an onslaught upon the Bank of England, and fill his pockets, now reduced to the lowest ebb, for he had not sixpence wherewith to pay for a night’s lodging. He had not been to the mansion of Mr Gross to sleep but once since his return from the hospital; for he was largely indebted to that gentleman, and though scarcely anything had been said, Mrs Gross had dropped just a mild hint, what she considered an exceedingly mild hint, to the effect that, when it was convenient, they would be glad to receive one or two instalments on account.

This made Matt more shy, and after a day or two he stopped away altogether, so that when Septimus Hardon sought

at his lodgings, he found him not, and had to inspect the interior of two or three hostelries favoured by the fraternity before he found him out.

“Ah, sir,” said Matt, as he hugged a lamp-post, “the times that I’ve seen them lugging the little chests and barrels in there—heavy so that they could scarcely lift them, and any one of ’em would have set me up for life. Specie, they call it, sir; species as I was always unable to collect much of in my rambles through life; and it wouldn’t take a deal to make me comfortable, anyhow. Precious cold here, sir, for an old man like me, and I don’t know that I’d say no, just now, to one of those little iron bedsteads with its clean sheets in the hospital—leastways, if one could feel sure nobody had just died upon it, for the thought of that gives one a turn like, and seems to fidget. Precious cold, sir! Talk about the internal heat of the earth, I wish there was a little more external. Crust of the earth, sir? Yes, sir, there’s plenty of crust, and precious little crumb. Red-hot fluid state inside, eh? Then I shall move, sir—move. I was a good will to when I was in the hospital; but I think I shall make up my mind soon, for the world ain’t safe—a volcanic, earthquaky place. I shall flit, as they say down north.”

“Cold, cold, cold, sir!” shivered the poor old fellow after a pause, as he looked down the long deserted City streets, that teemed so with busy life in the daytime. “That scamp of a valet never reminded me of my greatcoat—a scoundrel. Thinks a deal more of his own confounded self, sir, than he does of his master. Now look here, sir—There; I know, of course—it’s all right; I’m a-going on, I am. ‘Move on,’ says you; but make the most of it, old chap; for you won’t have me to move on much longer.”

The old man spoke sadly as an approaching policeman cut short his address; but he went on before he could be told, and made his way slowly down into Cannon-street, where he stopped before another post.

“Now look here, sir,” said Matt, as though he had not been interrupted for an instant, “we want an establishment here in town—a club for gentlemen in my position to-night—where we could go and have a basin of hot tea or coffee, or gruel if you like, and a decent, dry, clean, warm bed under shelter, without going to the workhouse. Now, sir, when my ship comes in, I mean to establish just such a place, and make it self-supporting. None of your casual wards in workhouses, but a decent place where honest people can go and do their bit of work over night or in the morning, to earn their bed and board. Let the idle vagabonds and tramps, sir, go to the casual ward; for there’s hundreds of decent people in town every night would be glad to do a bit of work and get their meal and bed. Seems hard, sir,” said Matt pitifully, as the cold night wind swept down the street, and he shivered miserably, “seems hard, sir, that in this great place where the wealth is almost running over the side, things are so, that an old chap like me should stand here to-night, as I’ve stood scores of times before, wanting the work and means for a meal and bed, and not able to get ’em. Now, let’s see, sir; what shall we call my place? Hotel? No, that’s too fine and grand. Home? Well, no; that sounds like humbugging the poor creatures. ‘There’s no place like home!’ I wish I was at home, I do,” shivered the old man. “There, now, there it is again! Another policeman. Public streets, indeed! Ain’t I one of the public, and haven’t I a right to be in them? Strange thing a man can’t address a few words in confidence to a friend without one of these fellows sticking his nose in. There, I’m a-going. I ain’t going to commit a burglary upon the post and walk off with the gas. I wish there wasn’t a policeman on the face of the blessed earth! I’m a-going;” and in obedience to the wag of the constable’s head, the old man walked on towards London-bridge; but before he was halfway there, he made another stoppage beneath a lamp.

“Now, policemen are all very well, sir,” he said, “but they’re too officious. Now, what did that chap do but put a stop to as fine a bit of philanthropy as was ever devised for the benefit of humanity at large? Only think, now, of the crowds of poor folks flocking there of a night! There’s your proper officers to see that there’s neither talking nor noise; there’s your clean kitchen, with its great soup-coppers, and rows upon rows of mugs and basins; there’s your dormitories, with their long ranges of beds, every one separate, clean hay in ticks, and a couple of warm rugs; place heated by hot-water pipes, and all orderly and regular—a place for sleep and rest, and no one allowed to disturb it; baths and washhouses attached, and every chance given for a poor creature to get Rest, Refreshment, and a Rinse—the three graces of everyday life, sir. Open always, sir, until it was fall; while the fact of a good, fair bit of work being done first or after, would keep a good many of the canting casuals away. I mean to say, sir,” said Matt, “that it might be made self-supporting after the first start; and such a place for the male and female poor of London, sir, would be an honour to the people. Now then, once more, sir, what shall we call it? ‘Hotel’ won’t do; ‘home’ won’t do; ‘hospital’ sounds too sickly. Tell you what, sir, we’ll call it ‘Space for All,’ in honour of its projector. Why, confound it, sir, I’d have it got up by a penny subscription, if my ship happened to sink and I couldn’t do it myself. And mind you, sir, I’m not going to have my money fooled away in a grand architectural building, where all the space is taken up by rooms for the officers; I want it all for the poor privates, the soldiers fighting in the war of life. I’m not going to have all my money spent in outside show; I want it for furnishing and the inside—furnishing the inside of the building and the inside of the people. I want something plain and useful, clean and simple, with kind, quiet, firm people to attend, and see that things go right, and guard against imposition. But there, sir, we should be safe to be imposed upon some time or another, more or less; but then look at the good we should do. Ah! you may well twinkle, and laugh, and blink, old fellow, for that would be something like a job done, and one worth talking about.”

Old Matt gave the lamp a parting slap, and shuffled on towards the bridge, where he stopped in one of the recesses, and tried to get himself into a comfortable position.

“Ugh-h-h, how cold these seats are! Rich corporation like the City, too, and not have the decency to put a few cushions for a poor fellow! Just like to put stone seats round the table on Lord Mayor’s Day. Wonder how the aldermen, sheriffs, and common council would like it! Spoil their appetites, I know!”

“There,” said he after a while, as he looked over the parapet, and down at the stone steps leading to the water, “that would be a better place than this, and more quiet and sheltered. There’s t’other steps leading down to Thames-street there; but then there’s sure to be a dozen more, and I ain’t fond of company. But a fellow must sleep somewhere, so where shall it be—steps, ’Delphi arches, or the Park? Park’s too far off, and the ventilation too powerful, seeing as there’s so much water to cool the wind—makes it chilly sometimes. Rather like the Park, though; something respectable about it; genteel neighbours; soldiers on duty; air sweet; water clean. But there’s the rails to get over,

and I ain't up to rails to-night; and, besides, they tear. But there, with this suit, I could stand a tear or two as well as anyone; and I don't s'pose I could tell myself which was the new slit if the spear-head of the rail wasn't in it. Down the steps is all very well; but the company ain't select, and you run the risk of being robbed. So you do down the arches; but then there's something suitable about them—handy to work in the morning. That's the spot for me, so here goes. Pity I came all this way, though, now the penny-boats don't run."

But the weary old man seemed in no hurry to move, for with his chin resting upon his hands, he stopped, gazing down into the hurrying black stream far beneath—black and stealthy as it hurried through the arches, lamps here and there twinkling and showing like blurred stars in the swift waters; and a stealthy, gliding race was that of the river as it bore along its stolen secrets towards the sea—secrets unknown to those who watched from far above; but there were rich spoils and treasures, dropped from the side of lighter and vessel, swept out of sewers; secrets, too, of life and death; and now and then something strange and bloated and sodden was whirled round, to rise to the surface and stare up, as if appealing with its lack-lustre eyes to the star-sprinkled heaven above—gazing fearfully upwards, but swept round again the next moment by the eddy, and forced on by the hurrying stream, dashed against prow, borne under slimy keel, forced savagely, and entangled amongst chains, thrown upon mudbanks, and left by the tide half buried in the black ooze; swept clear again, and borne off up the river, down the river, scraping along bridge-pier or stone wharf, buttress or caisson, ever hideous, bloated, horrible—these of the river secrets glided along.

"Ah!" muttered Matt softly, "who can say that there is poverty here in London, when everywhere the gold is looking out of the great works in which it has been sunk. There are ships, ships, ships, and steamer, lighter, and barge; and how many of 'em loaded with what I should call a large fortune!" And now with a sigh he leaned his forehead upon his hands, and gazed along the river at the dimly-seen wharves and warehouses, with here and there a light flashing from the river. Then he thought of his own weary life, of Septimus Hardon and his sorrows, pondering long upon the ill-success that had attended their efforts, and seeing too plainly how ineffective they had been; and then he sighed again loudly, and started, for a small hand was laid firmly upon his shoulder with a tight clutch, and turning quickly round, there, with the light of the gas shining full upon it, he saw as it were the face of an angel, seen through the thin veil of sin and misery that sullied its beauty—a beauty that still clung to features fair and girlish.

The strange couple gazed earnestly at one another for a few moments, when the girl spoke huskily:

"You weren't thinking of that, were you?"

"Thinking of what, my lass?" said Matt quietly.

"Going over?" said the girl, with almost a sob, and at the same moment catching his wrist and holding it with both hands tightly, as he tried to withdraw it, while her nostrils seemed to distend, and her breath came heavily as she held him firmly, fearing lest her words might prompt him to the desperate leap.

"No, no, my lass, no," said Matt wearily, as he sank in a sitting posture upon the stone seat. "I have thought of such a thing—time back; but not lately. I have thought that it would be putting an end to a weary way when one gets very footsore, and that no one would miss a poor, worn-out fellow like me; but I've thought better of it, and I'll wait till I'm called, my lass. I was only thinking a bit."

"You looked as if you meant to," said the girl, loosing his wrist, and kneeling upon the seat in the very attitude the old man had taken a short time before. "But one can't help thinking of it sometimes, and almost feeling as if the river drew you like. It seems as if you'd go to sleep then, and wake no more. Not much to leave here, is there?" she added slowly.

Old Matt shook his head, and, leaning forward unseen by his companion, he took a firm hold of her dress, for the girl went on dreamily as she looked down on the black water.

"I saw one of our girls once; she went off Waterloo, and they got her out, and she looked so quiet and happy like. But there," she added in a reckless, offhand way, "I sha'n't do it, I haven't the heart. There, you needn't hold me, old man;" and she snatched her dress from his grasp.

A deep, hollow cough checked her for a few minutes; and Matt sat in the cold recess gazing on the slight, graceful form, as the well-dressed girl knelt upon the seat—frail, fair, and apparently not twenty.

"Lend me threepence, old man!" she exclaimed suddenly, as she turned to him.

"What for?" said Matt.

"Glass of brandy," said the girl, holding her hand pressed to her side, and then battling hard once more with her cough.

"I haven't a halfpenny left," said Matt drearily, "or I shouldn't be sitting here, my lass. But you're better without the brandy, and there's no place open now."

"There! I don't want your money, old man," said the girl; "only one gets so used to asking, it comes natural. Are you hard up?"

"Yes," said Matt drearily, "close as I can be."

"Here!" she exclaimed, holding out sixpence. "You may as well have it, as for me to take it back."

The old man stared at his companion for a moment, and then raised his hand to take the money, but he suddenly lowered it again.

“No, my lass, no,” he said; “thank you all the same, but I can do without it.”

The girl’s eyes flashed as she looked angrily at the old man, and then raising her hand, she dashed the money over the parapet, and sank down upon the seat sobbing violently.

“There!” she exclaimed passionately, as Matt spoke soothingly to her; “I know, and I deserve it all. I wish I was dead —I wish I was dead!”

“I didn’t mean to hurt you,” said Matt kindly. “Now go home, my lass, and try and forget it.”

“Home!” said the girl, with a forced mocking laugh. “Yes, when it’s time. Good-night old man. You didn’t meet Marian, did you?”

“Who?” said Matt absently.

“Marian,” said the girl; “I’m looking for her. But you don’t know her; good-night;” and she went lightly off, humming the snatch of a popular air as she went towards the City; while, after waiting until the girlish form had disappeared, old Matt rose himself and began to shuffle back the same way as he had come; looking longingly at a passing hay-cart bound for the market, and thinking of the fragrant stack whence the load had been taken, and how pleasant it would have been to have dragged out a heap to nestle in. For the old man was cold, weary, and ill; and as he slowly shuffled along, many a thought of those who rested upon luxurious couches came to his mind. He crossed the great echoing cathedral yard, and passed slowly from gaslight to gaslight, too weary now to talk. Now and then he would encounter a policeman, who turned to look after the slow, shambling figure. At intervals, a cab would rattle by him, while once, with its hollow, heavy rumble, a fire-engine dashed by, the light flashing back from the shining helmets of the firemen; then there was a short, rushing vision of something red covered with figures, and drawn by two steaming, plunging horses, a faint dying away of the hurrying wheels, and then all still once more, for it was now the most silent hour of the whole twenty-four in great London. Dull and dreary looked the streets, with hardly a wayfarer in sight, and those, perhaps, women who paced wearily along or talked noisily to a companion. But no one heeded Matt as he still shuffled onward, more than once as he passed through Fleet-street gazing up at the gas-lit windows of the newspaper-offices.

Past Lower Series-place, looking in the dark night like the mouth of a sewer, emptying itself by the bridge—Temple Bar; past Essex-street, to stand and gaze down it for a few moments thoughtfully; past the last of the four churches, and the street leading to the “Bridge of Sighs.” Onward still, and then into one of those hilly lanes, up which in busy day came clattering the heavy teams of wagon—horses with their black load—down one of those river lanes along which came sighing the damp-laden winds, whispering of being lost upon the great stream, and of having wandered from the green trees, where in summer the reeds rustled, and the silver water glided past emerald banks—whispering of cooling groves, and the gladdening, sparkling, dancing wavelets, sheltered woody islets, and the sweet, pure country air; but now lost in wintry weather upon the breast of the great river,—lost, after wandering by muddy pile and slimy, horrid, loathsome drain and sullying sewer; lost, as they had swept past wharf, bridge, pier, and barge; they came in despair, weeping tears from their misty burden, sweeping amongst the gloomy houses, and causing a shiver as they passed along.

For a moment some bright recollection of the past seemed to strike the old man, and he paused thoughtfully beneath a gas-lamp; but old Matt’s memories of waving reed and rustling tree were few, and he sighed and passed on, thinking only of his sought-for resting-place. Onward, and down beneath the great black yawning arch, to where he could hear voices, while above the faint damp fever-reek of the place, came the fumes of tobacco-smoke. On still, with hands outstretched to avoid collision with cart or wagon, but more than once he tripped over a shaft, as some stabled horse rattled halter or chain through the ring of its manger, and Matt sighed with envy as he thought of the warm straw.

To a miserable fire at length, with several miserable objects huddled round, and amidst jest, laughter, and foul language, a voice yelled out a verse or two of a current song, a man and woman dancing hard by, their shadows cast, wildly distorted and grotesque, upon the reeking brickwork, where they almost seemed to cling. Then, too, came that peculiar “glug-glug” sound of liquid passing from a bottle, and a voice shouted to the old man:

“Come on, matey; heaps o’ room to-night. Give’s a pipe o’ baccy.”

“All right,” replied Matt, backing into the darkness, and shaking his head, as he shuffled hurriedly along till he reached the Strand once more.

“Can’t stand that now,” muttered Matt; “nerves too weak. No idea there was such a pressure of business in the hotel. Foreign gentleman that, dancing—wonder whether his organ’s down there.”

Heavily, listlessly, and with drooping head, old Matt walked slowly back towards the City, now stopping in a doorway, or resting leaning against a shutter; but soon to shuffle on again, as his heart seemed to whisper, “O, that it were day once more!”

Tramp, tramp through the silent streets of the great wilderness. Thoughtful after a strange, numbed, weary mode, the old man made his way into Thames-street, looking hopelessly about the while for some dry sheltered spot, where, unnoticed by the police, he might coil up as hundreds do nightly in our streets, trying to forget the present as they wait for the coming of the desolate future.

At last, less particular now, he was nearing the dry arch of London-bridge, and thinking of the steps as a place to rest his aching bones, when, from his half-sleepy state he suddenly roused up, for down from a turning in front came a couple of policemen with a stretcher, while, hurried and excited in her manner, her long hair lank and curl-less with the dank night wind, followed the poor girl he had seen upon the bridge, now talking earnestly to one of the

constables.

The new-comers did not notice Matt, and after walking onwards for a short distance, with the old man closely following, they suddenly turned down between two large piles of warehouses, along a narrow passage up which came the odour of the river borne on the moaning wind, where the rugged broken pavement was wet and slimy.

There was no feeling of fatigue and misery now to bear down the old man, as, led by some impulse, he followed the police, his heart beating wildly as he glanced at the stretcher and recalled the hospital. There was something weird and strange-looking in the oil-caped figures as, seen in the misty darkness, they passed along; and the eager voice of the girl sounded hollow and echoing. Down to the river-side, where the muddy water could be heard rushing amidst the floating piers and moored barges, with a hurried whispering secret sound,—here where barge and lighter were moored closely together and steamers were buoyed, waiting for the coming day. High warehouses towered above them, with cranes jutting out, gallows-like, at intervals as if just deprived of some malefactor's body that had swung to the chain, and then dropped in the river to be swept away. Piles were driven thickly here; slimy, mysterious-looking stone steps led down into the water, right down into its secret muddy depths; and an old boat or two floated hard by, secured by small chains, which rattled backwards and forwards over their gunwales as the tide lifted, and bore them to and fro in its ebbing and flowing and eddying currents.

But there was light here, sparsely shed over the scene by a single flickering lamp, whose panes seemed bedewed with tears. The pale blue flame jumped and danced, burning bluely as it was nearly extinct, and then flashed up again with regular throbs, from water collected in the pipe. And now as Matt drew nearer, he saw the light flash from the shiny wet cape of another policeman, standing talking to a couple of nondescript waterside men in Guernsey shirts and heavy mudlark boots, who stood leaning against the mooring-posts and smoking hard; while all three seemed to be keeping vigil over something lying upon the ground covered with an old sack and some matting, upon whose uncouth form the blinking gaslight looked down; now showing its shudder-engendering proportions, now leaving it all but in darkness. But as the light flashed up, there was a tiny trickling stream sluggishly flowing from beneath the sack in a tortuous way to the edge of the landing-place, where it dripped slowly with a little echoing plash into the running waters, which beat against the stones and leaped and rose, and fell with a monotonous lap-lap as if seeking to rise, and drag back the secret taken from their bosom.

It was strange, but far off in the country, in Somesham town, Doctor Hardon clenched his hands and groaned in his sleep, as the perspiration stood in big beads upon his forehead; but though in his dream he saw the stern faces of his brother and nephew, and went through the church-yard-scene once more, it was, perhaps, merely a fit of indignation, or on account of certain speculations which had threatened to prove failures, even though, after his fashion, he had made vows at his conscience-shrine, and promised to seek out his lost child, and to do something for Septimus Hardon should they succeed.

And 'twas strange, too, that Mrs Doctor Hardon should wake up with a wild cry from an oppressing slumber, and then, trembling from a strange sense of dread, cry hysterically, and he for hours thinking of her child. Strange, perhaps; but such things have been.

The policemen stopped, and set down their stretcher, saying something in an undertone to their fellow; the two men smoking left their posts, and, beneath the lamp, the girl leaned against the wall trembling visibly, as again and again she coughed and pressed her hand against her heaving chest.

Old Matt drew nearer and nearer, his claw-like fingers working convulsively, as if to tear off the wet covering before him; his head was craned forward, his dry lips parted, and then he stopped short as one of the men stooped and lifted the sack, so that the light flashed across a pale face "dreadfully staring through muddy impurity," for with a wild, wailing cry, the girl started forward and threw herself on her knees, sobbing bitterly; and the men, hardened though they were to such scenes, fell back a step or two, with some show of respect for the sorrow before them.

The wind moaned and sighed, and mingled with the poor girl's cries; the chains rattled noisily, and the waters seemed to leap and dash angrily at the steps, rising higher and higher minute by minute, fearful of losing their prey; while Matt stole nearer and nearer, trembling in every limb—nearer and nearer still, with his eyes fixed upon that pale, staring face, till a policeman laid a hand upon his breast to stay him from interrupting the mourner's sorrow; but, putting back the hand, Matt pressed on with a chaos of thoughts hurrying through his brain, bright amongst which seemed to shine forth the face of Lucy Grey, as, stooping lower, he now looked down upon this countenance which he had, ere now, seen raised wildly and appealingly to his, when he had gruffly talked of time, and then, shivering as if stricken with some paralysing seizure, he gasped almost to himself—"It's that poor girl!"

Volume Three—Chapter Ten.

By Day.

The public might have been present in force, but they were not; for inquests upon bodies found in Thames' stream are common events, such as find their way into corners of the morning papers in the shape of short paragraphs. And in this instance there was a very seedy-looking staff to represent the Press—namely, a man who winked solemnly at old Matt as he passed him on his way to a side-table beside the jury. The necessary witnesses were there apparently, and the inquest dragged on its slow length as they told all they knew. But Matthew Space must be quoted as an exception; he did not tell all, only that he knew the poor woman by sight, while he rightly said that he was ignorant of her name and home. It would be time, he thought, to tell all when there was no more danger of publicity, and so he allowed himself to be huffed by the coroner for taking up his valuable time.

But now came forward a pale, well-dressed, weeping girl, who stated that her name was Eleanor.

“Eleanor what?” said the coroner, frowning very severely, and oozing all over his very high, bald forehead with the quintessence of morality; for the poor girl shivered before him, and looked appealingly from face to face of the jurymen. “Eleanor what?” said the coroner again, with quite a snap.

“Anderson,” said the girl sobbing; and then for a few minutes she could not proceed to tell her tale; how that for a year past she had always tried to see those girls who were taken out of the river. She hardly knew why, only that she had known some of them, as she knew poor Marian; and there seemed something which drew her towards the river. She met the policemen, and they let her go with them, for she was looking for Marian, and somehow she was not surprised to find her there.

Had known her a long time—years, she thought—and they lodged together. She had often said that she was tired of life, but never talked about her friends, or anything of the past: thought she came from the country. Had not seen her before for days, and had been uneasy, and fancied she had gone over the bridge, as many did—could not tell why, unless because she was tired of her life, and had the feeling of being drawn to do it. Her name was Marian—that was what she was called—but thought it was not her real name; did not know why; but many girls like her gave themselves fresh names. She gave witness a little Bible once, with passages marked in it, but there was no name in it. Never spoke of anyone else, or of herself, but was always very kind, and had nursed witness once through a bad fever, not long back, and never left her night or day, when no one else dared come near; and now she was gone.

There was a pause here longer than those made while the coroner had taken down the depositions, during which he had frowned very severely; and now appeared greatly annoyed at the unbusiness-like sobbing of the poor girl, who sat down again upon a form behind old Matt, who tried to whisper a few words of comfort, as the jurymen mostly seemed very intent upon the paper before them.

Then followed the doctor to tell of his horrible task, and express his opinion respecting the marks of blows upon the face of deceased, such, though, as might have been caused by striking against some part of the bridge in falling; he was of opinion that she must have struck twice, as there was a fracture upon the back of the skull; and she had evidently been dead some days.

“Found dead.”

And then there was a little quiet bustle, and scraping of chairs upon the oilcloth, for the inquest was over; and old Matt and the weeping girl were standing outside by some railings.

“Strange as we should meet again after talking as we did.”

“Yes, yes,” said the girl sadly; “but why didn’t you say you knew her when I spoke to you?”

“Didn’t know her by that name,” said Matt; “and I had only seen her a few times, hardly to speak to. But about that Bible?”

“Well!” said the girl sadly.

“Have you got it now?”

“Yes,” she said; and then she turned, for a hand was laid upon her arm, and one of the jurymen led her on a few steps talking long and earnestly, till after repeating something aloud two or three times he walked away; and Matt and the girl, two of the waifs of London streets, went slowly on, not noticing that they were watched.

“Poor, poor Marian!” sobbed the girl, stopping by a doorway. “Told me to read the words she had marked in the Bible, and then to go and do that!”

“Well, well, well,” said the old man, “let’s hope she has gone to a better world; and now, my lass, where are you going?”

“Back to my lodging,” said the girl wearily.

“That gentleman told you to call somewhere, didn’t he?” said Matt.

“Ah, yes,” said the girl abstractedly, “I think so.”

“Now I don’t believe you remember it,” said Matt; “but I happened to hear it, and I’ll write it down. Now, look here;” and he brought out his old, ragged memorandum-book and the lead-pencil stump; and then, using the crown of his hat for a desk, he wrote down the address carefully, tore out half a leaf, and gave it to the girl.

“There, my lass,” he said, “take my advice, and go there; and now I want you to let me have that Bible.”

“What for?” and the girl looked wonderingly at him.

“It’s a whim of mine, that’s all,” said Matt. “But you’ll—”

He paused, for a hand was laid upon his shoulder, and turning round he stood face to face with the juryman who had spoken to the girl.

“What paper was that you gave to the girl?” he said roughly.

“The one you ought to have given,” said Matt, resenting the question, and the tone of voice in which it was asked.

“What do you mean?” said the stranger.

Old Matt was weak and ill, or he would have retorted angrily; but he only said, “An address.”

“What address?” said the juryman dubiously.

“Well, then, yours, if you must know,” said Matt.

The juryman looked keenly at the old printer, who met his gaze without flinching. “It was easy to remember,” said the former.

“I know that,” said Matt, “but I thought she’d forget; and you seemed to mean well by the poor lass. I watched you, sir, at the inquest.”

“God knows I do, my man,” said the juryman softly; “and I ask your pardon for playing the spy; for I must confess to having had my doubts of you.”

“It’s all right, sir; and we can cry quits,” said Matt. “I had my doubts, too; and was in two minds about writing down the address; but if you can do anything towards saving the country the cost of another inquest, for God’s sake do. No, thank you, sir; I don’t want your money. I don’t like taking it where I haven’t earned it. It’s a weak point of mine, and has stood in the way of my comfort more than once: and I’m old now, sir, and can’t break myself of bad habits. Good-day, sir.”

The juryman smiled as they parted, and old Matt hurried off talking to himself; for the girl had disappeared while he had been detained.

“I want to see that Bible,” he muttered, “and he’s hindered me dreadfully. But, yes; no; yes; that’s her; there she is,” and he shuffled on after a slight figure he saw crossing the road, some distance down the street. “Hang the folks, how they do get in your way when you’re in a hurry,” he growled. “Now, stoopid, which way is it to be?” And then he hurried and panted along to overtake the retreating figure, which had again disappeared. Dodging amongst the vehicles he encountered, he crossed the road, pressing on, with everyone he met apparently resenting his hurry, till passing a turning, he looked down, to see the figure he had followed nearly at the bottom.

“Gets over the ground well,” muttered the old man, wiping his forehead; “but I’m safe of her now. Must have that Bible; there may be some clue there, and I want to have this matter cleared up; but how can I tell Miss Lucy?”

The old man reached the bottom of the street, and stood within twenty yards of the figure he sought to overtake, when hurrying on he caught up to her, saying—

“My lass, you’ll let me have that book, won’t you?”

The figure turned sharply round, as Matt touched her shoulder lightly; but the face was strange, and, taken aback and confounded, the old man made a rough apology, and stood panting as he clung to the railings of a house hard by.

Volume Three—Chapter Eleven.

Mr Jarker is Wanted.

Mr William Jarker had had a long holiday from the public school where her Majesty’s officers try to instil lessons of good, while their refractory pupils resent them to the best of their ability. So long had been Mr Jarker’s holiday, that the police had grown uncomfortable at their inability to bring something home to him, but he was wanted, at last, on account of a collection of plate and valuables that had suddenly disappeared after a few linnets and finches had been netted some thirty miles down in Hertfordshire, though even here the burglary would not have drawn Mr Jarker into trouble had it not been for a confederate who had “peached” in consequence of what he called an unfair division of the spoil.

So Mr Jarker was wanted just at a time when he felt very comfortable and secure. He had certainly felt rather uneasy for a few days past, and read, or rather stumbled through, the various newspapers, taking particular interest in passages relating to discoveries of bodies, and inquests, but now this uneasiness had worn off, and no further notice having been taken of his behaviour by the Hardon family, he felt in very good spirits; though for all that, he had kept away from Bennett’s-rents, so that he might not encounter the Reverend Arthur Sterne, who had been assaulted, he heard; and on the principle of giving a dog a bad name and then hanging him, Bill thought he might be accused of the assault. As to the child, he learned that the curate had taken it to his own home.

Mr Jarker’s notice was drawn to the fact of his being wanted, one day when making his way from the Dials into Holborn. Naturally given to casting his eyes about him, he became aware of a quiet-looking man following him at a distance; and no sooner did Mr Jarker catch sight of that face, than horrors of the past untold danced before his eyes for an instant; but the next moment he thrust his hands into his pockets, drew a long breath, and began to whistle, all the while looking out ahead for what he next expected to see—a policeman in uniform.

It might be supposed that the whistler intended to give the person who followed him so closely into custody, but this was not the case, for Mr Jarker imagined that no sooner was there a policeman in sight, than the quiet-looking man would begin to close up.

But it might be somebody else who was wanted, so Mr Jarker crossed the road—so did the quiet man; Bill crossed again—so did the quiet man; and, though the weather was cold, the bird-catcher perspired, as he muttered—

“I wonder what it’s for?”

However, he appeared to take matters very coolly, and peeped here and there into the bird-fanciers’ shops, and so made his way into Holborn, now and then directing a peep at his quiet friend, who was apparently not taking the slightest heed of his proceedings, but all the same thoroughly realising the difficulty of finding one of his brotherhood when wanted.

Passengers were plentiful here, and the crowd thickened as Jarker went on, till a good opportunity seemed to present itself.

“Now for it!” thought Bill, and after a glance over his shoulder, he dodged in and out and about for five minutes, making more than one feint of having turned out of the main street; then, being apparently very much taken with the contents of a draper’s window, he stopped short, and glanced to the right to find the quiet-looking man in precisely the same place, and worse still, probably in obedience to a sign from the said quiet man, to the left there was a policeman closing up quickly.

“Meant for me!” muttered Bill; and again, as he turned hotter, “I wonder what it’s for?” while once more glancing to the right, there was the quiet man also closing in quickly.

But not so quickly as Jarker made a leap backwards into the road, dodged right under a horse’s legs, round an omnibus, past cabs, carts, and wagons, and in and out and about like an eel, invulnerable to the tread of horses’ feet or the passage of wheels. Ordinary people would have been run over half-a-dozen times, but Bill Jarker was not, and on he tore, with the two constables in full chase.

Jarker had not much start, but he made the most of it, with the full determination of making his escape if possible; perhaps even for a small robbery he might have run hard, and fought hard, to avoid capture; but at the present time there was a look of desperation in his face that prevented more than one willing hand from attempting his seizure; and away he sped, in and out of the vehicles coming and going upon the slippery road. All at once he caught sight of a new peril; right in front there was another policeman, and if, to avoid him, he took to the pavement, so great was the crowd of passengers, that he must have been hemmed-in and captured directly. So on dashed Jarker, right at the constable in front, coming down upon him with the impetus of a battering-ram. Over he went, and on dashed Bill with the other constables in close pursuit, and shouts and cries rising on all sides. “Stop thief! stop thief!” with the tail of followers increasing each moment.

Jarker’s breath came hot and thick, and he felt that a few more minutes past, and he would be marching through the street handcuffed and with his liberty stopped; he thought no more of that, but shuddered, while, at the same moment, hope animated his breast, for he could see, far in front, a haven of safety: right before him the street was up, and the boards and bricks told of repairs to the sewers, while the large heap of earth pointed out the depth down at which they lay.

On tore Jarker, racing over the ground with a long, loping run, and on came the police, with the tag of idlers; but the goal was reached. With one bound Jarker cleared the barrier, ran and stumbled over the loose earth for some distance, and then dropped to the first platform, slid down ladder after ladder, passed man after man, too astonished and startled to attempt to seize him, sometimes falling, sometimes climbing, with the deal planks springing, and brickbats and clods of earth falling after him. One man made a blow at him with his spade, but it came too late, for Jarker reached the bottom, leaped into the black stream, here but little over his knees, went splashing away under the echoing dark arch of the sewer, into the dense black passages that run for so many miles under London, and was out of sight long before the first policeman was half-way down the great opening.

The main sewers were not made in those days, and the quiet man stopped for an instant to give some instructions to one of his constables, the result being that he leaped into a hansom cab, and very soon after, as the tide was up, a Thames-police row-galley was being pulled slowly backwards and forwards in front of the mouths of two large openings which lent their black, affluent streams to the great river.

On through the darkness went Jarker, always with the stream, his hands outstretched in front, and his head turned from time to time to catch a glimpse of the flash of some bull’s-eye lantern. On he pressed, but not unpursued; since for some distance a couple of policemen, the one in plain clothes and he who had been knocked down and made vicious by the blow, came plashing along.

Once the ruffian stopped, drew out a heavy life-preserver, and with an oath turned back, but directly after he was pressing on again, carefully feeling his way by the slimy wall, for the water grew deeper and deeper, and more than once his quick ear detected the light scuffling noise as of some little animal running, and a plash as of something leaping into the murky stream.

At last Jarker stopped, for the long-continued silence and the thick darkness taught him that he was unpursued; but he knew well enough that though the pursuit had perhaps ceased, the entrances to the sewers would be carefully watched; and he felt too now that there would be no home for him again in Bennett’s-rents.

“They’re gallus clever!” growled the ruffian when, after pressing on a little further, he once more stopped short —“they’re gallus clever, them p’lice, but they don’t know everythink.”

And now, after listening long and carefully, he turned off short round to the right, and waded onward for a few minutes, when he stopped again to draw forth a box and light a match; but he found that they were wetted, and nothing followed but faint streaks of phosphorescent light; when with a curse he threw the useless splints away and pressed on.

Dark, plashing, echoing paths, with noisome mephitic smells and the sound of hurrying waters—paths that might in

ignorance be traversed for days and days, until the weary wanderer sank down for the black stream to bear him out to the great river. Here there would be a smaller sewer off to the right, here one to the left; while drain-pipe and culvert emptied their filthy streams, augmenting always the larger sewer where the ruffian waded; as the current swelled and rose and rolled swiftly on, at times with almost sufficient force to render his footing insecure.

At one time the water was up to his breast, but it soon shallowed when he entered a branch and faced the stream, guiding himself ever with his hand upon the slimy wall, as if thoroughly acquainted with his road, and proceeding the while at no mean rate along the gloomy way; for Jarker had been here before, and he pressed on fearless of darkness or rats, thinking that the only danger that could assail him would be a rush of water after a heavy rain. At times, though, he stopped splashing and beating the stream, and imitating the snapping, snarling bark of a dog, for something would run scratching over him—then another, and another—keen, hunger-bitten little animals; then there followed splash after splash, as they leaped into the water. Now he was clear of them again, and stopped puzzled, feeling along the wall on both sides for something he could not find—some guide-mark or open sewer-mouth; but now again came the little eager animals, hunger-driven and fierce, crowding and swimming round him, swarming up his back and breast, and biting sharply with their little keen teeth as the wretch leaped and bounded about, tearing half-a-dozen off to make room for a score.

“If I only had one of their gallus lights!” shrieked the ruffian, forgetful of the risk of being heard, and of the *ruse* he had before successfully practised, and in the horror of his position ready even to have given himself up as he cursed and yelled in a frightful manner—the hideous noises echoing along the vaulted sewer, and sounding doubly frightful.

“Curse ’em! I shall be gnawed to death!” shrieked Jarker, as he could not help recalling the times when he had gloated with delight over the performances of some steel-teethed terrier in a pit amidst a dozen rats; and now, as he fought there, splashing about in the water, and tearing off rat after rat to crush them in his powerful hands, he could not but feel how the tables were turned, and groaned piteously as a great dread came upon him—a horror blacker than the black darkness around. But Jarker fought on savagely for his life, while the diminutive size of his adversaries formed their protection again and again. He had his life-preserver out now, and struck with it at random, fierce and heavy blows, each of which would have beaten the life out of a dozen rats, but only once or twice had they any effect, and then he struck the brick side of the sewer, when the lead knob was loosened and fell from the whalebone handle into the rushing water, and with a curse Jarker dashed the useless fragment away.

Faint and harassed, his great brute strength of no avail, his hands and face streaming with blood, Jarker now made a fierce rush up stream; but his progress was slow with the water so deep; when, as if fearing to lose their prey, the rats redoubled their efforts and leaped upon him furiously, till, half-mad with the horror of their fearful assault, one he had never known before in his many sewer wanderings through having been provided with a light, Jarker drew in a long breath, exhaled it again, thoroughly inflated his lungs as he beat off his assailants, and then plunged beneath the water, groping his way slowly up stream, and keeping under the foul water for nearly a minute, when he raised his head for breath, and plunged under again and again.

His plan succeeded; for, evidently at a loss, the tribe of rats had gone down with the stream; and then he was alone and afraid to stir, lest he should bring them back, as he stood panting and dripping with the noisome water, and leaned against the slippery wall.

“I did say as I’d keep a dawg,” growled Jarker at last; “and if I’d ha’ had one—” And then he burst out into a hideous string of oaths and curses at what he called his ill luck, as, after listening for some time, he resumed his way in the echoing subterranean labyrinth, trembling lest the rats should have heard his voice.

But he did not go far before he stopped as if puzzled, and stood thinking, and listening to the rush of the stream and the trickling of drain after drain as it emptied itself into the main current, itself but a tributary of a greater. He dared not retrace his steps on account of the rats, but went slowly on; stopped, went on again; stopped once more to scratch his dripping head; and then he gave a leap and a cry of terror as he felt an enemy swim up once more and try to effect a lodgment. Then he hurried forward through the dense black darkness, then back a little way in a strange, excited way, tearing and splashing about furiously as a new horror assailed him; and at last muttering low blasphemies, muttering them in a low whisper lest they should be heard by the rats, he made another push on for many yards, cursing the police, the rats, and his ill luck. Once he stumbled and fell with a heavy splash, to be swept along over and over by the stream before he recovered his footing to stand half-drowned and clinging to the bricks, giving vent now to a whimpering, sobbing howl, that seemed as if it had come from a dog; for, with his courage gone and his head in a whirl, he stood now in the intense darkness afraid to move, as his imagination peopled the sewers around him with horrors at the very thought of which he shuddered; for in spite of scores of rambles in these subterranean channels, with whose many turns he had considered himself perfectly familiar, Bill Jarker had lost his way.

The police turned back after pursuing Jarker for a short distance along the sewer; but though not disposed to follow him along the dark subway, they had not given him up, for the outlets were carefully watched both by the places where repairs were going on and also at the mouths in the Thames’ bank; while, after proper arrangements had been made, the sewers were searched that night with lanterns; the principal man engaged more than once announcing in a very loud voice, which went echoing along the arched ways, that he (Jarker) might just as well give up as be starved out; but for all that, Mr Jarker was not found.

“Not much use hunting along here,” muttered one man to another; “here’s a hundred places where he could hide till we got by.”

“Remember that poor chap we found just here, Joe?” said one man, evidently quite at home in the place—a rough fellow in a Guernsey shirt and high boots, and wearing a hair-mask.

“Ah,” said another, “well.”

“What was that?” said the quiet man, who was also here.

“Chap we found all along here,” said the other, “and brought him out in a basket.”

“Basket?” said the quiet man.

“Ah!” said the other; “bones lying all along here; trod on ’em as you went—picked clean.”

“Pooh, nonsense!” said the quiet man, who had not shuddered before for at least ten years.

“Right enough,” said the other sulkily; “rats!”

“Here, let’s get out,” said the quiet man, “we are doing no good;” and he made the light of his bull’s-eye lantern play along the surface of the water to where he could just see a little head above the stream as its owner swam rapidly away, leaving an ever-widening track behind. “Let’s get out; it’s no use to go splashing along here; if he isn’t drowned, all we can do is to wait for him.”

“He ain’t drowned,” said a policeman, thrusting his lantern up a drain and peering in; “he’s too much of a rat hisself, and I wouldn’t mind laying that he’s worked his way up to light before now.” And the man stopped, gazing up the black noisome channel before him as if it possessed some attraction.

“Gone up there, safe,” said the quiet man, laughing. “Go up, Tom, and see; I’ll wait for you.”

“Officers allus goes fust to lead the way, and privates follers,” said the policeman. “Nice place, though, ain’t it?”

“Whereabouts are we now?” said the quiet man.

“Don’t zackly know,” said the man in the hair-mask. “Not far from Holborn, I should say.”

“Going up there, Tom?” said the quiet man, unscrewing the top of a small dram-flask.

“Arter you, sir,” said the policeman.

The quiet man took the “arter you” to apply to the dram-flask, which he passed to his follower; and as no one seemed disposed to crawl on hands and knees along the narrow place, the party slowly retraced their steps to where they had descended, and it was with a feeling of relief that they found themselves once more in the clear night air.

Volume Three—Chapter Twelve.

What Ma Mère Knew.

“You mad fool, Jean! you shall listen, and you shall hear all,” cried *ma mère* furiously; “and I will torment you till you see that you are *bête*. The little worker—the pink doll—is not for you; and you shall not have her. But it was good sport, Jean—rare sport, Jean. That sniff woman, poor fool! told me. He carried her down the stairs—carried her down in his arms, of course, for he loves her; and let him marry her if he will; who cares? for she is not for you. Do you hear, *bête*? he carried her lovingly down in his arms.”

Jean winced as he sat in his old place at the window, but pretended not to hear, though from the working of his nostrils it was plain how eagerly he drank in every word.

“No, Jean, she is not for you,” cried the old woman. “I hate her, and you shall not love her, but someone else; for she has always set you against me. I know—I know all—all—all!” she exclaimed, muttering and nodding her head; “he struck down the Jarker—big wretch; and then the Jarker waited hour after hour, hour after hour, into the dark night, and watched for him till he was talking to the painted woman, and struck him down too; and then I saw more too, and I was not going to tell—O no—though I think he killed her. But no, no, Jean, I would not tell, for I have my plans; and pah! there are plenty more painted women. But no, no, Jean, you shall not have the pink doll. You must love me, Jean, till I tell you to marry.”

The young man writhed in his chair, but he spoke no word; while his mother knitted furiously, clicking her needles and smiling maliciously as she watched him sideways.

“No, no, Jean, you shall not have the pink doll; and you cannot see her now—they are gone.”

“But she will come,” cried Jean angrily, with something of his mother’s spirit bursting forth.

“No, no!” half-shrieked his mother; “she shall not—I will not have her. But no, she will not come, you *bête*, for the preacher is ill with the Jarker’s blow, and she nurses him and smoothes his pillow. Fool!” she cried in a sharp, cracked voice, “I will torment you to death if you tear not the hateful little thing from your foolish heart. You shall only love me till I tell you. But now listen: it is dark now, and I have my plans. The Jarker is away, and the police hunt him. Now listen, fool, while I tell you. They may take him, but I hope not yet; for you shall be rich, Jean—you shall have money and all that the great people have, and plenty of fine dolls shall be proud to have you, Jean; for I am proud of you; and what was she? Bah! nothing. I know the Jarker’s secret—I know it two years; but he does not think it, for I have been still and waited two years, Jean—more. He suspect me once, but he dare not touch me, and I have given him no chance since. And should I tell till it was time? No, no!”

Ma mère leaned over towards her son, and casting down her knitting in her eagerness, one of the dogs ran to pick it up, but she struck the poor thing angrily with Jean's crutch, and it ran yelping back to its corner. And now she whispered long and eagerly in the young man's ear, till his cheek flushed and eyes sparkled, for he was coupling all he heard with the name of Lucy Grey.

"Gold and silver—much silver and rich things, Jean," hissed *ma mère*.

"But have you seen them?" cried Jean eagerly.

"Bah! no; but what then? Why was he out night after night? To catch birds? Bah! no, but to pluck birds of their fine feathers, gay feathers, rich feathers, and he has a store, I know it."

"But he may come back," said Jean huskily.

"Do I not say the police hunt him? They have been here to seek him," hissed his mother; "and when I have taken his honey I will show his empty nest, and they will send him to the galleys. Yes, yes. But come, fool. There," she said, kissing him, "thy *mère* loves thee, Jean. No, no, lean on me; you must leave the crutch, it is noisy. No, no, he dare not come back here to be taken."

Ma mère placed a piece of candle in her pocket, along with a box of matches. She then led Jean to a chair by the door, left him seated, and went softly back to the window, which she opened, and then gazed down into the court and anxiously at the windows where there were lights. Then once more closing the window, she returned to her son, opened the door, and listened. But there were voices on the stairs, so thrusting Jean back, she leaned over the balusters to try and hear who waited below, but without avail, so she returned to the room.

"But we will be rich, Jean—rich," she whispered, "and there shall be no more of this pinching for bread. You shall not have poor workers but ladies glad to see you smile, *mon fils*" and the old woman cast her lean arms round the cripple's neck, kissing him fondly, though he remained thoughtful and impassive, apparently listening to the impatient movements of some sleepless bird.

"But listen, Jean—it was very horrible; but I saw all, and I shall tell some day when it is time. I saw the Jarker strike the preacher down, for I had been watching too. I came back late, and saw the Jarker and hid myself; because he is a savage, and I would not meet him by night never since I knew his secret; but when I was hid, and he had struck down the preacher, I saw him run this way to cross the road, but the painted woman dash at him and hold him, fighting fiercely with him, till I would have helped her—but I was old and weak, Jean. Then he struck her down, Jean—such a coward, cruel blow—but she clung to his legs, and he kicked her, so that I hear his boot upon her poor head, and I felt sick, Jean, but I dare not speak; and as he came closer I shrunk in the doorway and watched, for he ran into the court; but the painted woman was up, and ran again, and caught hold of him, and held on, and I could hear her say just inside the court there, 'Give me my child, give me my child!' and he struck her down again. But once more she held to his legs gasping, and saying, 'My child, give me my child!' and in her fierce, angry way she seemed to crawl and wind up him like a serpent, while—ah, Jean, I am old and coward, and I shivered and trembled to see it all. There was no noise, only the fierce whisper, 'Give me my child!' and the struggling, and I saw him strike at her again and again in the face, while she held her poor head down in his breast that he should not hit her; till at last they fell, and I heard her poor head strike the stones, and I sink down on the passage-floor, Jean, for I could not bear it, and I don't know how long for, but when I look out again there was nothing in the court—nothing but the miserable light—and I dare not go out and see, Jean, for I was frightened. I think perhaps he killed her, poor painted woman, and I am sorry, for she loved her child as I love you, Jean, and would die for you; but stop, and then the police shall know, and they will take him—but not yet. Poor painted woman! I have not seen her since, and the preacher has her child. And it is not ungrateful like you, Jean. Ah! do I not cry long hours for you, and you do not mind, for you think always of the doll, and I hate her. She coaxed you from me with her soft white skin and her cat's ways. She is deceitful, and tries to make the preacher marry her; but he shall not yet, for I will tell him something that shall frighten him. But there, bah! let him marry her, and take, too, her old imbecile of a father and the weak, crying mother—let him marry them all. But you—you shall be rich, Jean, and keep no more birds. You shall have doctors, and get rid of your crutch, and people will be proud to know you."

But Jean spoke not; only sat listening to his mother's words as he built up some bright future and thought of Lucy Grey.

At last *ma mère* rose again from the seat she had taken, and went to the head of the staircase; but still there were voices to be heard, and this time, without coming back, she sat down with her pinched cheek leaning against the balusters, where she remained patiently listening for quite an hour, when she softly rose and whispered to Jean as she supported him; and then slowly and painfully the strange couple made their way down to the passage, where, after waiting for a few minutes, they crossed the empty court and stood in the dark entry of the opposite house.

Late as it was—nearly twelve—the door stood open; but even if the old woman's catlike step and the slow painful shuffle of her son had been heard, they would have excited no attention, as stealthily she helped Jean along, until they stood at the head of the cellar-steps.

"Ah!" hissed *ma mère* as she kicked against something soft, "but it is that Bijou who has followed us.—Back, then!" she hissed, striking at the dumb brute, whose soft patter was now heard along the dark passage as the animal scuffled away. "Now, mind," whispered *ma mère* as they descended slowly, while once Jean slipped and nearly dragged the old woman headlong to the bottom; but he saved himself by grasping the rough railing, and after recovering his panting breath another trial was made, and they stood at the bottom, when, feeling her way along, *ma mère* led him till, still in the dark, they stood in the front cellar, where the water dripped hollowly into the tub. But the woman well knew her way; and, with one arm round her son, she helped him along to the arch, warned him of the step down, and so drew him into the back-cellar and along to the end, where she left him leaning against one of the

bins while she stole softly back to the cellar-steps to listen for awhile before returning to strike a match and light her piece of candle, which she screened by holding it far into the bin.

“No, Jean,” she muttered, “he dare not come back, for there is a police always on the watch for him, though I have not told. But, hush! don’t speak,” she whispered, as a heavy step was heard to pass along the court; and all the while the light shone strangely upon her sharp withered features and the sallow face and wild eyes of Jean. “Hold this now,” she said softly, and once more she went nimbly back to the cellar-door to listen, when, closing it gently, she hurried to the side of her trembling son. “You fool!” she muttered sneeringly, “you shake, and there is nothing to fear. Now hold the candle low, and shade it with your coat;” and then, going down upon hands and knees, she crawled into the bin before her—one that was deep and narrow; and, panting and sighing with the exertion, she scraped away a little of the blackened sawdust, and thrust her hands beneath what appeared to be the brick end of the bin, lifted it a little and then thrust sideways, when the whole back slowly slid along, disclosing an opening which the whitewashed stone had before covered.

A little more hard thrusting and Jean could see that there was apparently room to pass into what appeared to be another cellar, while a cold, damp, foul-smelling vapour rushed through, and nearly extinguished the candle.

“Come, quick, Jean,” panted *ma mère*, making her way through the opening, when Jean crawled into the bin and handed her the guttering candle before following her through the hole, against which he kneeled hesitating; but directly after he crept through and stood beside his mother in a little cellar surrounded by bins similar to those in the one they had left; then, having stuck the candle amongst the loose damp sawdust, *ma mère* drew the stone flag back into its place, for it ran in a rough brick groove at the bottom, while at the top it was kept from falling by a large iron bar roughly laid in a couple of staples.

“Now look, now look,” hissed *ma mère*, taking the candle in her hands and peering about; “wine, old wine in bottles, put here and forgotten; and what is this?—my faith, it is a melting-pot;” and she paused curiously by a large black-lead crucible, fitted upon a rough brick furnace, whose chimney was a piece of iron piping, carried up apparently into one of the house flues. By its side in an old box was a quantity of charcoal; and in another several pounds of saltpetre, evidently used to augment the fierceness of the fire, while by the side lay a pair of bellows—instruments which had before now caused angry words to issue from Mr Jarker’s lips. “Now look, Jean; but what ails you, fool? Look at the boxes; there, that is where the rich things are;” and her lean fingers clutched and clawed and opened and shut as she held a hand out towards a rough chest.

Jean was gazing with astonished eyes around him at the gloomy place; at the bins half full of empty bottles; at a couple of boxes that lay in one; but, as his mother spoke, he was leaning towards one corner of the cellar where there seemed to be an opening, which was lightly covered with an old box-lid.

“What is that?” he whispered.

“What? fool!” exclaimed *ma mère*, going to the lid and lifting it; when the foul wind rushed up, and once more nearly extinguished her candle. “Pah!” she ejaculated; “a way down into the drains, and O, my faith, Jean, but it is the rat’s hole; but,” she chuckled, “he dare not come, the ferrets and dogs are after him, and he will soon feel their teeth. So, my faith! he had two holes.”

As she spoke she hastily closed the place once more, listening the while to a musical trickling noise which came whispering up; but, led by some strange impulse, Jean went down upon his knees by the hole, and lifted the lid again, peering down into the black darkness, and listening to the hollow echoing noise, while from apparently a distance came a rushing sound as of a stream through a large sewer, and the young man shuddered as he listened to its strange wild cadence.

“Come here, fool!” hissed *ma mère*; “come, hold the candle;” and broken glass crackled beneath her feet as she crossed the cellar towards a box in one of the bins. “Come, Jean, here are the treasures, boy; but O, look here! It is what I thought: here is the painted woman’s veil;” and she picked up a small net fall, that had evidently from its torn appearance been snatched hastily from a bonnet. “He must have dragged her down here, Jean; and then—there is that hole!”

Mother and son stayed gazing at one another with dilated eyes and parted lips, till, dropping the lid, Jean crawled shuddering away, as an echoing sound came up caused by the falling cover. Mother and son seemed fascinated for a few moments, as they pictured in their own minds the scene that might have taken place in the damp cavernous place where they stood; and then, forgetful of her main object, *ma mère* crept closer to her son.

“But it is very horrible!” she murmured; and as she spoke she wiped her forehead with the scrap of lace in her hand, but only to throw it down with a shudder the next moment.

“Do you think he killed her, then?” whispered Jean in a harsh dry voice.

“Hush! don’t speak, don’t talk of it,” hissed the old woman, who seemed quite unnerved, and trembled violently.

“But where do the drains go to?” whispered Jean.

“Into the big river,” said *ma mère*; “but come quick, there are the boxes, Jean, and let us get away from here. I hardly breathe. But O, my faith, look there!”

Jean Marais gave a cry of horror as he clutched his mother’s gown; and then they remained silent for a few moments.

The candle had burned out!

Volume Three—Chapter Thirteen.

Peace.

What were the thoughts of Aunt Fanny as she ushered in Lucy Grey, the bearer of her answer to a note she had received? Strange thoughts, no doubt—thoughts of the time when her own hands were like her cheeks, plump and soft, and dimpled; but she said no word, only kissed the visitor tenderly, held her in her arms a minute to gaze in the blushing face, and then with a sigh, half of pleasure, half sorrowful, she led the way to the door and opened it for the humbly-dressed girl—nay, not humbly dressed, for Heaven had clothed her with a beauty that in a higher sphere would have been called peerless. Aunt Fanny then closed the door, and went back to the sitting-room to smoothe the stiff plaits of her poplin and black apron, and shed a few tears.

Aunt Fanny stood by the window gazing into vacancy, but her look could not penetrate to where Lucy was kneeling, like some fair penitent, beside the easy-chair where Arthur Sterne sat propped up by pillows. There was a desire to flee again when once she was there, but Lucy's hands were prisoned, and even for a time the eyes were downcast; but then those words, powerful in their eloquence—words which made the young girl's heart beat quickly—had their effect, and soon the flushed face was raised, and in the long unflinching gaze that met his own, there was all that doubting man could desire.

Ah, Arthur Sterne, you may have mumbled so that poor Aunt Fanny had to move her seat in church, but there was something now in the true eloquence of your words that must have thrilled the heart of the fair girl by your side; for the tears of happiness fell fast as her face was buried in your breast.

Explanations? Yes, all he could wish for; and how could he blame the loving tender heart, which saw not as the world saw, but was ready to stretch forth her hand to help the lost soul struggling in the slough of sin? How could he blame as he listened to the story of Agnes Hardon's sorrow, and how she had made herself known, begging again and again so earnestly, as she asked Lucy's protection for her child, that Septimus or Mrs Hardon might never be told of their intimacy, lest they should be of the world worldly, and cast the wretched woman from this last hold upon something pure?

Explanations! ay, many; and could he have done so he would have knelt to Lucy, as, weeping, she whispered to him of her wounded heart, and of how gladly she would have told him all, but that she feared his condemnation and contempt.

But there, love-scenes should be matters of the strictest privacy; and if Arthur Sterne gazed long and lovingly in the pure candid face before him with a look of fond protection which saw nothing then in humbleness or poverty, and Lucy Grey returned that look with one from her tear-wet eyes, that saw in his face everything that was great, noble, and to be desired by the tender, untouched heart of woman—if these two joined their lips in one long kiss of love, why it seems to be only natural, and what might be expected under the circumstances.

"And poor Agnes?" whispered Lucy from where she nestled.

"Have you not seen her since?" said the curate.

And then followed much long happy planning for the future, in which Agnes Hardon and her little golden-haired child had their share, and Somesham was more than once mentioned in connection with reconciliations.

Time will fly at such times, and after Arthur Sterne had told of his arrangements that he had already made for the child, and once more related his interview with Agnes, smiling at the pain of Lucy as he lightly touched upon his mishap, one that he gloried in as he felt the maiden's soft cheek laid to his throbbing heart—after all this, and much more that both had forgotten as soon as spoken, the curate discovered that the interview had lasted more than two hours, though much of that time had been spent in a silence that neither felt disposed to break—a silence quite in unison with the doctor's orders, since he had left instructions that for some days yet the patient was to be kept perfectly undisturbed.

But there is an end to all things, and Arthur Sterne did not look much the worse for his visitor, when Aunt Fanny tapped gently at the door to announce another in the shape of Septimus Hardon come to escort his step-child back to their new home.

And that night, upon her way back, the something new that appeared to have come over the spirit of Lucy Grey was more than ever manifest; the ever-anxious look had departed, and her step was light, bounding, and elastic as she walked on by Septimus Hardon's side; a strange contrast—now quiet and hopeful, now elate and light-hearted, as she conversed, while every topic was tinged with the future.

"And what did Mr Sterne want?" said Septimus as his eyes twinkled, half from merriment, half from sadness, as he drew the graceful arm he held farther through his own.

Lucy was serious in a moment, and as she turned beneath a street-lamp and looked in her stepfather's face, he abused himself roundly, for he could see tears glittering in the bright eyes that met his own.

"Don't, don't ask me, dear," whispered Lucy. "Don't talk of it now, for indeed, indeed, I could not leave you."

"Hush, hush," whispered Septimus soothingly, for they passed another post, and he could this time see how fast the tears were falling, and now he tried to change the conversation.

"But he's getting better now very fast, eh? my darling," whispered Septimus.

“O, yes, yes,” murmured Lucy. “I think so.”

“And—but there, I’m making you worse. Let’s talk of something else.”

But Septimus Hardon’s attempts at starting fresh subjects for conversation were one and all failures, and Lucy was silent until they reached Essex-street; though hers were not tears kindred to those she had shed days—weeks—months back, and, as to her dreams that night, they must have been sweet to cause so happy a smile to play upon her lip; for though a tear once stole from the fringed lid, and lay like a pearl upon her cheek, it did not seem like a tear wrung from the heart, neither did the sigh which followed betoken sorrow; for it was a sigh like that sweet expiration some of us have heard when a confession has been wrung from lips we love, and those lips, when pressed, have hardly been withdrawn, but pouted sweetly, looking more ruddy for shame.

Only yesterday that they wore that look; it can’t be further back than the day before, or, say last week; and—the sweet recollection clings—“There, I do wish to goodness, dear, you would not always make a point of firing off into conversation directly I sit down to read or write. *Now* what is it? ‘Young Fitzpater was too attentive to Maude last night?’ Pooh! nonsense! sugar-candy! Why, the child isn’t seventeen yet, and—”

That could not have been last week, after all. How time does fly!

Volume Three—Chapter Fourteen.

In the Rat’s Hole.

“Hush!” cried *ma mère*, recovering from her tremor; “but I have another piece. You fool, Jean! are you afraid to be in the dark? Here is the candle, but where are the matches?” and the old woman kept on feeling about in her huge pocket, but found them not. “You have the matches, Jean!” she exclaimed at last.

“No,” said the cripple; “you had them, *ma mère*.”

“Ah, yes; and I left them in the other place; but I will fetch them. Where are you?”

“I am here,” whispered Jean, whom the darkness seemed to oppress, so that he could not speak above his breath.

“But where?” hissed his mother. “I cannot tell, not yet; where is the stone?”

“Don’t move,” whispered Jean hoarsely; “there is the hole, and you will fall down.”

“Then, come you,” hissed his mother; “we cannot stay here in the dark; and I am not come to go back with empty hand.”

“What can I do?” cried Jean angrily. “I am afraid to move. Why did you not let me have my crutch?” And now he began to feel slowly along the wall in search of the stone, but his hands only came in contact with the brick bins and empty bottles.

“Have you found the opening, Jean?” whispered his mother from the other side of the cellar; and then a cold shudder ran through the cripple as he stood with his hand upon the stone, for there was the sound of someone falling over a piece of board, and *ma mère* shrieked out, “O, *mon Dieu*, I am lost!” while standing there in the fearful darkness, and knowing his own helplessness, Jean almost swooned with horror.

“Here, quick, Jean, your hand!” cried his mother huskily; and on crawling towards the sound, Jean clutched his mother’s arms, and dragged at her, for she was lying with part of her body in the hole, but in no real danger, though unnerved and terrified, her fancy having magnified the peril a hundredfold before she lay panting on the damp sawdust beside her son.

“Not deep, not deep,” she muttered; “but, ah, Jean, it was very dreadful! I felt as if the painted woman was dragging me down.”

“Hush!” whispered Jean as they crawled farther away; “what is that noise?”

“*Bête*! would you frighten me?” hissed the old woman; and then she paused, for now distinctly heard, and as if ascending into the cellar through the hole, came a low blowing, panting noise; at first very soft, then louder and louder, as it came mingled with a plashing, scraping sound; nearer and nearer, and more plainly, as if someone was forcing a way along; while, at last, the panting noise was almost painful, for it was as of some hunted animal fighting for its breath.

Nearer and nearer came the noise; and with blood seeming to freeze and grow sluggish in their veins, mother and son crept farther away from the hole, till they crouched, clinging together, against one of the bins, when Jean’s elbow came in contact with an empty bottle, which clinked loudly. And still nearer came the sound, more rustling, more loud panting, echoing and hollow, as if sent through some large pipe; and, hardly daring to breathe, as they listened to the heavy throb, throb of their hearts, mother and son waited the result.

Now there was a muttering noise heard along with the panting; then more rustling, and all louder and plainer; till, as mother and son crouched there with starting eyes, they could in imagination see a dripping figure emerge from the hole, and stand within a few feet of them.

Then there was a silence so horrible that to the trembling couple it seemed worse than the coming of the noises. But

there was relief at last in the sound as of one searching amongst bottles; and then the snap as of the opening of a box, followed by the striking of matches, first one and then another. The sweat gathered upon the listeners' faces as they thought of the result of the discovery, and the probable fate of her whose veil they had seen. But, as in the sewer, nothing but faint lines of light ensued, and tiny spots where the damp matches were thrown; when, as if to show that this was no supernatural visitant, a deep husky voice growled the word "damp!" as the box was thrown impatiently down.

Then a heavy foot crunched upon Jean's hand, which he had rested upon the ground to thrust himself close to the wall; but though the pain was acute, he uttered no cry, sitting almost frozen with fear, as he heard the click of a bottle, the breaking of glass, the trickling of liquid upon the floor, followed by the sound of someone drinking; taking a long breath; drinking heavily again and again; and then something struck the young man heavily, his face was splashed with wine, and a broken bottle fell upon the floor.

Once more there was the silence, only broken by the heavy breathing of the new-comer; and then the hearts of mother and son bounded as they heard first the gliding of a hand upon a wall, and then a rough grating, which they both recognised as that of the stone being very softly and slowly slid back for a few inches, while it appeared that the new-comer was listening; and once more in the painful silence it seemed certain that he would hear the laboured beating of their hearts.

Once again, though, there was the grating, and they could tell that the opening was now fully exposed; then followed the rustling as of a body passing through, and, as they listened, the faint fall of steps passing along the court fell upon their ears, seeming refreshing, as it linked them once more with things of the upper world; but the next moment came the rustling sound, then the grating of the stone, and once more all was silent as the grave.

"Ah!" sighed *ma mère* with almost a groan, as she once more breathed freely; while in a husky voice Jean whispered, "Let's go."

"Stop," whispered his mother; "I dare not move yet. He will not be gone; only waiting for a chance to get past the police; and if he see us he will hide his rich things;" and the thought of the contents of the place seemed to lend force to the old woman's failing nerves; though, for what seemed half an hour to Jean, they sat in the silent darkness, waiting; a silence broken now and then by a peculiar sighing noise from the sewers, which made its hearers shudder.

"Was it him?" whispered Jean at last.

"Yes; the Jarker," hissed *ma mère*; "but get up now. Let me help you, and we will take all we can and go. Be still and careful; and there, now you are up. But, my faith, Jean, I am cramped! Now, the boxes were here; and—"

Ma mère ceased speaking, and stood trembling, with the sense as of something lifting the hair of her bare head, for at that moment came the sound of the grating stone pushed quickly aside; there was the sharp rustling as of one passing through, and the stone was thrust back, while the old woman could hear the panting, hard breath of someone close to her. She would have crouched away, but she stood as if paralysed, calling up the old interview with Jarker in the front cellar, and his great knife and ominous words, and she felt now that her hour was come, as a voice muttered the words "Two there!" and a heavy hand was laid upon her bare head. It was a horrible moment; but she could not move, and stood with her tongue glued to her palate, waiting for what she felt must follow; though, could she have turned, she would have clasped her withered arms round the ruffian, and cried to her son to escape. But *ma mère* was motionless, while the hideous yell that now rang in a dull, smothered way through the vault froze her blood into stagnation. Still the hand was not moved, but lay motionless upon her head, trembled and shook violently for a few moments, and then the old woman was free; for, in a horrible voice, the ruffian shrieked:

"Come back! come back!" when there was a heavy crash as of a body falling amongst a quantity of broken bottles, and all was silent once more.

No word spoke *ma mère*, but catching her son's hand, she drew him after her to the opening, seized the stone, which seemed to glide away at her touch, and then she thrust hurriedly at Jean as he crawled through, one hand being stretched back to seize on Jarker, should he recover from his swoon and try to touch her boy. Then she felt that there was room, and crept through herself, closed the stone with some difficulty, and made her way shuddering out into the cellar. Here *ma mère* clutched Jean round the waist, and stopped to listen, but all was silent and apparently no pursuit, so hurrying him along, they stood trembling once more in the passage, expecting to be seized from behind, *ma mère* seeming to feel the knife of Jarker, as she clutched at her throat and pressed on. Upon passing out into the court, though, there was a policeman, but beyond a glance, he took no heed of them till they had entered their own passage and closed the door, when he quietly made his way through the entrance they had that moment quitted.

"Cognac, Jean; drink it, fool, you want it," said *ma mère*, when they were once more safe in their own room. Before she would partake herself, the old woman forced some upon her son. "Another time, though, Jean, another time. I thought he would not dare to come back; but he will go now, and it will be safe. My faith, though, to see those boxes and touch nothing!" she exclaimed, and her hands clawed again as she spoke. "No, Jean, he will come no more, for it was as I thought; he is a murderer, and afraid. He did kill the poor painted woman; and then he was frightened, and thrust her poor body down into the sewer. But he was frightened, and fainted away, for he thought it was his poor victim come back. Did you not hear him shriek it? But I will tell the police when I have his gold and silver. But a little, but a little, and then all will be right."

They neither of them felt that they could sleep, and *ma mère* drew out her knitting, but did little, sitting thoughtfully in her chair; at last, though, Jean slept heavily till his mother woke him in the early dawn, and together they looked down, trying to pierce the fog which hung in the court, when the first thing that their eyes fell upon was the glazed top of a policeman's hat.

"But you will not go again?" whispered Jean.

“But you are *bête*!” cried the old woman angrily. “Should I leave the treasure I have discover, and let the police have all? No,” she cried, hooking her skinny fingers, “I will have all myself, and we will be rich, Jean. Ah! what—you sigh? But you are *bête*, and it is for the little worker who come between us, Jean. You loved your poor mother till she come, and I hate her for it, and I could slay her, for I am mad and disappointed; but I had my revenge for long. I told the preacher something, and he believed me; and you are all fools, you men. But I am not angry, Jean, for you are my own Jean, and you shall be rich yet. What! you push me away? I care not, for you shall be like your father—a gentleman—before he died, and left me in this cold, cold, cold, miserable London. But we will have the Jarker’s treasure, Jean, that I have watched, and we will laugh then at the world.”

Jean sat silently gazing down into the court, wincing at times as he heard the bitter words of his mother, while his eyes would then flash as he seemed ready to turn; but he spoke no word, as he thought over the past night and restrained himself. He knew the value of money, and his face would brighten as he thought of it in connection with Lucy; but a weary, sad smile came directly after, for he knew such thoughts were folly, and he turned them to Jarker, as he seemed to feel that his duty was to point out the wretch’s hiding-place, though he flinched from the task. And still he sat on, hour after hour gazing down into the court, where a strange man, like an artisan out of work, was lounging about smoking a short black pipe, and apparently very intent upon a small birdcage tied up in a blue-spotted handkerchief beneath his arm. There was something of the shoemaker and more of the tailor about him—nothing at all of the detective-policeman, and doubtless it must have been very unpleasant for a man of his income to smoke such bad tobacco, and pay for so many half-quarterns of rum for Mrs Sims, who was very communicative concerning the last time Jarker was at home, while a policeman in uniform would have acted as a seal upon her lips. So Mrs Sims chattered, the strange man watched, and for a time the uniform of the police-force was not seen in Bennett’s-rents.

Volume Three—Chapter Fifteen.

Taken.

A heart at peace, doubtless, had much to do with the rapid strides towards convalescence taken by the Reverend Arthur Sterne, who, in direct opposition to the hints of his medical man and the uplifted hands of Aunt Fanny, resumed his work; and not many days after the visit from Lucy he found himself late one afternoon in the place where so much of his past life had derived its interest. Pale and weak, he climbed slowly up to the garret of *ma mère*; but she was absent with the dogs, though Jean, more sallow than ever, sat cowering over his fire, and thinking of the events of a couple of nights before.

Jean could not restrain the deep frown that came over his forehead as his visitor entered; still there was an inborn politeness in the way he asked him to be seated, but after replying in a constrained way to the questions put touching his health, he painfully made his way to the window, and appeared to be watching the proceedings in the court below.

But for a while Jean saw nothing, for his gaze was introspective, and the secret he held seemed more than he could bear. Ever pictured in his brain were the scenes his mother had described, and sleeping or waking he saw again and again the wild, agonised face of the murdered woman; while the knowledge that he could point out the murderer’s lair, while the officers of the law watched and waited in ignorance, made him angry that he should be bound; for he felt that he was bound, as he thought of his mother’s rage and disappointment should Jarker’s retreat be discovered before she had ventured again to secure a portion of his spoil; and that night she was to return early, and they were to go. Jean shuddered as he thought of the last visit, and trembled for the one to come; and, could he have divested himself of certain cares that gnawed his heart, and looked upon Mr Sterne merely as the friend and pastor, undoubtedly, moved as he then was, he would have told all.

Mr Sterne had hoped to have found *ma mère* at home, and to have derived from her some information respecting Agnes Hardon. Once he was on the point of questioning Jean respecting her; but he refrained. He was anxious to see her now that he knew her secret, and certain in his own mind of Septimus Hardon, he hoped yet to procure a reconciliation at Somesham; while, at the same time, there was a dim something in his mind that he could not quite shape, as it seemed to point towards Agnes Hardon knowing something of her uncle’s arrangements during his last years: but at present he could define nothing, make no plans, though he seemed to be finding the ends of the threads he sought, and felt hopeful yet of a happy termination of much misery. His duty seemed to be to bring all these people into unison if possible; if not, to call in the strong arm of the law, should he feel, after a long and patient investigation, that there was right upon Septimus Hardon’s side.

“Will not your mother soon return, Jean?” said the curate at last.

“No,” said the young man moodily; “these busy nights are profitable, and we have little money, while two nights she has spent watching.”

“Watching?” said the curate.

Jean started and turned round, making as though he would speak to his visitor; but he turned his back the next moment, when the scene that met his eye chased everything else before it, and, wild and excited, he cried, “Now he is here, and you can take him! I was frightened, and dare not; come you, sir. It was he who beat you down in the street. Here, look!” he hissed between his teeth, standing almost erect as he spoke, and clenching his fists. “If I could strike him down!”

The rage in the young man’s face seemed for the moment reflected in that of the curate, as, starting forward, he flung the window open, and recalled the last time he had gazed from where he stood; but the next instant horror predominated as he looked upon the sight which had so excited the cripple.

There was a heavy mist falling, and the lamps were just alight; but out upon the housetop, and plainly seen in relief, was the figure of Jarker struggling out through the trap-door on to the platform where he kept his pigeons. He was making his way out slowly as Mr Sterne flung open the window, for it seemed that someone was dragging at him from beneath; and this proved to be the case, for as Jarker struggled out, kicking and striking savagely, the head and shoulders of a policeman appeared, and in the fierce struggle which ensued the man clung so firmly to the ruffian's legs, that he brought him down with a crash, which shivered and crushed the frail cages and traps to atoms; and then ensued a battle for life which chilled with horror those who were looking on, both too helpless to interfere.

The platform was but frail, and cracked and broke away as the two men wrestled together, while more than one poor bird was crushed to death. Once they rose for a few moments, and rocked to and fro, but Jarker seemed to trip and fall, dragging the policeman with him, and then from the crackling and breaking tiles arose a sound more like the encounter of two wild beasts, as the men writhed and twisted, every instant nearer and nearer to the edge, where there was only a low brick parapet some six inches high; and death for both seemed inevitable.

Jean stood as it were riveted to the spot, his lips apart, eyes distended, and chest heaving: while clutching his shoulder was Mr Sterne, expecting every moment to see the bodies of the struggling men part the air, and fall with a sickening crash into the court beneath.

But no. Jarker freed one arm, and twined it round one of the platform supports, giving himself a savage wrench, and stopping the slow, gliding motion which had taken him nearer and nearer to the little parapet. Another wrench, and a savage kick, and Jarker was almost at liberty, when down came the frail platform, to fall bodily into the court.

Shouting at the ruffian, Mr Sterne now called the attention of the gathering people below to what was going on, for it was time; but before it was possible for aid to be rendered, Jarker had forced the policeman's head back, and dragged his other hand at liberty; then came the sound of a heavy blow as the ruffian raised and dashed his adversary's head against the tiles. Then followed another fierce struggle, the officer fighting for his life, and he held on tenaciously to his opponent; but Jarker was uppermost, and using his great brute strength, he raised and dashed the man's head down again and again, till his hold relaxed, and he rolled over into the gutter, where he lay to all appearance dead; while, with savage cruelty, Jarker loosened a tile so as to have a firm hold, and then with his free hand he seized his enemy and tried to force him over into the court.

But he was arrested by shouts from *ma mère's* room and the open trap, at which now appeared in the dim light the eager countenance of the artisan-like man who had been hanging about the court; and now, active as a cat, with the man in full pursuit, Jarker went along upon hands and knees, over slate and tile ridge, along gutter, and past stack after stack of chimneys, to where there was a similar platform to his own; but he was disappointed—the trap-door was fast. On he went again, with Nemesis upon his track, over roof after roof again, towards a house with a dormer-window in the sloping slates; but the slates were covered with a redundant moisture, and to his horror he found that he was slowly gliding down to certain death—faster and faster—as he sat as it were upon his iron-nailed boots. A few seconds would have ended his career; but with a frightful oath, such as none but a drink-maddened ruffian would have uttered, he threw himself at full length, and rolled rapidly over and over to a chimney-stack, to which he clung, as he lay upon his face, with his feet so near the awaiting destruction, that his toes rested in the slight iron gutter.

He lay there for a few moments, trembling and unnerved by the danger he had escaped, and than painfully climbing up in the angle formed by the wall of the next house, which stood a little higher, he reached the ridge, and sat astride, panting and showing his teeth at the coming officer, who was making his way more cautiously; while dragging off first one and then the other of his heavy boots, Jarker hurled them at his pursuer before continuing his flight.

The dangerous slope Jarker had crossed gave him an advantage over the officer; for now unable to escape by the trap or window for which he had aimed, the ruffian had doubled, and was working his way rapidly back to his own garret, which now seemed his last resource.

For an instant he stood by the ruins of his pigeon-traps, gazing at the man lying in the gutter—now showing signs of animation—and listening at the opening; but though there were voices enough in the court, all seemed silent in his room, and with one glance at his fast-nearing foe upon the roof, Jarker lowered himself through his trap; while as Mr Sterne hurried out of the room, with Jean following him slowly, the ruffian stood once more opposite to the bed of his dead wife, to be confronted by another watching policeman.

Not of the same stuff this man; for a moment's struggle, and Jarker was free, leaping down the stairs, which seemed ready to fall with his weight—nearly to the bottom, with the man in full pursuit; when in the buzz of voices be heard a cry for a light below, which flashed upon the hat of yet another officer.

Panting, mad, hemmed-in on all sides, foes above and foes below, knowing that there was blood upon his hands, and —for aught he knew to the contrary—that the gallows waited for him, the ruffian, as a last resource, dashed open the window upon the first landing, while, as hands actually touched him, he dropped into the backyard.

One man leaned out directly, while another hand was at the window; but they saw Jarker in the dim light below recover himself. Then there was the hanging of a door, and one of the men bounded down the stairs just in time to strike the ruffian back as he made a dash along the passage to force his way through the crowd. But he was not taken yet; though it was with a smile that the policeman wiped his dripping face as he posted himself at the top of the cellar-steps, and sent a companion out to watch the grating in the court.

And now it seemed that they had run their game to earth; for after one or two ineffectual attempts to escape during the past forty-eight hours—attempts frustrated by the careful watch kept upon the premises he occupied—Jarker had that evening made his way up through the cellar in a half-maddened state, produced by fear and the wine he had drunk to drive it away, for it was many hours since food had passed his lips. But Mr Jarker's course was run, and,

though ignorant of the offence for which he was sought, there were heinous matters enough upon his conscience to make him fight for liberty to the last gasp; while, upon this last attempt being made, he had been sighted by the man on watch, who saw him in the passage and drove him back, when, horrified at the idea of going back to the cellar, Jarker had bounded upstairs, to be chased as has been described.

There was no lack of policemen now upon the spot, and while the crowd was kept back, place was given to Mr Sterne, who, with Jean hanging upon his arm, slowly descended the cellar-steps, preceded by the policemen, with staves in hand and open lanterns.

“Keep a good look-out on the stairs,” said the artisan-looking man—the quiet man of a day or two before, and one in authority. And now, inch by inch, the cellar was searched; then bin after bin of the inner vault; when the men turned and looked at their leader.

“O, he’s here, somewhere,” said the sergeant, and taking a lantern in hand, he peered long and carefully into every bin, while, trembling with eagerness, Jean pressed forward to see if the discovery would be made. He was not kept long in suspense; for, after directing his light carefully along the sawdust, the keen-eyed man suddenly exclaimed, “There’s someone been through here. Here’s fresh candle-grease and matches; and what’s this?”

Jean pressed forward with the others, and “this” proved to be a fragment of a stuff dress caught in an old nail between the bricks, a scrap which Jean recognised as a piece of his mother’s dress.

Jarker’s hiding-place, or rather this entrance to his hiding-place, owed much of its strength to its very openness; for, with the house and cellar-doors as it were free to the neighbourhood, many of the other tenants of the court even coming at times for water, no one would suspect the existence of a secret lair, though a careful examination of the long deep bin, now that attention was so fully directed to it, soon robbed the spot of its mystery.

“Crowbar,” said the sergeant abruptly, and a man departed in search of the implement; while one whispered to another his opinion that, if there was another way out, they were done, after all.

But now a new-comer forced her way upon the scene, after quite a battle with the constable on duty at the head of the stairs; and but for the request of Mr Sterne, she would not have obtained her desire. And now bitterly in French *ma mère* reproached her son for betraying her secret, though he as eagerly denied it, appealing to the curate, who freely exonerated the young man from having made any communications to the police.

“But what is the secret, *ma mère*?” he said to her in her own tongue.

“Come away, come away,” she whispered, wringing her hands; but Jean would not move, and the old woman was compelled to be a spectator of what followed.

A few blows from the crowbar, when it was brought, shivered the thin end stone to pieces, and Jean shuddered as he felt the cold damp air rush through the black opening, as the sergeant exclaimed:

“That’s sewers, my lads: there’s another way out. Now, who’ll go first?”

No one moved; but *ma mère* groaned.

“Who wants promotion?” said the sergeant again.

The muttering that followed seemed to intimate that all three of the men present wanted it, but not at the cost of thrusting his body into the black hole before him.

“Then I hope you’ll make matters straight if I’m hurt, my lads,” said the sergeant grimly.

“That we will, sir,” chorussed the men, and then there was quite a competition for the second post of honour; as, without another moment’s hesitation the sergeant crept into the bin, thrust his lantern forward as far as he could, looked eagerly round, and then, staff in hand, he regularly shot himself forward, and called to his men to follow. But there was no enemy to encounter: nothing to be seen but bins round the cellar, a box or two, the open hole, and the furnace.

“Who’d have thought of there being this place here?” said the sergeant to Mr Sterne, when *ma mère* and her son both stood shuddering in the cellar with them; the Frenchwoman creeping towards the boxes, her fingers working the while. “Old houses, you see, sir; gentlemen’s houses once; and this was an old cellar; wine in it, too, seemingly, and forgotten. Melting-pot, of course,” he continued, pointing to the crucible. “Nice handy spot for it; and of course he has made himself all right before now. Gone down to one of the sewers, I suppose,” he said. “And while we were hunting him t’other day, he had crawled up here, and was taking his port. Boxes, eh? what’s in the boxes?” One of the men was already examining the treasure-chests, and the agony in the old Frenchwoman’s face was pitiful, as she saw the lids opened of first one and then the other, to find in place of the riches she had pictured, broken glass, worn out crucibles, and brickbats that had formed part of the furnace.

“Rubbish!” said one of the men, when the old woman reeled, and would have fallen if the curate had not caught her in his arms and seated her upon one of the boxes.

“Nice place to go down, sir; take that old lady out in the fresh air,” said the sergeant, peering at the black opening, and listening to the quick rush of water. “There,” he said to one of his men, “you needn’t stew. I ain’t going to send you where I wouldn’t go myself.”

The man spoken to held up his hand to command silence, for at that moment there came a strange rustling noise, mingled with the fierce rush of the water, while before they could recover from their surprise, drenched with the foul

stream, his distorted face looking absolutely fiendish and inhuman, the head of Jarker appeared for a moment at the hole.

“Help!” he gasped, with a cry that rung through the place, but before hand could touch him he had fallen back with a heavy splash: there was the sound of water rushing furiously along with a hollow, echoing, gurgling noise; and the men stood looking at one another.

“Here, for God’s sake, men,” cried Mr Sterne, “do something!” and, weak, and trembling with horror, he stepped towards the hole; but the sergeant had his arms round him in a moment.

“Keep still, sir,” he said sternly; “we’ve done our part, I think. It’s certain death to go down there; they’re flushing the sewers, I should say, or else there’s a heavy fall of rain somewhere. He’s half-way to the Thames by now.”

The next moment Mr Sterne was telling himself that he had left his room too soon, for a strange sick feeling came over him, and the place around looked misty and indistinct; but his was not the only sleepless couch that night, for the old Frenchwoman moaned bitterly at the destruction of the *Château en Espagne* which she had raised.

Volume Three—Chapter Sixteen.

Worn Out.

A heavy step upon the stairs, a heavy knock upon the door, and a heavy-eyed, heavy-countenanced man asking for Septimus Hardon.

“And he wants you, too, Miss,” said the man. “O dear, O dear! he was the only friend I ever had, and he came back the night afore last, after you’d been to ask for him. Not seen him, we hadn’t, for long enough; and then to come back like this!” and the great fellow sat down unasked upon a chair, and sobbed like a child.

“He wants to see you, sir,” he said again, “and we’ve done all we could,” he cried pitifully; “but you see he’s old, sir, and there ain’t nothing of him as’ll hold together, and he knows it, sir; and he only laughed and said, he says, ‘Ikey, old man,’ he says, ‘it must be all new stuff,’ he says, ‘for the stitches won’t hold no longer;’ and he was the only friend I ever had. ‘Go and tell them,’ he says, ‘as old Matt’s taken his last copy, and would like to see ’em afore he takes the wages he’s earned.’ You’ll come and see him, won’t you, sir? though it’s no sort of a place to come to; and the missus is breaking her heart about him.”

Half-an-hour after, Septimus Hardon and Lucy were in Lower Series-place, where, in the dingy back-room, close to the waste-paper, lay poor old Matt, with Mrs Gross upon her knees beside his bed, crying bitterly, as the poor old man lay calm and apparently sleeping; but he started when Lucy knelt down and took his hand, to let a tear-fall upon it.

“God bless you!” he whispered earnestly, as his dim eyes recognised the face bending over him. “Come like an angel to a dying man. God bless you, sir, I’m glad you’ve come; I was in mortal fear that you would be too late. Tell her—but no, I will.—Mother Slagg, you and Ikey go for a bit, please.”

The weeping woman put her apron to her eyes, and went out with her husband. It was a heavy afternoon, and the fog was settling down fast over the City. The light struggled feebly through the window, half-covered as it was with boots; but the great landlord returned directly with a thick, strong-smelling candle, stuck upon a block of wood between three nails.

As soon as the door was once more closed—a rare position for it, and one which it resented for some time, until Ikey had poked the corners clean with an awl, and oiled the lock—old Matt said huskily:

“Put your hand, sir, under my pillow. That’s it, that there little Bible. Know it, sir?” he said, for Septimus Hardon had changed colour, and his hands were trembling. “That took me a long time to get, sir,” and then he slowly and painfully told what he said he would have spared Miss Lucy if he could, but it was not to be; how he had seen Agnes Hardon lying dead, she whom he knew now to have been Agnes Hardon; how he had attended the inquest, and then tried to get a Bible that had been there mentioned, seeking for it day after day, night after night, ready to drop always, but feeling that he should succeed in spite of all. He searched the streets, he said, but all in vain; and at last he began to fear that the poor girl to whom Agnes gave the Bible had emulated her fate, when he recalled the address of the juryman, found to his delight she had been there, and through the stranger’s influence obtained the prize he sought.

“And now,” said Matt, “I’m happy. I can feel, sir, that I’ve done one little bit of good in my life, and I can go easy. Now, sir that book.”

Septimus, wondering and surprised, turned from Matt to Lucy, sobbing and horror-stricken at the old man’s recital, for much of what he heard now had yet to be explained to him; but the old man was intent upon the little Bible, one that Septimus remembered to have seen at home in his father’s desk.

“Now!” exclaimed the old man, with hands trembling, and eyes appealing, lest his hearers should lose anything of what he disclosed; “now look, look, look!” he cried, “I fastened it down again, as it was before. A knife, quick! Now look here,” he said huskily, and he tried to insert the blade of the penknife given to him beneath the fly-leaf, groaning bitterly at his inability, when, with hands trembling nearly as much, Septimus took Bible and knife, loosened the paper round, and laid it open, when the first thing that met his eyes, in his father’s clear handwriting, was the date of the marriage, and eighteen months after appeared the entry of his birth, while upon the opposite side, in a delicate woman’s hand, were the words—

"Agnes Hardon.
The gift of Uncle Octavius."

"There, there, there, sir! That's it, isn't it, sir?" cried the old man excitedly. "I wouldn't rest till I'd got it, and 'twas hard work, for the poor girl clung to it as the gift of someone she loved; but the more she hung back, the more I was set upon having it. I knew enough of binding to see that the end-leaf was gummed down, and under that leaf I knew there was what I wanted. Here; breath!" he gasped; "open the window."

Septimus Hardon sat gazing dreamily at the entry in his hand; it was indisputable, though he could hardly believe in its truth, while the few words he heard coming from the weeping girl seemed only to add to the confused state of his mind; but it appeared to him now that the old man's condition was the first thing to consider, and placing the book in his pocket, he begged that he might try and have him removed to his own lodgings.

"No," said Matt feebly, "no; I won't leave here, for somehow these people love me after their way, and I seem to think that the end should be much what the life has been; and as to doctor, sir, why I've got one here," he said, gazing fondly up in Lucy's weeping face, "and if she'll stop here, and let me hold her hand, God bless her! I can go easy, for it will seem to keep ill away. No other doctor's any use, sir. I'm worn out, sir, worn out!"

But Septimus would not be satisfied, and leaving Lucy by the old man's side, he fetched assistance to his old friend.

"No hope at all?" he said, as the doctor and he walked together afterwards through the dingy shop.

"Not the slightest," said the surgeon once more, as he stood upon the doorstep. "He has never thoroughly recovered from the effects of the operations he suffered, and besides, it's the old tale with the poor fellow—sorrow, misery, starvation, on the one hand; dissipation, drink, late hours on the other. The poor old fellow speaks the truth; he is worn out."

Night came, and Lucy and Septimus still waited by the old man's dying bed. He had slept for some little time, during which interval Lucy had replied to her stepfather's many queries—replied as she thought of the despair that must have prompted the awful plunge into futurity. Then the old man woke, and talked eagerly for awhile of the future prospects of the family. But soon a change came over his face, his head tossed wearily from side to side of his dirty pillow, while often he would raise it and stare wildly from face to face, but recognising none, sink back again with a pitiful moan.

"Lost life, lost life! Worn out, worn out!" he kept on muttering as he tossed restlessly from side to side, frequently starting and looking round as if not knowing where he was. Then he seemed to sleep peacefully for awhile, to open his eyes once more, and smile feebly at his visitors, beckoning them to come nearer.

"God bless you both!" he muttered; "it's all over."

Septimus half-rose and would have fetched the doctor again, but Matt whispered "No."

"Don't go," he said. "He can do no good now, nor anyone else; I'm past all that. It's been coming for days past, and I've fought it out; kept on till my work was done. I've never been much good, sir; but now I'm worn out. P'r'aps I might have been different, if I'd had other chances; but I was always weak, sir; weak."

He paused again; and Lucy's sobs were the only sounds that broke the silence.

"Ah!" said Matt again, feebly; "I've justified many a line, sir; line by line—'line upon line,' don't it say somewhere? but I can't justify myself. Dropping out of the old forme, sir; fast—fast now. But there, sir, hold up; for I'm happy enough. You did me a good turn once, and I've tried to pay it back; and since I've known you, and you've been ready to be my friends, I've seemed to get proud, and wouldn't do anything that should disgrace Miss Lucy here. But I began too late, and I never deserved such friends as I've found; for I've been a poor, weak, helpless drinking old galley-slave. But there, sir," he said with a smile, "my case is foul; the sorts are out; and I'm putting away my stick for good."

"May I fetch Mr Sterne?" whispered Septimus.

"No, no, no," said the old man wearily; "we were never friends; and I can't play the hypocrite, sir. It's too late, sir; too late! What I've done, I've done. Let me die in peace, here, with your loving faces by me; and fetch poor old Ike in, by and by, for he loves me in his way. No, sir; it would be the act of a hypocrite, I fancy, for me to send for a clergyman now. No, Mr Hardon, sir; stay with me to the last; and let me hold tightly by this little white hand, and I can go from you hopeful and in peace. For if the great God who sent me here, struggling on through a life of care, has made hearts so gentle, and true, and loving, that they can weep and sorrow over my poor old battered case, can't I hope that He who knows all, and has seen all my helpless weakness, will be merciful? I know, sir, I know. I might have done better: but it's been a life of drive and struggle—money to-day, starve to-morrow, and drink always, to hold up and do the work. I'm sorry, sir, sorry; but the sorrow came too late. I've had a hard life, sir; the wish for better things came too late, when I was worn, and shattered, and used up; when the day was too far spent, sir; and now the night's coming on faster and faster. Hold my hands tight," he whispered, "for it's growing dark and darker; and I'm losing my way."

And now once more there was a long silence, when the old man looked eagerly round.

"What time is it?" he asked; and Septimus told him, then, turning towards Lucy, the old man whispered—

"Put your hand to my lips, that I may kiss it once before I go;" but she leaned over and tenderly kissed him, when he smiled, and some words passed, but they were too faint to be heard. Then he was restless for a while; but soon started again, to stare wildly round. "What's that?" he asked.

“Nothing but the wind moaning round the houses,” whispered Lucy.

“No,” he said with a smile, “nothing but the wind—nothing but the wind waiting to scatter the dust.”

And now he lay so still and peaceful, that, in answer to Lucy’s inquiring look, Septimus bent over him again and again; but as he looked in that sorrow-ploughed face he could see that the old man still slept, while, with the light strong upon her face as she knelt, Lucy seemed no mean representative of the angel watching by the old man’s side.

“An angel, sir, an angel, sir!” he had mattered again; and then he seemed to doze off, muttering the words to himself.

“Worn out!” said Septimus Hardon, as he listened time after time to the faintly-borne chimes of Saint Clement’s; and then he thought of the present revelation, which seemed almost dearly bought in the old man’s death; of the past; the office in Carey-street, and its sorrows; the bitter struggle for mere life; the lodging in Bennett’s-rents; and the shabby old compositor in his frayed suit, pinching himself that he might supply their wants; the watchful care and jealousy with which he had tended Lucy to and from the warehouse; the secret they had shared, and the old man’s chivalrous endurance in tracing out the information; spite of all blurs or blots upon his character, ever the same tender, true-hearted man, devoted to his friends’ interests, and ready with his offering, even though it were humble as the cup of cold water that should not be without its reward; and now worn out—the poor old setting battered and worthless, but the heart true and bright to the last.

The quarters chimed again. Isaac had been to set up a fresh candle, and then retired to his weeping partner; while, now seated upon an old work-bench, Septimus Hardon still let his thoughts wander, pausing long upon the poverty of the crowded streets of the great City; the prosperity crushing down the misery; the swiftly-hurrying stream of life, and the striving of the throng to keep afloat, as others pressed upon them, climbed upon their shoulders, or, in the madness of despair, clung to their legs and dragged them down to the muddy ooze at the bottom. He thought too once more of his own misery, and that of this waif, after its long encounter with the storms of life, cast up torn, weary, and breathless upon the shore.

Mournfully moaned the wind down the court and at the back of the house, making cowls creak and spin, and rattling worn old windows; for it was no bright starry night, the clouds gathered black overhead, and sent down a pitiless rain to empty the streets, and be caught by the wind and dashed against the panes. By the feeble light in the front shop, Isaac could be seen with his head against the wall sleeping heavily; and, worn out with watching, his wife had returned to the next house. Now faintly heard in the lulls of the wind came the striking of Saint Clement’s clock and its laboured chiming, which sounded wild and strange upon the night air.

Suddenly Lucy and her stepfather started, for the old man was sitting up in bed with one hand raised as if to command silence, and loud, clear, and strange, his voice seemed to thrill through the silence as the tones of the bells came louder upon the wind.

“Hush!” cried the old man, “the bells! I set it once, and I’ve never forgotten it— ‘Ring out the false, ring in the true’—never forgotten it,” he muttered, as he sank heavily back and spoke in a whisper—“‘Ring out the false, ring in the true.’ Hands—hands—once again; they’re ringing out a false and coward heart, and ringing in the true.” Then he began to mutter from time to time words connected with his trade—wild incoherent words, but strangely fitted to his past life and present state; while at times he spoke with such wild bitterness that his hearers shuddered, and Isaac came trembling in, leading with him Mr Sterne, anxious at their protracted absence.

And so an hour passed, when the dying man had been for some time silent, but another kneeling figure had offered a prayer at the bedside; then once more the old man began to mutter, at first in a low tone, then slowly and aloud.

“Gold, sir, cold; bitter cold for an old man like me—dreary streets, sir, and the lamps out—dark, dark—the dull courts and the foggy alleys—misery—beggary—starvation. Bright fields—light and darkness. No hypocrite, sir—humbly, with an angel’s kiss upon my old lips—a seal—purity. Hark! Copy and proof—copy and proof—blurred and blotted—foul—foul—spelling—outs and doubles—corrections—too late—too late. Wages on Friday night, air; wages, sir—wages of sin—wages—death—death—poor girl!—Bleeping—found drowned—the Bible—Agnes Hardon—wages—wages—darker and darker—but no hypocrite, sir—with an angel’s kiss—an angel’s—forgive—forgive—for ever and ever—and ev—”

Silence in the room, and the watchers stealing away.

Volume Three—Chapter Seventeen.

“My Solicitors, Sir!”

It never rains but it pours, and the storm fell heavily now upon the head of Doctor Hardon of Somesham. Through the instrumentality of Mr Sterne he was served with the requisite legal notices, which seemed to be of the nature of seeds calling up a variety of legal plants, which coiled, and twined, and curled round the doctor, threatening to strangle him with their powerful tendrils; for he was deeply involved in numerous speculative matters, and the fact of his being legally summoned to give up his brother’s estate, now reduced to quite one-half—for he had disposed of all that he could—roused the aggressiveness of the law—a law which seemed omniscient as regarded failing men’s affairs; and a few days after, from information he had received, as the policemen say, Septimus Hardon learned that his uncle was in Cursitor-street.

“I would go and see him,” said Mr Sterne; “he may feel disposed to give up all quietly; and I presume that you would take no steps to enforce restitution of what he has sold during his occupation of your rights?”

“No, no; no, no!” exclaimed Septimus; “he is a ruined man.”

Septimus Hardon shuddered as he turned into Cursitor-street—dirty, cheerless, sponging-housey Cursitor-street of those days, with its legal twang and the iron-barred windows of the sheriffs’ houses. There was no difficulty in finding the residence of Mr Barjonas, for the brass-plate was on the door, though from its colour it was only by supposition that the plate was termed brass. The windows were coated with a preservative paste of dirt, while the same composition entered strongly into all the domestic arrangements. In front, the pavement was marked all over with cabalistic signs, over which hopped and danced dirty children—young clients, perhaps—in company with pieces of broken plate, there called “chaney;” the road was decorated with parsnip-cuttings and potato-peelings, after the mode adopted in Bennett’s-rents; while sundry indications pointed to the fact that coffee was much in favour, for the grounds found a resting-place in the gutter. A bashaw-like cock was scratching over some scraps of parchment and sawdust-sweepings, but they seemed dry, so he refrained from calling up the ladies of his harem—two—both of whom were of the breed known as “five-toed Dorkings,” and in duty bound to be white, but they were of a peculiar tint, like mouldy robes.

Septimus Hardon walked up to a thick-lipped gentleman upon the doorstep, and, as he seemed disposed to bar the way, told him of his business.

“Show this gedt idto dudber seved,” said the officer; for such he was, though only holding commission from the sheriff.

A fluey-headed boy, with his shirt-sleeves rolled up to his shoulders to display two very thin arms, at the end of one of which he carried a black waiter, came forward, performing a sort of shaving operation with the edge of the said waiter on his smooth chin, and beckoning to the visitor, ushered him into the room known as number seven, where Septimus stood in presence of his uncle, and gazed with wonder at the change. For the doctor’s clothes were growing looser upon him hour by hour, and his cheeks hung flabby and in folds above his dirty white neckcloth.

But more than at this Septimus Hardon gazed at his uncle’s strange lost aspect, as he stood with his gold pencil-case in one hand and a letter in the other—a letter which he had read over again and again, and then paused to wipe his forehead with his hand. But it was only a letter of upbraiding from his wife, enclosing to him a small scrap which the wretched woman had clipped from a newspaper—a paper weeks old, but which Fate had ordered should be sent to her; while now she asked her ruined lord who was the woman taken from the river, the woman who had nursed Eleanor Anderson, and had asked their help and forgiveness at that very time. Upbraidings, words almost of rage, she had sent him in that letter, telling him of his obstinacy, and reminding him of the times she had implored his forgiveness. And now these words had come at an hour when he could bear no more. He had read letter and paragraph in a dreamy, misty way, thinking of his losses—of his wrongs to his nephew, while now the man himself stood before him, perhaps to add his revilings. Worn out with anxiety and sleeplessness, faint with hunger and weary calculations of his affairs, the doctor strove for an instant to regain command of himself; then stared piteously at his visitor for an instant, staggered, grasped at his neckcloth, and fell heavily upon the floor.

Time passed; and as soon as the proper legal arrangements were completed, Septimus Hardon was to be possessed of his father’s much reduced property—an estate shorn of its extent, but still what, to a poor man, seemed wealth. In obedience to his wishes, the affairs had been arranged in the quietest manner, Septimus Hardon’s not being a nature to trample upon a fallen man—fallen indeed; for his next visit to his uncle was at one of the debtors’ prisons, from which there seemed no likelihood of his release, so deeply was he involved.

Mrs Doctor Hardon had been to Essex-street the night before begging that he would come, for the poor woman was in despair and dread at the turn matters were taking; for there the doctor sat as he had sat the night through in his shabbily-furnished room, sitting with a heavy frown upon his forehead, wrinkled as though the spirit of evil pressed down upon him heavily. Three times over he had sternly bade the weeping woman begone—the wife of many years—who, her fit of bitter anger passed, now hung about the gates of a morning until they were opened, and would then have laid her grey head upon his shoulder as she whispered comfort. But no; her lot was to pace wearily up and down; and the doctor sat alone, hour after hour, brooding over his fall; the proofs brought forward that his was a fraud; the curse that had seemed to attend the money; the failure of venture after venture that he had looked upon as certainties; the gnawing agony of his heart for the daughter he had lost, but who was to have been forgiven at some future time—always at some time in the future—a season put off till it was too late, and she had gone for forgiveness elsewhere; while, above all, there was a strange wild impending dread overtopping every cloud and driving him to turn over and over in his pocket a small-stoppered bottle—a bottle without a label, and held so long in his hand that the glass was hot.

A noble mansion had the doctor built in imagination: one that should be wondrous in its prosperity and endurance, but it had no foundation—a bit had crumbled here, a wall there cracked, then a corner had given way (a key to the whole), and with a crash the fabric had come down—so that the builder’s spirit was crushed as here he sat, shrunk and limp, waiting for the news of some fresh calamity, some new fall that should crush him yet more; for in his wild dreams he had seen his brother threatening him, and Septimus triumphantly shaking the will in his face. And so he sat on, hour after hour, clasping the tiny bottle in his hand—containing what? But a spoonful of some limpid fluid; while the stricken man still listened as if for something that he expected to happen that day.

There he sat, without fire, but feeling not the cold, hearing not the imploring whispered words of his wife—words uttered at the door after he had dismissed her, to wander up and down or sit shivering, and refusing the offered hospitality of some feeling fellow-prisoner.

Deeper grew the wrinkles upon the doctor’s brow as he sat. He had taken nothing for many hours, but a wine-glass stood upon the table, and more than once a trembling hand had been stretched out to grasp it. But he would wait another hour, he would wait until that other crushing news came, that other news hidden from his sight as by a black curtain, which ever trembled as though about to be raised. He would wait until the clocks struck again, just to think;

though each stroke of hammer upon bell sounded funereally upon his ear. Again another hour, and another, and so on through the long night, through the grey, cold dawn, and again after the bright rising of the sun, which brought no hope to him.

“Only one other hour,” said the crouching man, and the words hissed between his fevered lips. “Only another hour!” he muttered, while his bloodshot eyes seemed to dilate as he drew forth the bottle and held it up to the light, shook it, and, watched the bright beads that trickled down the sides of the glass. His unshorn beard and sunken cheeks gave him a strangely haggard look; such that those who had known him in former days would have passed him without recognition.

Suddenly there was a step in the long corridor—one of many, but a step that he seemed to know; and then followed low voices, and the sound of a woman sobbing.

It had come at last—he had waited, and it was here—and a bitter smile trembled, it did not play, round the lips of Doctor Hardon, as he once more drew forth the bottle.

“This, this, this!” he kept on hissing in a harsh whisper as he smiled, thinking that the dark curtain which trembled in front would show him the future and not the present. And now he tried to draw forth the little stopper, but it was immovable. He tore at it fiercely, and then seized it with his teeth, but it broke short off, and he spat the piece angrily upon the floor.

“Now, now!” he muttered, as though there was not a moment to spare, while with trembling hand he seized the poker, and, holding the bottle above the wine-glass, struck it sharply, shivered it to atoms, and the liquid, mingled with sharp fragments, fell into the vessel, a large portion splashing over the table and moistening the doctor’s hand.

“Now, now!” he muttered, seizing the glass; and as he gave one glance at the bright blue wintry sky, he raised the little vessel hesitatingly to his lips. Then the door was pushed open, Mrs Hardon stepped in, shrieked, and dashed the undrained glass from her husband’s hand, so that it fell shivered upon the cold hearthstone, when, falling at his feet and clutching his knees, the unhappy woman sobbed loudly:

“O Tom, Tom, ask him to forgive us!” but the doctor only stood glaring at his visitor.

“Indeed, indeed, Septimus, I never knew it,” sobbed Mrs Hardon.

“It is of the past—let it rest,” said her nephew, who could not remove his eyes from his uncle, now smiling feebly and pointing to the chamber-door.

“Why would you provoke this painful scene?” he said in an injured tone. “You must have known, sir, that the interview would be most unfortunate. Pray go. My solicitors, Messrs Keening. Every arrangement has been made, and the funeral will take place to-morrow.”

Mrs Hardon started up, and stood clasping one of her husband’s hands as she looked aghast in his face, while he continued in the same feeble voice:

“No will, sir—illegitimate—pray leave—most painful,” and with his disengaged hand he still pointed towards the door. “My solicitors, sir, Messrs Keening.”

“Pray—pray go,” whispered Mrs Hardon. “He is worn out, and ill with anxiety. I’ll—I’ll write, Septimus,” and she hurried her visitor to the door. “But don’t—don’t punish us for what is past,” she said imploringly.

The look of Septimus Hardon was sufficient as he turned to the unhappy woman; and then he stepped into the passage with the intention of fetching medical assistance, for, as the door closed, he once more heard the doctor’s voice: “My solicitors, sir, Messrs Keening. Pray go.”

Volume Three—Chapter Eighteen.

The Lake Uncaged.

That was only a poor wedding that Jean Marais, with a bright spot in each of his sallow cheeks and a wild look in his dark eyes, gazed down upon from the gloomy old gallery of the church; only a quiet wedding that those two eager eyes had gazed upon, when their crippled owner had climbed slowly and laboriously up to the gallery to watch unseen, while the ceremony was performed which gave Lucy Grey to her happy husband; but beneath those wild eyes there were convulsed features, cracked and quivering lips.

And the lark? He bore his treasure with him, the bird she had loved to hear; it nestled in his breast, and a stall-keeper hard by took charge of the cage. And there watched Jean unseen, while Lucy, turning her eyes upon her husband, accompanied him into the vestry.

Then below in the nave there was the buzz of expectation as the party came from the vestry—Lucy, blushing and fair, leaning upon the curate’s arm; and he, proud of the treasure he had won, walking happy and elate by her side. But it was only a poor wedding—poor in the show that was made and in those who assembled; for Bennett’s-rents was empty that morning, and Mrs Sims’ sniff was heard again and again, just inside the chancel; while the only wonder was that some of the children gathered together were not crushed beneath the wheels of the conveyances.

It was only a poor affair, but there was a light in many a face there that would have outshone the glories of a fashionable wedding. Even Mrs Septimus forgot her troubles, and confided more than once to Aunt Fanny that she

thought her complaint had got the turn.

But there knelt Jean the cripple, alone in the gallery, till the last looker-on had left, the last wheel rolled from the gate, and a sad stillness had fallen upon the empty church, when, with a bitter, heart-wrung cry, the young man crouched lower and lower, burying his face in his hands. Then he slowly rose, and taking his crutch, painfully made his way towards the narrow door, his looks worn and weary, but with a strange light in his eye.

Pausing at length in the busy street, he took from his breast the bird he had so long tended, and started slightly, but with a bitter smile upon his lips, for in his emotion he had crushed the poor thing, and it panted feebly, with half-closed eye and open beak; but Jean only smiled. And with the same sad look he replaced the bird in his bosom, and then slowly and laboriously crept along, side by side, with the hurrying stream of passengers. Toiling on slowly and patiently, his crutch sounding loudly upon the pavement, with the same bitter look fixed as it were upon his lip, Jean Marais slowly toiled on till he was lost in the crowd.

Only a poor wedding; but Aunt Fanny was there, laughing and crying by turns, and vowing that she heard every word of the service, and that Arthur never spoke out so well before. And what a dress the old lady wore! surely no poplin ever before displayed such plaits; and then, forgetful of dress, plaits, muslin, everything, was it not a treat to see her take Lucy to her warm old heart when they had returned to Essex-street, as the fair girl knelt at her feet, the large eyes gazing up so appealingly, and seeming to say—“Don’t despise me for being so humble!” But, there; had she been a princess, she could have had no warmer nook in the old dame’s heart, for was not Arthur happy? And then those arms, that of old lay so placidly across her black-silk apron—worn even at the return from the wedding, and brought in a reticule—became restless to a degree, ever animated by the desire to embrace her children.

Did she love Lucy? Had not Arthur, the wisest of men, chosen her? and did not that spread such a mantle of holiness around the maiden that, even had Aunt Fanny never seen her, she would have battled for her to the death? Would he have chosen any but the purest and noblest of heart? she asked herself again and again. So she divided her love between them, and then, upon the return from church, laughed and cried by turns; for, said she, “I must leave poor Arty now.”

Arthur Sterne was silent, but he smiled as he saw two soft round arms circle Aunt Fanny’s neck, prisoning her as their owner whispered words whose import he could guess.

A quiet repast, and a short interval of preparation before the start for a trip, only some miles from town, an easy drive, for a few days’ visit to where the sweet breath of the country blew; and then the elders standing at the door watching the departing vehicle, and the waving hands, as the wheels rattled along the echoing street; and then upstairs, for Aunt Fanny and Mrs Septimus to talk of their children, while Septimus Hardon roamed the streets.

“O, the bright lovely country!” cried Lucy, as the carriage rolled on between hedgerows here and there silvered with the scented May, whose fragrance was borne by the light breeze through the open windows. “O, the bright lovely country!” she cried; “am I not foolish, Arthur?” she sobbed; “but the tears will come, for I feel that this happiness cannot last!”

The word “Arthur” was spoken hesitatingly, as if it were strange to her lips, and she hardly dared to use it; her eyes were fixed for a moment upon those of her husband, and then she glided down to the bottom of the fly and kneeled at his feet, as he fondly parted the hair upon her broad forehead.

“You are not angry with me for being so childish?” she murmured.

“Angry!” he replied, and the tone in which he said that word was sufficient.

“Don’t think me foolish,” she said; “but let us walk a little here, where the grass borders the road; for it seems wrong to hurry past the lovely green trees, after the close misery of London. They are new to me, Arthur; and look! look! there are flowers, and birds; and see how the bright sunshine dances amongst the leaves. But, there,” she said sadly; “you smile at my folly, and forget what all this is to me, after years of prisoning London.”

But the next minute the fly had stopped, and, relieved of its load, resumed its way; and, happy and proud, Arthur Sterne looked down upon his newly-wedded wife, elate to see the pure, intense love of all that was beautiful in nature which emanated from this escaped prisoner of life; while Lucy was divided between delight of the scene around her, and reproach for her so-called indifference towards her husband. And so they walked, inhaling the sweets of the early summer afternoon, and finding in them joys known only to those who have escaped but freshly from the great City’s miseries. And still on and on, almost in silence, enveloped as they were in the happiness of the present.

“Listen!” cried Lucy, as she stopped suddenly, and laid a finger upon her husband’s lip—a finger now white and delicate, once fretted and work-worn. “Listen!” she whispered, “and close your eyes. Might not that be poor Jean’s lark?” and then both stood listening, as in those days of the past, when their prisoned souls had gazed up eagerly into the bright blue sky, and they had drunk in the pure gushing lay of the speckled songster.

“Tears, more tears, Lucy?” whispered the curate. “Are you not happy?”

No words came for a reply, nothing but a look; as the bright eyes brimmed over, and a sob rose from the burdened heart.

“It seems too much—as if it could not last,” whispered Lucy; “and that song brought back so many sorrows, dear—the court, and so much of the past. But you will forgive me, Arthur?”

Again the same hesitating speech, as if it were an assumption upon her part to call him by his name, and she half dreaded rebuke.

“What does the driver want?” said Mr Sterne; for the man was shouting and making signs.

By the time they had overtaken the vehicle, the man had dismounted and was by the bank, stooping over a reclining figure; and on approaching nearer, the curate recognised the cripple, Jean, lying apparently asleep, holding his lark to his lips, while his crutch was by his side. But if the master slept, it was not so with the bird; for its soft feathers were ruffled, its wings half-open, and the lids drawn partly over the little dark, bead-like eyes; the crest lay smooth, the throat-feathers rose not, the wings had fluttered for the last time; the bright, gushing lay would thrill through prisoned hearts in Bennett’s-rents no more—the lark was dead.

And its master? To get one more look, one farewell glance, he had toiled wearily on, mile after mile, towards the village where he had heard they would rest; and on he pressed, with a strength evoked by the despair of his heart, till he had sat down to rest by the wayside and sunk back exhausted.

In an instant Lucy was upon her knees by his side and had raised his head, while her husband’s hand was in the cripple’s breast. Then he slowly opened his eyes and stared wildly round till they rested upon her who supported his head, when his features softened, and a smile came once more upon his lips as they seemed to part to form the words “Good-bye!”

And then slowly and imperceptibly the smile faded from his lip, the light from his eye; and as they gazed upon him, a cold sternness stole over the poor youth’s countenance, till, with agony depicted in her every feature, Lucy looked up appealingly at her husband.

But Jean was dead—passed away; for he had toiled through the streets, nerved by a stern determination—a wild despair—on through the suburbs, and so out into the country; the one purpose always in his mind—to be where she would come once more; on still, slowly, painfully, hour after hour, till he sank exhausted, to die of a ruptured blood-vessel.

And still, of a summer’s evening, may the lounger in the great streets of the West come upon a knot of idlers; and, pausing for a few moments, listen to divers sharply-uttered commands given in French to a pair of wretched poodles; who fetch and carry, rise erect, and march about with aspect doleful and disconsolate, till a few of the bystanders drop halfpence in the basket one of the dogs carries in his mouth. Then a fresh pitch is made; the performance again gone through; and then on again; on after *ma mère* of the sharp and eager look—the harsh, cracked voice; on again, with drooping ears and tail—unlionlike of aspect; on again, perhaps to cast a look of envy at some free and rollicking idle dog, or of condolence at the miserable sharp-eyed monkey performing on the table, rapid in every moment, but more rapid in the glance of its little dark, blow-watching eye. And at last, when the streets grow thin of passengers, and the dogs tired and blundering, home to the court where they dwell—a court yet standing, though Bennett’s-rents is no more; another court, where the flags lie broken, and the refuse-choked channel festers with the water from the hard-used pump; where the children revel by day in the dirt and filth, and Death oft and oft again beckons the undertaker to come with his shambling horse and shabby Shillibeer-hearse; where the pigeons cluster upon the housetops and coo at daybreak, and then circle in flights, while men of the Jarker stamp urge them on. Home, to another old house, and up the groaning stairs, where even by night the twittering of birds can be heard in lodgers’ rooms—prisoners dwelling in a prison within a prison; here, too, the click of a sewing-machine—patent—man’s make; there, the sigh of a sewing-machine—not patent—God’s make; and up the rickety stairs to another attic, where cages hang—empty cages, kept because they were those of Jean; where the crutch stands in the corner beneath the lark’s home, brought back by the neighbour who keeps a stall, but empty too: canaries, linnets, finches, passed away; while the lark lies upon the breast of its master—the cripple Jean—and the turf grows green above his resting-place at Highgate.

“*En avant—venez donc—mes chiens*! Home!” though it be not Bennett’s-rents.

Volume Three—Chapter Nineteen.

Mad.

In one of those vast piles of building a short distance down the main line of a great railway, a strange-looking elderly man, and one whose dress bespeaks the clergyman, are passing from ward to ward upon a visit. The man with them, in his quiet livery, raises the brass-chained key he carries to open lock after lock—one key for hundreds—and they pass on by sights of the most sorrowful; for they are amongst those of their fellows in whom the light of reason burns but dimly or is extinct. At last they stand by a window looking upon an extensive yard, where some fifty patients clothed in grey serge walk about for exercise—some hurriedly, some talking, some excited, others calm. And now one visitor lays a trembling hand upon his companion’s arm as, nearing the window, comes a portly, grey, smiling man, rolling solemnly along with imposing gait, wearing a stiff white-paper cravat, with a card snuff-box in his hand and a straw-plait chain meandering over his grey serge vest. Quiet and harmless, he goes about the yard feeling the pulses of his fellow-patients, and nods at them and smiles encouragement.

“Is there any prospect of his recovery?” says the clergyman to the warder, who is looking unconcernedly on.

“Whose, sir?” says the attendant. “His? the doctor’s? O no, sir, not the least. Stark mad!”

The End.

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