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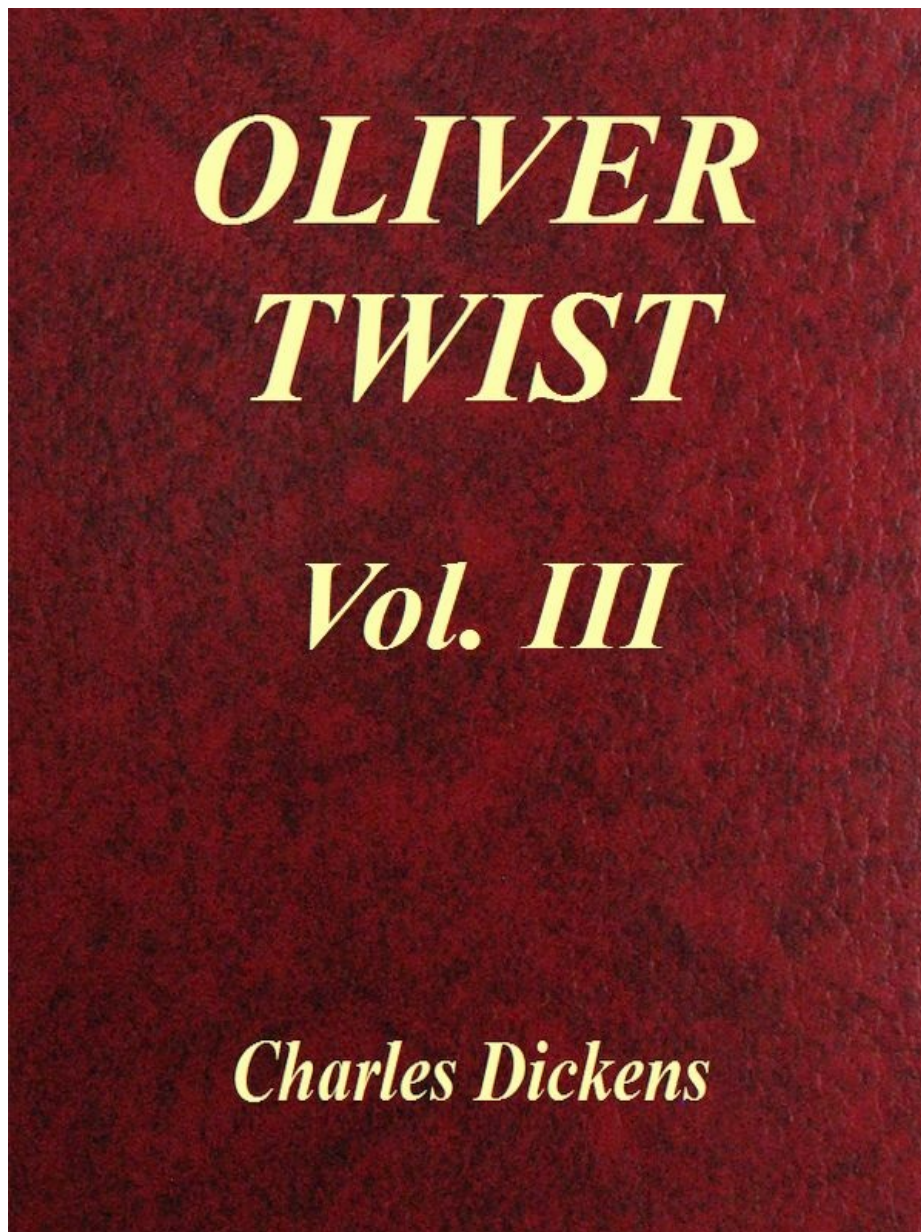
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OLIVER TWIST.



The Last Chance.

OLIVER TWIST.

BY

CHARLES DICKENS.

AUTHOR OF "THE PICKWICK PAPERS."

SECOND EDITION.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

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RICHARD BENTLEY, NEW BURLINGTON STREET.

1839.

WHITING,
BEAUFORT HOUSE.

OLIVER TWIST.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

CONTAINING AN ACCOUNT OF WHAT PASSED BETWEEN MR. AND MRS. BUMBLE AND MONKS, AT THEIR NOCTURNAL INTERVIEW.

IT was a dull, close, overcast summer evening, when the clouds, which had been threatening all day, spread out in a dense and sluggish mass of vapour, already yielded large drops of rain, and seemed to presage a violent thunderstorm,—as Mr. and Mrs. Bumble, turning out of the main

street of the town, directed their course towards a scattered little colony of ruinous houses, distant from it some mile and a-half, or thereabouts, and erected on a low unwholesome swamp, bordering upon the river.

They were both wrapped in old and shabby outer garments, which might perhaps serve the double purpose of protecting their persons from the rain, and sheltering them from observation; the husband carried a lantern, from which, however, no light yet shone, and trudged on a few paces in front, as though—the way being dirty—to give his wife the benefit of treading in his heavy foot-prints. They went on in profound silence; every now and then Mr. Bumble relaxed his pace, and turned his head round, as if to make sure that his helpmate was following, and, discovering that she was close at his heels, mended his rate of walking, and proceeded at a considerable increase of speed towards their place of destination. [2]

This was far from being a place of doubtful character, for it had long been known as the residence of none but low and desperate ruffians, who, under various pretences of living by their labour, subsisted chiefly on plunder and crime. It was a collection of mere hovels, some hastily built with loose bricks, and others of old worm-eaten ship timber, jumbled together without any attempt at order or arrangement, and planted, for the most part, within a few feet of the river's bank. A few leaky boats drawn up on the mud, and made fast to the dwarf wall which skirted it, and here and there an oar or coil of rope, appeared at first to indicate that the inhabitants of these miserable cottages pursued some avocation on the river; but a glance at the shattered and useless condition of the articles thus displayed would have led a passerby without much difficulty to the conjecture that they were disposed there, rather for the preservation of appearances than with any view to their being actually employed. [3]

In the heart of this cluster of huts, and skirting the river, which its upper stories overhung, stood a large building formerly used as a manufactory of some kind, and which had in its day probably furnished employment to the inhabitants of the surrounding tenements. But it had long since gone to ruin. The rat, the worm, and the action of the damp, had weakened and rotted the piles on which it stood, and a considerable portion of the building had already sunk down into the water beneath, while the remainder, tottering and bending over the dark stream, seemed to wait a favourable opportunity of following its old companion, and involving itself in the same fate. [4]

It was before this ruinous building that the worthy couple paused as the first peal of distant thunder reverberated in the air, and the rain commenced pouring violently down.

"The place should be somewhere here," said Bumble, consulting a scrap of paper he held in his hand.

"Halloa there!" cried a voice from above.

Following the sound, Bumble raised his head, and descried a man looking out of a door, breast-high, on the second story.

"Stand still a minute," cried the voice; "I'll be with you directly." With which the head disappeared, and the door closed.

"Is that the man?" asked Mr. Bumble's good lady.

Mr. Bumble nodded in the affirmative.

"Then, mind what I told you," said the matron, "and be careful to say as little as you can, or you'll betray us at once." [5]

Mr. Bumble, who had eyed the building with very rueful looks, was apparently about to express some doubts relative to the advisability of proceeding any farther with the enterprise just then, when he was prevented by the appearance of Monks, who opened a small door, near which they stood, and beckoned them inwards.

"Come!" he cried impatiently, stamping his foot upon the ground. "Don't keep me here!"

The woman, who had hesitated at first, walked boldly in without any further invitation, and Mr. Bumble, who was ashamed or afraid to lag behind, followed, obviously very ill at his ease, and with scarcely any of that remarkable dignity which was usually his chief characteristic.

"What the devil made you stand lingering there in the wet?" said Monks, turning round, and addressing Bumble, after he had bolted the door behind them. [6]

"We—we were only cooling ourselves," stammered Bumble, looking apprehensively about him.

"Cooling yourselves!" retorted Monks. "Not all the rain that ever fell, or ever will fall, will put as much of hell's fire out as a man can carry about with him. You won't cool yourself so easily, don't think it!"

With this agreeable speech Monks turned short upon the matron, and bent his fierce gaze upon her, till even she, who was not easily cowed, was fain to withdraw her eyes, and turn them towards the ground.

"This is the woman, is it?" demanded Monks.

"Hem! That is the woman," replied Mr. Bumble, mindful of his wife's caution.

"You think women never can keep secrets, I suppose?" said the matron, interposing, and returning as she spoke the searching look of Monks.

"I know they will always keep *one* till it's found out," said Monks contemptuously. [7]

"And what may that be?" asked the matron in the same tone.

"The loss of their own good name," replied Monks: "so, by the same rule, if a woman's a party to a secret that might hang or transport her, I'm not afraid of her telling it to any body, not I. Do you understand me?"

"No," rejoined the matron, slightly colouring as she spoke.

"Of course you don't!" said Monks ironically. "How should you?"

Bestowing something half-way between a sneer and a scowl upon his two companions, and again beckoning them to follow him, the man hastened across the apartment, which was of considerable extent, but low in the roof, and was preparing to ascend a steep staircase, or rather ladder, leading to another floor of warehouses above, when a bright flash of lightning streamed down the aperture, and a peal of thunder followed, which shook the crazy building to its centre.

"Hear it!" he cried, shrinking back. "Hear it rolling and crashing away as if it echoed through a thousand caverns, where the devils are hiding from it. Fire the sound! I hate it." [8]

He remained silent for a few moments, and then removing his hands suddenly from his face, showed, to the unspeakable discomposure of Mr. Bumble, that it was much distorted, and nearly blank.

"These fits come over me now and then," said Monks, observing his alarm, "and thunder sometimes brings them on. Don't mind me now; it's all over for this once."

Thus speaking, he led the way up the ladder, and hastily closing the window-shutter of the room into which it led, lowered a lantern which hung at the end of a rope and pulley passed through one of the heavy beams in the ceiling, and which cast a dim light upon an old table and three chairs that were placed beneath it.

"Now," said Monks, when they had all three seated themselves, "the sooner we come to our business, the better for all. The woman knows what it is, does she?" [9]

The question was addressed to Bumble; but his wife anticipated the reply, by intimating that she was perfectly acquainted with it.

"He is right in saying that you were with this hag the night she died, and that she told you something—"

"About the mother of the boy you named," replied the matron interrupting him. "Yes."

"The first question is, of what nature was her communication?" said Monks.

"That's the second," observed the woman with much deliberation. "The first is, what may the communication be worth?"

"Who the devil can tell that, without knowing of what kind it is?" asked Monks.

"Nobody better than you, I am persuaded," answered Mrs. Bumble, who did not want for spirit, as her yokefellow could abundantly testify.

"Humph!" said Monks significantly, and with a look of eager inquiry, "there may be money's worth to get, eh?"

"Perhaps there may," was the composed reply. [10]

"Something that was taken from her," said Monks eagerly; "something that she wore—something that—"

"You had better bid," interrupted Mrs. Bumble. "I have heard enough already to assure me that you are the man I ought to talk to."

Mr. Bumble, who had not yet been admitted by his better half into any greater share of the secret than he had originally possessed, listened to this dialogue with outstretched neck and distended eyes, which he directed towards his wife and Monks by turns in undisguised astonishment; increased, if possible, when the latter sternly demanded what sum was required for the disclosure.

"What's it worth to you?" asked the woman, as collectedly as before.

"It may be nothing; it may be twenty pounds," replied Monks; "speak out, and let me know which."

"Add five pounds to the sum you have named; give me five-and-twenty pounds in gold," said the woman, "and I'll tell you all I know—not before." [11]

"Five-and-twenty pounds!" exclaimed Monks, drawing back.

"I spoke as plainly as I could," replied Mrs. Bumble, "and it's not a large sum either."

"Not a large sum for a paltry secret, that may be nothing when it's told!" cried Monks impatiently, "and which has been lying dead for twelve years past, or more!"

"Such matters keep well, and, like good wine, often double their value in course of time," answered the matron, still preserving the resolute indifference she had assumed. "As to lying dead, there are those who will lie dead for twelve thousand years to come, or twelve million, for any thing you or I know, who will tell strange tales at last!"

"What if I pay it for nothing?" asked Monks, hesitating.

"You can easily take it away again," replied the matron. "I am but a woman, alone here, and unprotected." [12]

"Not alone, my dear, nor unprotected neither," submitted Mr. Bumble, in a voice tremulous with fear; "I am here, my dear. And besides," said Mr. Bumble, his teeth chattering as he spoke, "Mr. Monks is too much of a gentleman to attempt any violence on parochial persons. Mr. Monks is aware that I am not a young man, my dear, and also that I am a little run to seed, as I may say; but he has heard—I say I have no doubt Mr. Monks has heard, my dear—that I am a very determined officer, with very uncommon strength, if I'm once roused. I only want a little rousing, that's all."

As Mr. Bumble spoke, he made a melancholy feint of grasping his lantern with fierce determination, and plainly showed, by the alarmed expression of every feature, that he did want a little rousing, and not a little, prior to making any very warlike demonstration, unless, indeed, against paupers, or other person or persons trained down for the purpose. [13]

"You are a fool," said Mrs. Bumble, in reply, "and had better hold your tongue."

"He had better have cut it out before he came, if he can't speak in a lower tone," said Monks, grimly. "So he's your husband, eh?"

"He my husband!" tittered the matron, parrying the question.

"I thought as much when you came in," rejoined Monks, marking the angry glance which the lady darted at her spouse as she spoke. "So much the better; I have less hesitation in dealing with two people, when I find that there's only one will between them. I'm in earnest—see here."

He thrust his hand into a side-pocket, and producing a canvass bag, told out twenty-five sovereigns on the table, and pushed them over to the woman.

"Now," he said, "gather them up; and when this cursed peal of thunder, that I feel is coming up to break over the house-top, is gone, let's hear your story." [14]

The roar of thunder, which seemed in fact much nearer, and to shiver and break almost over their heads, having subsided, Monks, raising his face from the table, bent forward to listen to what the woman should say. The faces of the three nearly touched as the two men leant over the small table in their eagerness to hear, and the woman also leant forward to render her whisper audible. The sickly rays of the suspended lantern falling directly upon them, aggravated the paleness and anxiety of their countenances, which, encircled by the deepest gloom and darkness, looked ghastly in the extreme.

"When this woman, that we called old Sally, died," the matron began, "she and I were alone."

"Was there no one by?" asked Monks, in the same hollow whisper, "no sick wretch or idiot in some other bed?—no one who could hear, and might by possibility understand?"

"Not a soul," replied the woman; "we were alone: I stood alone beside the body when death came over it." [15]

"Good," said Monks, regarding her attentively: "go on."

"She spoke of a young creature," resumed the matron, "who had brought a child into the world some years before: not merely in the same room, but in the same bed in which she then lay dying."

"Ay?" said Monks, with quivering lip, and glancing over his shoulder. "Blood! How things come about at last!"

"The child was the one you named to him last night," said the matron, nodding carelessly towards her husband; "the mother this nurse had robbed."

"In life?" asked Monks.

"In death," replied the woman, with something like a shudder. "She stole from the corpse, when it had hardly turned to one, that which the dead mother had prayed her with her last breath to keep for the infant's sake."

"She sold it?" cried Monks, with desperate eagerness; "did she sell it?—where?—when?—to whom?—how long before?" [16]

"As she told me with great difficulty that she had done this," said the matron, "she fell back and died."

"Without saying more?" cried Monks, in a voice which, from its very suppression, seemed only the more furious. "It's a lie! I'll not be played with. She said more—I'll tear the life out of you both, but I'll know what it was."

"She didn't utter another word," said the woman, to all appearance unmoved (as Mr. Bumble was very far from being) by the strange man's violence; "but she clutched my gown violently with one hand, which was partly closed, and when I saw that she was dead, and so removed the hand by force, I found it clasped a scrap of dirty paper."

"Which contained—" interposed Monks, stretching forward.

"Nothing," replied the woman; "it was a pawnbroker's duplicate."

"For what?" demanded Monks.

"In good time I'll tell you," said the woman. "I judge that she had kept the trinket for some time, in the hope of turning it to better account, and then pawned it, and saved or scraped together money to pay the pawnbroker's interest year by year, and prevent its running out, so that if any thing came of it, it could still be redeemed. Nothing had come of it; and, as I tell you, she died with the scrap of paper, all worn and tattered, in her hand. The time was out in two days; I thought something might one day come of it too, and so redeemed the pledge."

[17]

"Where is it now?" asked Monks quickly.

"*There*," replied the woman. And, as if glad to be relieved of it, she hastily threw upon the table a small kid bag scarcely large enough for a French watch, which Monks pouncing upon, tore open with trembling hands. It contained a little gold locket, in which were two locks of hair, and a plain gold wedding-ring.

"It has the word 'Agnes' engraved on the inside," said the woman. "There is a blank left for the surname, and then follows the date, which is within a year before the child was born; I found out that."

[18]

"And this is all?" said Monks, after a close and eager scrutiny of the contents of the little packet.

"All," replied the woman.

Mr. Bumble drew a long breath, as if he were glad to find that the story was over, and no mention made of taking the five-and-twenty pounds back again; and now took courage to wipe off the perspiration, which had been trickling over his nose unchecked during the whole of the previous conversation.

"I know nothing of the story beyond what I can guess at," said his wife, addressing Monks after a short silence, "and I want to know nothing, for it's safer not. But I may ask you two questions, may I?"

"You may ask," said Monks, with some show of surprise, "but whether I answer or not is another question."

"—Which makes three," observed Mr. Bumble, essaying a stroke of facetiousness.

"Is that what you expected to get from me?" demanded the matron.

[19]

"It is," replied Monks. "The other question?"

"What you propose to do with it. Can it be used against me?"

"Never," rejoined Monks; "nor against me either. See here; but don't move a step forward, or your life's not worth a bulrush!"

With these words he suddenly wheeled the table aside, and pulling an iron ring in the boarding, threw back a large trap-door which opened close at Mr. Bumble's feet, and caused that gentleman to retire several paces backward with great precipitation.

"Look down," said Monks, lowering the lantern into the gulf. "Don't fear me. I could have let you down quietly enough when you were seated over it, if that had been my game."

Thus encouraged, the matron drew near to the brink, and even Mr. Bumble himself, impelled by curiosity, ventured to do the same. The turbid water, swollen by the heavy rain, was rushing rapidly on below, and all other sounds were lost in the noise of its plashing and eddying against the green and slimy piles. There had once been a water-mill beneath, and the tide, foaming and chafing round the few rotten stakes, and fragments of machinery, that yet remained, seemed to dart onward with a new impulse when freed from the obstacles which had unavailingly attempted to stem its headlong course.

[20]

"If you flung a man's body down there, where would it be to-morrow morning?" said Monks, swinging the lantern to and fro in the dark well.

"Twelve miles down the river, and cut to pieces besides," replied Bumble, recoiling at the very notion.

Monks drew the little packet from his breast, into which he had hurriedly thrust it, and tying it

firmly to a leaden weight which had formed a part of some pulley, and was lying on the floor, dropped it into the stream. It fell straight, and true as a die, clove the water with a scarcely audible splash, and was gone.



The evidence destroyed.

The three looked into each other's faces, and seemed to breathe more freely.

[21]

"There!" said Monks, closing the trap-door, which fell heavily back into its former position. "If the sea ever gives up its dead—as books say it will—it will keep its gold and silver to itself, and that trash among it. We have nothing more to say, and may break up our pleasant party."

"By all means," observed Mr. Bumble with great alacrity.

"You'll keep a quiet tongue in your head, will you?" said Monks, with a threatening look. "I am not afraid of your wife."

"You may depend upon me, young man," answered Mr. Bumble, bowing himself gradually towards the ladder with excessive politeness. "On every body's account, young man; on my own, you know, Mr. Monks."

"I am glad for your sake to hear it," remarked Monks. "Light your lantern, and get away from here as fast as you can."

It was fortunate that the conversation terminated at this point, or Mr. Bumble, who had bowed himself to within six inches of the ladder, would infallibly have pitched headlong into the room below. He lighted his lantern from that which Monks had detached from the rope, and now carried in his hand, and, making no effort to prolong the discourse, descended in silence, followed by his wife. Monks brought up the rear, after pausing on the steps to satisfy himself that there were no other sounds to be heard than the beating of the rain without, and the rushing of the water.

[22]

They traversed the lower room slowly, and with caution, for Monks started at every shadow, and Mr. Bumble, holding his lantern a foot above the ground, walked not only with remarkable care, but with a marvellously light step for a gentleman of his figure: looking nervously about him for hidden trap-doors. The gate at which they had entered was softly unfastened and opened by Monks, and, merely exchanging a nod with their mysterious acquaintance, the married couple emerged into the wet and darkness outside.

They were no sooner gone, than Monks, who appeared to entertain an invincible repugnance to being left alone, called to a boy who had been hidden somewhere below, and bidding him go first, and bear the light, returned to the chamber he had just quitted.

[23]

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

[24]

INTRODUCES SOME RESPECTABLE CHARACTERS WITH WHOM THE READER IS ALREADY ACQUAINTED, AND SHOWS HOW MONKS AND THE JEW LAID THEIR WORTHY HEADS TOGETHER.

It was about two hours earlier on the evening following that upon which the three worthies

mentioned in the last chapter disposed of their little matter of business as therein narrated, when Mr. William Sikes, awakening from a nap, drowsily growled forth an inquiry what time of night it was.

The room in which Mr. Sikes propounded this question was not one of those he had tenanted previous to the Chertsey expedition, although it was in the same quarter of the town, and was situated at no great distance from his former lodgings. It was not in appearance so desirable a habitation as his old quarters, being a mean and badly-furnished apartment of very limited size, lighted only by one small window in the shelving roof, and abutting upon a close and dirty lane. Nor were there wanting other indications of the good gentleman's having gone down in the world of late; for a great scarcity of furniture, and total absence of comfort, together with the disappearance of all such small moveables as spare clothes and linen, bespoke a state of extreme poverty, while the meager and attenuated condition of Mr. Sikes himself would have fully confirmed these symptoms if they had stood in need of corroboration.

[25]

The housebreaker was lying on the bed wrapped in his white great-coat, by way of dressing-gown, and displaying a set of features in no degree improved by the cadaverous hue of illness, and the addition of a soiled nightcap, and a stiff, black beard of a week's growth. The dog sat at the bedside, now eyeing his master with a wistful look, and now pricking his ears, and uttering a low growl as some noise in the street, or in the lower part of the house, attracted his attention. Seated by the window, busily engaged in patching an old waistcoat which formed a portion of the robber's ordinary dress, was a female, so pale and reduced with watching and privation that there would have been considerable difficulty in recognising her as the same Nancy who has already figured in this tale, but for the voice in which she replied to Mr. Sikes's question.

[26]

"Not long gone seven," said the girl. "How do you feel to-night, Bill?"

"As weak as water," replied Mr. Sikes, with an imprecation on his eyes and limbs. "Here; lend us a hand, and let me get off this thundering bed, anyhow."

Illness had not improved Mr. Sikes's temper, for, as the girl raised him up, and led him to a chair, he muttered various curses upon her awkwardness, and struck her.

"Whining, are you?" said Sikes. "Come; don't stand snivelling there. If you can't do any thing better than that, cut off altogether. D'ye hear me?"

[27]

"I hear you," replied the girl, turning her face aside, and forcing a laugh. "What fancy have you got in your head now?"

"Oh! you've thought better of it, have you?" growled Sikes, marking the tear which trembled in her eye. "All the better for you, you have."

"Why, you don't mean to say you'd be hard upon me to-night, Bill," said the girl, laying her hand upon his shoulder.

"No!" cried Mr. Sikes. "Why not?"

"Such a number of nights," said the girl, with a touch of woman's tenderness, which communicated something like sweetness of tone even to her voice,— "such a number of nights as I've been patient with you, nursing and caring for you, as if you had been a child, and this the first that I've seen you like yourself; you wouldn't have served me as you did just now, if you'd thought of that, would you? Come, come; say you wouldn't."

"Well, then," rejoined Mr. Sikes. "I wouldn't. Why, damme, now, the girl's whining again!"

[28]



Mr. Fagin and his pupil recovering Nancy.

"It's nothing," said the girl, throwing herself into a chair. "Don't you seem to mind me, and it'll soon be over."

"What'll be over?" demanded Mr. Sikes in a savage voice. "What foolery are you up to now again? Get up, and bustle about, and don't come over me with your woman's nonsense."

At any other time this remonstrance, and the tone in which it was delivered, would have had the desired effect; but the girl being really weak and exhausted, dropped her head over the back of the chair, and fainted, before Mr. Sikes could get out a few of the appropriate oaths with which on similar occasions he was accustomed to garnish his threats. Not knowing very well what to do in this uncommon emergency, for Miss Nancy's hysterics were usually of that violent kind which the patient fights and struggles out of without much assistance, Mr. Sikes tried a little blasphemy, and finding that mode of treatment wholly ineffectual, called for assistance. [29]

"What's the matter here, my dear?" said the Jew, looking in.

"Lend a hand to the girl, can't you?" replied Sikes impatiently, "and don't stand chattering and grinning at me!"

With an exclamation of surprise Fagin hastened to the girl's assistance, while Mr. John Dawkins (otherwise the Artful Dodger), who had followed his venerable friend into the room, hastily deposited on the floor a bundle with which he was laden, and, snatching a bottle from the grasp of Master Charles Bates who came close at his heels, uncorked it in a twinkling with his teeth, and poured a portion of its contents down the patient's throat; previously taking a taste himself to prevent mistakes.

"Give her a whiff of fresh air with the bellows, Charley," said Mr. Dawkins; "and you slap her hands, Fagin, while Bill undoes the petticoats."

These united restoratives, administered with great energy, especially that department consigned to Master Bates, who appeared to consider his share in the proceeding a piece of unexampled pleasantry, were not long in producing the desired effect. The girl gradually recovered her senses, and, staggering to a chair by the bedside, hid her face upon the pillow, leaving Mr. Sikes to confront the new-comers, in some astonishment at their unlooked-for appearance. [30]

"Why, what evil wind has blowed you here?" he asked of Fagin.

"No evil wind at all, my dear," replied the Jew; "for ill winds blow nobody any good, and I've brought something good with me that you'll be glad to see. Dodger, my dear, open the bundle, and give Bill the little trifles that we spent all our money on this morning."

In compliance with Mr. Fagin's request, the Artful untied his bundle, which was of large size, and formed of an old tablecloth, and handed the articles it contained, one by one, to Charley Bates, who placed them on the table, with various encomiums on their rarity and excellence. [31]

"Sitch a rabbit pie, Bill!" exclaimed that young gentleman, disclosing to view a huge pasty; "sitch delicate creeturs, with sitch tender limbs, Bill, that the wery bones melt in your mouth, and there's no occasion to pick 'em; half a pound of seven and sixpenny green, so precious strong that if you mix it with boiling water, it'll go nigh to blow the lid of the teapot off; a pound and a half of moist sugar that the niggers didn't work at all at afore they got it to sitch a pitch of

goodness,—oh no! two half-quartern brans; pound of best fresh; piece of double Glo'ster; and, to wind up all, some of the richest sort you ever lushed." Uttering this last panegyric, Master Bates produced from one of his extensive pockets a full-sized wine-bottle, carefully corked, while Mr. Dawkins at the same instant poured out a wine glassful of raw spirits from the bottle he carried, which the invalid tossed down his throat without a moment's hesitation.

[32]

"Ah!" said the Jew, rubbing his hands with great satisfaction. "You'll do, Bill; you'll do now."

"Do!" exclaimed Mr. Sikes; "I might have been done for twenty times over, afore you'd have done any thing to help me. What do you mean by leaving a man in this state three weeks and more, you false-hearted wagabond?"

"Only hear him, boys!" said the Jew, shrugging his shoulders; "and us come to bring him all these beautiful things."

"The things is well enough in their way," observed Mr. Sikes, a little soothed as he glanced over the table; "but what have you got to say for yourself why you should leave me here, down in the mouth, health, blunt, and every thing else, and take no more notice of me all this mortal time than if I was that 'ere dog.—Drive him down, Charley."

"I never see such a jolly dog as that," cried Master Bates, doing as he was desired. "Smelling the grub like a old lady a-going to market! He'd make his fortun on the stage that dog would, and rewive the drayma besides."

[33]

"Hold your din," cried Sikes, as the dog retreated under the bed, still growling angrily. "And what have you got to say for yourself, you withered old fence, eh?"

"I was away from London a week and more, my dear, on a plant," replied the Jew.

"And what about the other fortnight?" demanded Sikes. "What about the other fortnight that you've left me lying here, like a sick rat in his hole?"

"I couldn't help it, Bill," replied the Jew. "I can't go into a long explanation before company; but I couldn't help it, upon my honour."

"Upon your what?" growled Sikes with excessive disgust. "Here, cut me off a piece of the pie, one of you boys, to take the taste of that out of my mouth, or it'll choke me dead."

"Don't be out of temper, my dear," urged the Jew submissively. "I have never forgot you, Bill; never once."

[34]

"No, I'll pound it, that you han't," replied Sikes with a bitter grin. "You've been scheming and plotting away every hour that I've laid shivering and burning here; and Bill was to do this, and Bill was to do that, and Bill was to do it all dirt cheap, as soon as he got well, and was quite poor enough for your work. If it hadn't been for the girl, I might have died."

"There now, Bill," remonstrated the Jew, eagerly catching at the word. "If it hadn't been for the girl! Who was the means of your having such a handy girl about you but me?"

"He says true enough there, God knows!" said Nancy, coming hastily forward. "Let him be, let him be."

Nancy's appearance gave a new turn to the conversation, for the boys, receiving a sly wink from the wary old Jew, began to ply her with liquor, of which, however, she partook very sparingly; while Fagin, assuming an unusual flow of spirits, gradually brought Mr. Sikes into a better temper, by affecting to regard his threats as a little pleasant banter, and, moreover, laughing very heartily at one or two rough jokes, which, after repeated applications to the spirit-bottle, he condescended to make.

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"It's all very well," said Mr. Sikes; "but I must have some blunt from you to-night."

"I haven't a piece of coin about me," replied the Jew.

"Then you've got lots at home," retorted Sikes, "and I must have some from there."

"Lots!" cried the Jew, holding up his hands. "I haven't so much as would——"

"I don't know how much you've got, and I dare say you hardly know yourself, as it would take a pretty long time to count it," said Sikes; "but I must have some to-night, and that's flat."

"Well, well," said the Jew, with a sigh, "I'll send the Artful round presently."

"You won't do nothing of the kind," rejoined Mr. Sikes. "The Artful's a deal too artful, and would forget to come, or lose his way, or get dodged by traps and so be perwented, or any thing for an excuse, if you put him up to it. Nancy shall go to the ken and fetch it, to make all sure, and I'll lie down and have a snooze while she's gone."

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After a great deal of haggling and squabbling, the Jew beat down the amount of the required advance from five pounds to three pounds four and sixpence, protesting with many solemn asseverations that that would only leave him eighteenpence to keep house with; Mr. Sikes sullenly remarking that if he couldn't get any more he must be content with that, Nancy prepared to accompany him home; while the Dodger and Master Bates put the eatables in the cupboard. The Jew then, taking leave of his affectionate friend, returned homewards, attended by Nancy

and the boys, Mr. Sikes meanwhile flinging himself on the bed, and composing himself to sleep away the time until the young lady's return.

In due time they arrived at the Jew's abode, where they found Toby Crackit and Mr. Chitling intent upon their fifteenth game at cribbage, which it is scarcely necessary to say the latter gentleman lost, and with it his fifteenth and last sixpence, much to the amusement of his young friends. Mr. Crackit, apparently somewhat ashamed at being found relaxing himself with a gentleman so much his inferior in station and mental endowments, yawned, and, inquiring after Sikes, took up his hat to go.

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"Has nobody been, Toby?" asked the Jew.

"Not a living leg," answered Mr. Crackit, pulling up his collar: "it's been as dull as swipes. You ought to stand something handsome, Fagin, to recompense me for keeping house so long. Damme, I'm as flat as a jury-man, and should have gone to sleep as fast as Newgate, if I hadn't had the good natur' to amuse this youngster. Horrid dull, I'm blessed if I an't."

With these and other ejaculations of the same kind, Mr. Toby Crackit swept up his winnings, and crammed them into his waistcoat pocket with a haughty air, as though such small pieces of silver were wholly beneath the consideration of a man of his figure, and swaggered out of the room with so much elegance and gentility, that Mr. Chitling, bestowing numerous admiring glances on his legs and boots till they were out of sight, assured the company that he considered his acquaintance cheap at fifteen sixpences an interview, and that he didn't value his losses the snap of a little finger.

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"Wot a rum chap you are, Tom!" said Master Bates, highly amused by this declaration.

"Not a bit of it," replied Mr. Chitling: "am I, Fagin?"

"A very clever fellow, my dear," said the Jew, patting him on the shoulder, and winking to his other pupils.

"And Mr. Crackit *is* a heavy swell, an't he, Fagin?" asked Tom.

"No doubt at all of that, my dear," replied the Jew.

"And it *is* a creditable thing to have his acquaintance, an't it, Fagin?" pursued Tom.

"Very much so, indeed, my dear," replied the Jew. "They're only jealous, Tom, because he won't give it to them."

"Ah!" cried Tom, triumphantly, "that's where it is. He has cleaned me out; but I can go and earn some more when I like,—can't I, Fagin?"

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"To be sure you can," replied the Jew; "and the sooner you go, the better, Tom; so make up your loss at once, and don't lose any more time. Dodger, Charley, it's time you were on the lay:—come, it's near ten, and nothing done yet."

In obedience to this hint, the boys, nodding to Nancy, took up their hats and left the room; the Dodger and his vivacious friend indulging as they went in many witticisms at the expense of Mr. Chitling, in whose conduct, it is but justice to say, there was nothing very conspicuous or peculiar, inasmuch as there are a great number of spirited young bloods upon town who pay a much higher price than Mr. Chitling for being seen in good society, and a great number of fine gentlemen (composing the good society aforesaid) who establish their reputation upon very much the same footing as flash Toby Crackit.

"Now," said the Jew, when they had left the room, "I'll go and get you that cash, Nancy. This is only the key of a little cupboard where I keep a few odd things the boys get, my dear. I never lock up my money, for I've got none to lock up, my dear—ha! ha! ha!—none to lock. It's a poor trade, Nancy, and no thanks; but I'm fond of seeing the young people about me, and I bear it all; I bear it all. Hush!" he said, hastily concealing the key in his breast; "who's that? Listen!"

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The girl, who was sitting at the table with her arms folded, appeared in no way interested in the arrival, or to care whether the person, whoever he was, came or went, until the murmur of a man's voice reached her ears. The instant she caught the sound she tore off her bonnet and shawl with the rapidity of lightning, and thrust them under the table. The Jew turning round immediately afterwards, she muttered a complaint of the heat in a tone of languor that contrasted very remarkably with the extreme haste and violence of this action, which, however, had been unobserved by Fagin, who had his back towards her at the time.

"Bah!" whispered the Jew, as though nettled by the interruption; "it's the man I expected before; he's coming down stairs. Not a word about the money while he's here, Nance. He won't stop long—not ten minutes, my dear."

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Laying his skinny forefinger upon his lip, the Jew carried a candle to the door as a man's step was heard upon the stairs without, and reached it at the same moment as the visiter, who coming hastily into the room, was close upon the girl before he observed her.

It was Monks.

"Only one of my young people," said the Jew, observing that Monks drew back on beholding a stranger. "Don't move, Nancy."

The girl drew closer to the table, and glancing at Monks with an air of careless levity, withdrew her eyes; but as he turned his towards the Jew, she stole another look, so keen and searching, and full of purpose, that if there had been any bystander to observe the change he could hardly have believed the two looks to have proceeded from the same person.

"Any news?" inquired the Jew.

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"Great."

"And—and—good?" asked the Jew hesitatingly, as though he feared to vex the other man by being too sanguine.

"Not bad any way," replied Monks with a smile. "I have been prompt enough this time. Let me have a word with you."

The girl drew closer to the table, and made no offer to leave the room, although she could see that Monks was pointing to her. The Jew—perhaps fearing that she might say something aloud about the money, if he endeavoured to get rid of her—pointed upwards, and took Monks out of the room.

"Not that infernal hole we were in before," she could hear the man say as they went up stairs. The Jew laughed, and making some reply which did not reach her, seemed by the creaking of the boards to lead his companion to the second story.

Before the sound of their footsteps had ceased to echo through the house, the girl had slipped off her shoes, and drawing her gown loosely over her head, and muffling her arms in it, stood at the door listening with breathless interest. The moment the noise ceased she glided from the room, ascended the stairs with incredible softness and silence, and was lost in the gloom above.

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The room remained deserted for a quarter of an hour or more; the girl glided back with the same unearthly tread; and immediately afterwards the two men were heard descending. Monks went at once into the street, and the Jew crawled up stairs again for the money. When he returned, the girl was adjusting her shawl and bonnet, as if preparing to be gone.

"Why, Nance," exclaimed the Jew, starting back as he put down the candle, "how pale you are!"

"Pale!" echoed the girl, shading her eyes with her hands as if to look steadily at him.

"Quite horrible," said the Jew. "What have you been doing to yourself?"

"Nothing that I know of, except sitting in this close place for I don't know how long and all," replied the girl carelessly. "Come, let me get back; that's a dear."

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With a sigh for every piece of money, Fagin told the amount into her hand, and they parted without more conversation than interchanging a "good-night."

When the girl got into the open street she sat down upon a door-step, and seemed for a few moments wholly bewildered and unable to pursue her way. Suddenly she arose, and hurrying on in a direction quite opposite to that in which Sikes was awaiting her return, quickened her pace, until it gradually resolved into a violent run. After completely exhausting herself, she stopped to take breath, and, as if suddenly recollecting herself, and deploring her inability to do something she was bent upon, wrung her hands, and burst into tears.

It might be that her tears relieved her, or that she felt the full hopelessness of her condition; but she turned back, and hurrying with nearly as great rapidity in the contrary direction, partly to recover lost time, and partly to keep pace with the violent current of her own thoughts, soon reached the dwelling where she had left the housebreaker.

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If she betrayed any agitation by the time she presented herself to Mr. Sikes, he did not observe it; for merely inquiring if she had brought the money, and receiving a reply in the affirmative, he uttered a growl of satisfaction, and replacing his head upon his pillow, resumed the slumbers which her arrival had interrupted.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

[46]

A STRANGE INTERVIEW, WHICH IS A SEQUEL TO THE LAST CHAPTER.

It was fortunate for the girl that the possession of money occasioned Mr. Sikes so much employment next day in the way of eating and drinking, and withal had so beneficial an effect in smoothing down the asperities of his temper that he had neither time nor inclination to be very critical upon her behaviour and deportment. That she had all the abstracted and nervous manner of one who is on the eve of some bold and hazardous step, which it has required no common struggle to resolve upon, would have been obvious to his lynx-eyed friend, the Jew, who would most probably have taken the alarm at once; but Mr. Sikes lacking the niceties of discrimination, and being troubled with no more subtle misgivings than those which resolve themselves into a dogged roughness of behaviour towards every body, and being, furthermore, in an unusually amiable condition, as has been already observed, saw nothing unusual in her demeanour, and

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indeed, troubled himself so little about her, that, had her agitation been far more perceptible than it was, it would have been very unlikely to have awakened his suspicions.

As the day closed in, the girl's excitement increased, and, when night came on, and she sat by, watching till the housebreaker should drink himself asleep, there was an unusual paleness in her cheek, and fire in her eye, that even Sikes observed with astonishment.

Mr. Sikes, being weak from the fever, was lying in bed, taking hot water with his gin to render it less inflammatory, and had pushed his glass towards Nancy to be replenished for the third or fourth time, when these symptoms first struck him.

"Why, burn my body!" said the man, raising himself on his hands as he stared the girl in the face. "You look like a corpse come to life again. What's the matter?" [48]

"Matter!" replied the girl. "Nothing. What do you look at me so hard for?"

"What foolery is this?" demanded Sikes, grasping her by the arm, and shaking her roughly. "What is it? What do you mean? What are you thinking of, ha?"

"Of many things, Bill," replied the girl, shuddering, and as she did so, pressing her hands upon her eyes. "But, Lord! what odds in that?"

The tone of forced gaiety in which the last words were spoken seemed to produce a deeper impression on Sikes than the wild and rigid look which had preceded them.

"I tell you wot it is," said Sikes, "if you haven't caught the fever, and got it comin' on now, there's something more than usual in the wind, and something dangerous, too. You're not a-going to— No, damme! you wouldn't do that!"

"Do what?" asked the girl.

"There ain't," said Sikes, fixing his eyes upon her, and muttering the words to himself, "there ain't a stauncher-hearted gal going, or I'd have cut her throat three months ago. She's got the fever coming on; that's it." [49]

Fortifying himself with this assurance, Sikes drained the glass to the bottom, and then, with many grumbling oaths, called for his physic. The girl jumped up with great alacrity, poured it quickly out, but with her back towards him: and held the vessel to his lips, while he drank it off.

"Now," said the robber, "come and sit aside of me, and put on your own face, or I'll alter it so that you won't know it again when you *do* want it."

The girl obeyed, and Sikes, locking her hand in his, fell back upon the pillow, turning his eyes upon her face. They closed, opened again; closed once more, again opened; the housebreaker shifted his position restlessly, and, after dozing again and again for two or three minutes, and as often springing up with a look of terror, and gazing vacantly about him, was suddenly stricken, as it were, while in the very attitude of rising, into a deep and heavy sleep. The grasp of his hand relaxed, the upraised arm fell languidly by his side, and he lay like one in a profound trance. [50]

"The laudanum has taken effect at last," murmured the girl as she rose from the bedside. "I may be too late even now."

She hastily dressed herself in her bonnet and shawl, looking fearfully round from time to time as if, despite the sleeping draught, she expected every moment to feel the pressure of Sikes's heavy hand upon her shoulder; then stooping softly over the bed, she kissed the robber's lips, and opening and closing the room-door with noiseless touch, hurried from the house.

A watchman was crying half-past nine down a dark passage through which she had to pass in gaining the main thoroughfare.

"Has it long gone the half-hour?" asked the girl.

"It'll strike the hour in another quarter," said the man, raising his lantern to her face.

"And I cannot get there in less than an hour or more," muttered Nancy, brushing swiftly past him and gliding rapidly down the street. [51]

Many of the shops were already closing in the back lanes and avenues through which she tracked her way in making from Spitalfields towards the West-End of London. The clock struck ten, increasing her impatience. She tore along the narrow pavement, elbowing the passengers from side to side and darting almost under the horses' heads, crossed crowded streets, where clusters of persons were eagerly watching their opportunity to do the like.

"The woman is mad!" said the people, turning to look after her as she rushed away.

When she reached the more wealthy quarter of the town, the streets were comparatively deserted, and here her headlong progress seemed to excite a greater curiosity in the stragglers whom she hurried past. Some quickened their pace behind, as though to see whither she was hastening at such an unusual rate; and a few made head upon her, and looked back, surprised at her undiminished speed, but they fell off one by one; and when she neared her place of destination she was alone. [52]

It was a family hotel in a quiet but handsome street near Hyde Park. As the brilliant light of the

lamp which burnt before its door guided her to the spot, the clock struck eleven. She had loitered for a few paces as though irresolute, and making up her mind to advance; but the sound determined her, and she stepped into the hall. The porter's seat was vacant. She looked round with an air of incertitude, and advanced towards the stairs.

"Now, young woman," said a smartly-dressed female, looking out from a door behind her, "who do you want here?"

"A lady who is stopping in this house," answered the girl.

"A lady!" was the reply, accompanied with a scornful look. "What lady, pray?"

"Miss Maylie," said Nancy.

The young woman, who had by this time noted her appearance, replied only by a look of virtuous disdain, and summoned a man to answer her. To him Nancy repeated her request. [53]

"What name am I to say?" asked the waiter.

"It's of no use saying any," replied Nancy.

"Nor business?" said the man.

"No, nor that neither," rejoined the girl. "I must see the lady."

"Come," said the man, pushing her towards the door, "none of this! Take yourself off, will you?"

"I shall be carried out if I go!" said the girl violently, "and I can make that a job that two of you won't like to do. Isn't there any body here," she said, looking round, "that will see a simple message carried for a poor wretch like me?"

This appeal produced an effect on a good-tempered-faced man-cook, who with some other of the servants was looking on, and who stepped forward to interfere.

"Take it up for her, Joe, can't you?" said this person. [54]

"What's the good?" replied the man. "You don't suppose the young lady will see such as her, do you?"

This allusion to Nancy's doubtful character raised a vast quantity of chaste wrath in the bosoms of four housemaids, who remarked with great fervour that the creature was a disgrace to her sex, and strongly advocated her being thrown ruthlessly into the kennel.

"Do what you like with me," said the girl, turning to the men again; "but do what I ask you first; and I ask you to give this message for God Almighty's sake."

The soft-hearted cook added his intercession, and the result was that the man who had first appeared undertook its delivery.

"What's it to be?" said the man, with one foot on the stairs.

"That a young woman earnestly asks to speak to Miss Maylie alone," said Nancy; "and, that if the lady will only hear the first word she has to say, she will know whether to hear her business, or have her turned out of doors as an impostor." [55]

"I say," said the man, "you're coming it strong!"

"You give the message," said the girl firmly, "and let me hear the answer."

The man ran up stairs, and Nancy remained pale and almost breathless, listening with quivering lip to the very audible expressions of scorn, of which the chaste housemaids were very prolific; and became still more so when the man returned, and said the young woman was to walk up stairs.

"It's no good being proper in this world," said the first housemaid.

"Brass can do better than the gold what has stood the fire," said the second.

The third contented herself with wondering "what ladies was made of;" and the fourth took the first in a quartette of "Shameful!" with which the Dianas concluded.

Regardless of all this—for she had weightier matters at heart—Nancy followed the man with trembling limbs to a small antechamber, lighted by a lamp from the ceiling, in which he left her, and retired. [56]

The girl's life had been squandered in the streets, and the most noisome of the stews and dens of London, but there was something of the woman's original nature left in her still; and when she heard a light step approaching the door opposite to that by which she had entered, and thought of the wide contrast which the small room would in another moment contain, she felt burdened with the sense of her own deep shame, and shrunk as though she could scarcely bear the presence of her with whom she had sought this interview.

But struggling with these better feelings was pride,—the vice of the lowest and most debased creatures no less than of the high and self-assured. The miserable companion of thieves and

ruffians, the fallen outcast of low haunts, the associate of the scourings of the jails and hulks, living within the shadow of the gallows itself,—even this degraded being felt too proud to betray one feeble gleam of the womanly feeling which she thought a weakness, but which alone connected her with that humanity, of which her wasting life had obliterated all outward traces when a very child.

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She raised her eyes sufficiently to observe that the figure which presented itself was that of a slight and beautiful girl, and then bending them on the ground, tossed her head with affected carelessness as she said,

“It’s a hard matter to get to see you, lady. If I had taken offence, and gone away, as many would have done, you’d have been sorry for it one day, and not without reason, either.”

“I am very sorry if any one has behaved harshly to you,” replied Rose. “Do not think of it; but tell me why you wished to see me. I am the person you inquired for.”

The kind tone of this answer, the sweet voice, the gentle manner, the absence of any accent of haughtiness or displeasure, took the girl completely by surprise, and she burst into tears.

“Oh, lady, lady!” she said, clasping her hands passionately before her face, “if there was more like you, there would be fewer like me,—there would—there would!”

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“Sit down,” said Rose earnestly; “you distress me. If you are in poverty or affliction I shall be truly happy to relieve you if I can,—I shall indeed. Sit down.”

“Let me stand, lady,” said the girl, still weeping, “and do not speak to me so kindly till you know me better. It is growing late. Is—is—that door shut?”

“Yes,” said Rose, recoiling a few steps, as if to be nearer assistance in case she should require it. “Why?”

“Because,” said the girl, “I am about to put my life and the lives of others in your hands. I am the girl that dragged little Oliver back to old Fagin’s, the Jew’s, on the night he went out from the house in Pentonville.”

“You!” said Rose Maylie.

“I, lady,” replied the girl. “I am the infamous creature you have heard of, that lives among the thieves, and that never from the first moment I can recollect my eyes and senses opening on London streets have known any better life, or kinder words than they have given me, so help me God! Do not mind shrinking openly from me, lady. I am younger than you would think, to look at me, but I am well used to it; the poorest women fall back as I make my way along the crowded pavement.”

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“What dreadful things are these!” said Rose, involuntarily falling from her strange companion.

“Thank Heaven upon your knees, dear lady,” cried the girl, “that you had friends to care for and keep you in your childhood, and that you were never in the midst of cold and hunger, and riot and drunkenness, and—and something worse than all—as I have been from my cradle; I may use the word, for the alley and the gutter were mine, as they will be my deathbed.”

“I pity you!” said Rose in a broken voice. “It wrings my heart to hear you!”

“God bless you for your goodness!” rejoined the girl. “If you knew what I am sometimes you would pity me, indeed. But I have stolen away from those who would surely murder me if they knew I had been here to tell you what I have overheard. Do you know a man named Monks?”

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“No,” said Rose.

“He knows you,” replied the girl; “and knew you were here, for it was by hearing him tell the place that I found you out.”

“I never heard the name,” said Rose.

“Then he goes by some other amongst us,” rejoined the girl, “which I more than thought before. Some time ago, and soon after Oliver was put into your house on the night of the robbery, I—suspecting this man—listened to a conversation held between him and Fagin in the dark. I found out from what I heard that Monks—the man I asked you about, you know—”

“Yes,” said Rose, “I understand.”

“—That Monks,” pursued the girl, “had seen him accidentally with two of our boys on the day we first lost him, and had known him directly to be the same child that he was watching for, though I couldn’t make out why. A bargain was struck with Fagin, that if Oliver was got back he should have a certain sum; and he was to have more for making him a thief, which this Monks wanted for some purpose of his own.”

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“For what purpose?” asked Rose.

“He caught sight of my shadow on the wall as I listened in the hope of finding out,” said the girl; “and there are not many people besides me that could have got out of their way in time to escape discovery. But I did; and I saw him no more till last night.”

"And what occurred then?"

"I'll tell you, lady. Last night he came again. Again they went up stairs, and I, wrapping myself up so that my shadow should not betray me, again listened at the door. The first words I heard Monks say were these: 'So the only proofs of the boy's identity lie at the bottom of the river, and the old hag that received them from the mother is rotting in her coffin.' They laughed, and talked of his success in doing this; and Monks, talking on about the boy, and getting very wild, said, that though he had got the young devil's money safely now, he'd rather have had it the other way; for, what a game it would have been to have brought down the boast of the father's will, by driving him through every jail in town, and then hauling him up for some capital felony, which Fagin could easily manage, after having made a good profit of him besides."

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"What is all this!" said Rose.

"The truth, lady, though it comes from my lips," replied the girl. "Then he said with oaths common enough in my ears, but strangers to yours, that if he could gratify his hatred by taking the boy's life without bringing his own neck in danger, he would; but, as he couldn't, he'd be upon the watch to meet him at every turn in life and if he took advantage of his birth and history, he might harm him yet. 'In short, Fagin,' he says, 'Jew as you are, you never laid such snares as I'll contrive for my young brother, Oliver.'"

"His brother!" exclaimed Rose, clasping her hands.

"Those were his words," said Nancy, glancing uneasily round, as she had scarcely ceased to do, since she began to speak, for a vision of Sikes haunted her perpetually. "And more. When he spoke of you and the other lady, and said it seemed contrived by Heaven, or the devil, against him, that Oliver should come into your hands, he laughed, and said there was some comfort in that too, for how many thousands and hundreds of thousands of pounds would you not give, if you had them, to know who your two-legged spaniel was."

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"You do not mean," said Rose, turning very pale, "to tell me that this was said in earnest."

"He spoke in hard and angry earnest, if a man ever did," replied the girl, shaking her head. "He is an earnest man when his hatred is up. I know many who do worse things; but I'd rather listen to them all a dozen times than to that Monks once. It is growing late, and I have to reach home without suspicion of having been on such an errand as this. I must get back quickly."

"But what can I do?" said Rose. "To what use can I turn this communication without you? Back! Why do you wish to return to companions you paint in such terrible colours. If you repeat this information to a gentleman whom I can summon in one instant from the next room, you can be consigned to some place of safety without half an hour's delay."

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"I wish to go back," said the girl. "I must go back, because—how can I tell such things to an innocent lady like you?—because among the men I have told you of, there is one the most desperate among them all that I can't leave; no—not even to be saved from the life I am leading now."

"Your having interfered in this dear boy's behalf before," said Rose; "your coming here at so great a risk to tell me what you have heard; your manner, which convinces me of the truth of what you say; your evident contrition, and sense of shame, all lead me to believe that you might be yet reclaimed. Oh!" said the earnest girl, folding her hands as the tears coursed down her face, "do not turn a deaf ear to the entreaties of one of your own sex; the first—the first, I do believe, who ever appealed to you in the voice of pity and compassion. Do hear my words, and let me save you yet for better things."

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"Lady," cried the girl, sinking on her knees, "dear, sweet, angel lady, you *are* the first that ever blessed me with such words as these, and if I had heard them years ago, they might have turned me from a life of sin and sorrow; but it is too late—it is too late!"

"It is never too late," said Rose, "for penitence and atonement."

"It is," cried the girl, writhing in the agony of her mind; "I cannot leave him now—I could not be his death."

"Why should you be?" asked Rose.

"Nothing could save him," cried the girl. "If I told others what I have told you, and led to their being taken, he would be sure to die. He is the boldest, and has been so cruel!"

"Is it possible," cried Rose, "that for such a man as this you can resign every future hope, and the certainty of immediate rescue? It is madness."

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"I don't know what it is," answered the girl; "I only know that it is so, and not with me alone, but with hundreds of others as bad and wretched as myself. I must go back. Whether it is God's wrath for the wrong I have done, I do not know; but I am drawn back to him through every suffering and ill usage, and should be, I believe, if I knew that I was to die by his hand at last."

"What am I to do?" said Rose. "I should not let you depart from me thus."

"You should, lady, and I know you will," rejoined the girl, rising. "You will not stop my going because I have trusted in your goodness, and forced no promise from you, as I might have done."

"Of what use, then, is the communication you have made?" said Rose. "This mystery must be investigated, or how will its disclosure to me benefit Oliver, whom you are anxious to serve?"

"You must have some kind gentleman about you that will hear it as a secret, and advise you what to do," rejoined the girl. [67]

"But where can I find you again when it is necessary?" asked Rose. "I do not seek to know where these dreadful people live, but where will you be walking or passing at any settled period from this time?"

"Will you promise me that you will have my secret strictly kept, and come alone, or with the only other person that knows it, and that I shall not be watched or followed?" asked the girl.

"I promise you solemnly," answered Rose.

"Every Sunday night, from eleven until the clock strikes twelve," said the girl without hesitation, "I will walk on London Bridge if I am alive."

"Stay another moment," interposed Rose, as the girl moved hurriedly towards the door. "Think once again on your own condition, and the opportunity you have of escaping from it. You have a claim on me: not only as the voluntary bearer of this intelligence, but as a woman lost almost beyond redemption, Will you return to this gang of robbers and to this man, when a word can save you? What fascination is it that can take you back, and make you cling to wickedness and misery? Oh! is there no chord in your heart that I can touch—is there nothing left to which I can appeal against this terrible infatuation?" [68]

"When ladies as young, and good, and beautiful as you are," replied the girl steadily, "give away your hearts, love will carry you all lengths—even such as you who have home, friends, other admirers, every thing to fill them. When such as me, who have no certain roof but the coffin-lid, and no friend in sickness or death but the hospital nurse, set our rotten hearts on any man, and let him fill the place that parents, home, and friends filled once, or that has been a blank through all our wretched lives, who can hope to cure us? Pity us, lady—pity us for having only one feeling of the woman left, and for having that turned by a heavy judgment from a comfort and a pride into a new means of violence and suffering." [69]

"You will," said Rose, after a pause, "take some money from me, which may enable you to live without dishonesty—at all events until we meet again?"

"Not a penny," replied the girl, waving her hand.

"Do not close your heart against all my efforts to help you," said Rose, stepping gently forward. "I wish to serve you indeed."

"You would serve me best, lady," replied the girl, wringing her hands, "if you could take my life at once; for I have felt more grief to think of what I am to-night than I ever did before, and it would be something not to die in the same hell in which I have lived. God bless you, sweet lady, and send as much happiness on your head as I have brought shame on mine!"

Thus speaking, and sobbing aloud, the unhappy creature turned away; while Rose Maylie, overpowered by this extraordinary interview, which bore more the semblance of a rapid dream than an actual occurrence, sank into a chair, and endeavoured to collect her wandering thoughts. [70]

CHAPTER XL.

 [71]

CONTAINING FRESH DISCOVERIES, AND SHOWING THAT SURPRISES, LIKE MISFORTUNES, SELDOM COME ALONE.

HER situation was indeed one of no common trial and difficulty, for while she felt the most eager and burning desire to penetrate the mystery in which Oliver's history was enveloped, she could not but hold sacred the confidence which the miserable woman with whom she had just conversed had reposed in her, as a young and guileless girl. Her words and manner had touched Rose Maylie's heart, and mingled with her love for her young charge, and scarcely less intense in its truth and fervour, was her fond wish to win the outcast back to repentance and hope.

They only proposed remaining in London three days, prior to departing for some weeks to a distant part of the coast. It was now midnight of the first day. What course of action could she determine upon which could be adopted in eight-and-forty hours? or how could she postpone the journey without exciting suspicion? [72]

Mr. Losberne was with them, and would be for the next two days; but Rose was too well acquainted with the excellent gentleman's impetuosity, and foresaw too clearly the wrath with which, in the first explosion of his indignation, he would regard the instrument of Oliver's recapture, to trust him with the secret, when her representations in the girl's behalf could be seconded by no experienced person. These were all reasons for the greatest caution and most circumspect behaviour in communicating it to Mrs. Maylie, whose first impulse would infallibly be to hold a conference with the worthy doctor on the subject. As to resorting to any legal adviser, even if she had known how to do so, it was scarcely to be thought of, for the same reasons. Once the thought occurred to her of seeking assistance from Harry; but this awakened [73]

the recollection of their last parting, and it seemed unworthy of her to call him back, when—the tears rose to her eyes as she pursued this train of reflection—he might have by this time learnt to forget her, and to be happier away.

Disturbed by these different reflections—inclining now to one course and then to another, and again recoiling from all as each successive consideration presented itself to her mind, Rose passed a sleepless and anxious night, and, after more communing with herself next day, arrived at the desperate conclusion of consulting Harry Maylie.

“If it be painful to him,” she thought, “to come back here, how painful will it be to me! But perhaps he will not come; he may write, or he may come himself, and studiously abstain from meeting me—he did when he went away. I hardly thought he would; but it was better for us both—a great deal better.” And here Rose dropped the pen and turned away, as though the very paper which was to be her messenger should not see her weep.

She had taken up the same pen and laid it down again fifty times, and had considered and re-considered the very first line of her letter without writing the first word, when Oliver, who had been walking in the streets with Mr. Giles for a body-guard, entered the room in such breathless haste and violent agitation, as seemed to betoken some new cause of alarm. [74]

“What makes you look so flurried?” asked Rose, advancing to meet him. “Speak to me, Oliver.”

“I hardly know how; I feel as if I should be choked,” replied the boy. “Oh dear! to think that I should see him at last, and you should be able to know that I have told you all the truth!”

“I never thought you had told us any thing but the truth, dear,” said Rose, soothing him. “But what is this?—of whom do you speak?”

“I have seen the gentleman,” replied Oliver, scarcely able to articulate, “the gentleman who was so good to me—Mr. Brownlow, that we have so often talked about.”

“Where?” asked Rose.

“Getting out of a coach,” replied Oliver, shedding tears of delight, “and going into a house. I didn’t speak to him—I couldn’t speak to him, for he didn’t see me, and I trembled so, that I was not able to go up to him. But Giles asked for me whether he lived there, and they said he did. Look here,” said Oliver, opening a scrap of paper, “here it is; here’s where he lives—I’m going there directly. Oh, dear me, dear me! what shall I do when I come to see him and hear him speak again!” [75]

With her attention not a little distracted by these and a great many other incoherent exclamations of joy, Rose read the address, which was Craven-street, in the Strand, and very soon determined upon turning the discovery to account.

“Quick!” she said, “tell them to fetch a hackney-coach, and be ready to go with me. I will take you there directly, without a minute’s loss of time. I will only tell my aunt that we are going out for an hour, and be ready as soon as you are.”

Oliver needed no prompting to despatch, and in little more than five minutes they were on their way to Craven-street. When they arrived there, Rose left Oliver in the coach under pretence of preparing the old gentleman to receive him, and sending up her card by the servant, requested to see Mr. Brownlow on very pressing business. The servant soon returned to beg that she would walk up stairs, and, following him into an upper room, Miss Maylie was presented to an elderly gentleman of benevolent appearance, in a bottle-green coat; at no great distance from whom was seated another old gentleman, in nankeen breeches and gaiters, who did not look particularly benevolent, and who was sitting with his hands clasped on the top of a thick stick, and his chin propped thereupon. [76]

“Dear me,” said the gentleman, in the bottle-green coat, hastily rising with great politeness, “I beg your pardon, young lady—I imagined it was some importunate person who—I beg you will excuse me. Be seated, pray.”

“Mr. Brownlow, I believe, sir?” said Rose, glancing from the other gentleman to the one who had spoken. [77]

“That is my name,” said the old gentleman. “This is my friend, Mr. Grimwig. Grimwig, will you leave us for a few minutes?”

“I believe,” interposed Miss Maylie, “that at this period of our interview I need not give that gentleman the trouble of going away. If I am correctly informed, he is cognizant of the business on which I wish to speak to you.”

Mr. Brownlow inclined his head, and Mr. Grimwig, who had made one very stiff bow, and risen from his chair, made another very stiff bow, and dropped into it again.

“I shall surprise you very much, I have no doubt,” said Rose, naturally embarrassed; “but you once showed great benevolence and goodness to a very dear young friend of mine, and I am sure you will take an interest in hearing of him again.”

“Indeed!” said Mr. Brownlow. “May I ask his name?”

“Oliver Twist you knew him as,” replied Rose. [78]

The words no sooner escaped her lips than Mr. Grimwig, who had been affecting to dip into a large book that lay on the table, upset it with a great crash, and falling back in his chair, discharged from his features every expression but one of the most unmitigated wonder, and indulged in a prolonged and vacant stare; then, as if ashamed of having betrayed so much emotion, he jerked himself, as it were, by a convulsion into his former attitude, and looking out straight before him emitted a long, deep whistle, which seemed at last not to be discharged on empty air, but to die away in the inmost recesses of his stomach.

Mr. Brownlow was no less surprised, although his astonishment was not expressed in the same eccentric manner. He drew his chair nearer to Miss Maylie's, and said,

"Do me the favour, my dear young lady, to leave entirely out of the question that goodness and benevolence of which you speak, and of which nobody else knows any thing, and if you have it in your power to produce any evidence which will alter the unfavourable opinion I was once induced to entertain of that poor child, in Heaven's name put me in possession of it." [79]

"A bad one—I'll eat my head if he is not a bad one," growled Mr. Grimwig, speaking by some ventriloquial power, without moving a muscle of his face.

"He is a child of a noble nature and a warm heart," said Rose, colouring; "and that Power which has thought fit to try him beyond his years has planted in his breast affections and feelings which would do honour to many who have numbered his days six times over."

"I'm only sixty-one," said Mr. Grimwig, with the same rigid face, "and, as the devil's in it if this Oliver is not twelve at least, I don't see the application of that remark."

"Do not heed my friend, Miss Maylie," said Mr. Brownlow; "he does not mean what he says."

"Yes, he does," growled Mr. Grimwig.

"No, he does not," said Mr. Brownlow, obviously rising in wrath as he spoke.

"He'll eat his head, if he doesn't," growled Mr. Grimwig. [80]

"He would deserve to have it knocked off, if he does," said Mr. Brownlow.

"And he'd uncommonly like to see any man offer to do it," responded Mr. Grimwig, knocking his stick upon the floor.

Having gone thus far, the two old gentlemen severally took snuff, and afterwards shook hands, according to their invariable custom.

"Now, Miss Maylie," said Mr. Brownlow, "to return to the subject in which your humanity is so much interested. Will you let me know what intelligence you have of this poor child: allowing me to premise that I exhausted every means in my power of discovering him, and that since I have been absent from this country, my first impression that he had imposed upon me, and been persuaded by his former associates to rob me, has been considerably shaken."

Rose, who had had time to collect her thoughts, at once related in a few natural words all that had befallen Oliver since he left Mr. Brownlow's house, reserving Nancy's information for that gentleman's private ear, and concluding with the assurance that his only sorrow for some months past had been the not being able to meet with his former benefactor and friend. [81]

"Thank God!" said the old gentleman "this is great happiness to me, great happiness. But you have not told me where he is now, Miss Maylie. You must pardon my finding fault with you,—but why not have brought him?"

"He is waiting in a coach at the door," replied Rose.

"At this door!" cried the old gentleman. With which he hurried out of the room, down the stairs, up the coach-steps, and into the coach, without another word.

When the room-door closed behind him, Mr. Grimwig lifted up his head, and converting one of the hind legs of his chair into a pivot described three distinct circles with the assistance of his stick and the table: sitting in it all the time. After performing this evolution, he rose and limped as fast as he could up and down the room at least a dozen times, and then stopping suddenly before Rose, kissed her without the slightest preface. [82]

"Hush!" he said, as the young lady rose in some alarm at this unusual proceeding, "don't be afraid; I'm old enough to be your grandfather. You're a sweet girl—I like you. Here they are."

In fact, as he threw himself at one dexterous dive into his former seat, Mr. Brownlow returned accompanied by Oliver, whom Mr. Grimwig received very graciously; and if the gratification of that moment had been the only reward for all her anxiety and care in Oliver's behalf, Rose Maylie would have been well repaid.

"There is somebody else who should not be forgotten, by the by," said Mr. Brownlow, ringing the bell. "Send Mrs. Bedwin here, if you please."

The old housekeeper answered the summons with all despatch, and dropping a curtsy at the door, waited for orders. [83]

"Why, you get blinder every day, Bedwin," said Mr. Brownlow, rather testily.

"Well, that I do, sir," replied the old lady. "People's eyes, at my time of life, don't improve with age, sir."

"I could have told you that," rejoined Mr. Brownlow; "but put on your glasses, and see if you can't find out what you were wanted for, will you?"

The old lady began to rummage in her pocket for her spectacles; but Oliver's patience was not proof against this new trial, and yielding to his first impulse, he sprung into her arms.

"God be good to me!" cried the old lady, embracing him; "it is my innocent boy!"

"My dear old nurse!" cried Oliver.

"He would come back—I knew he would," said the old lady, holding him in her arms. "How well he looks, and how like a gentleman's son he is dressed again! Where have you been this long, long while? Ah! the same sweet face, but not so pale; the same soft eye, but not so sad. I have never forgotten them or his quiet smile, but seen them every day side by side with those of my own dear children, dead and gone since I was a young lightsome creature." Running on thus, and now holding Oliver from her to mark how he had grown, now clasping him to her and passing her fingers fondly through his hair, the poor soul laughed and wept upon his neck by turns.

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Leaving her and Oliver to compare notes at leisure, Mr. Brownlow led the way into another room, and there heard from Rose a full narration of her interview with Nancy, which occasioned him no little surprise and perplexity. Rose also explained her reasons for not making a confident of her friend Mr. Losberne in the first instance; the old gentleman considered that she had acted prudently, and readily undertook to hold solemn conference with the worthy doctor himself. To afford him an early opportunity for the execution of this design, it was arranged that he should call at the hotel at eight o'clock that evening, and that in the mean time Mrs. Maylie should be cautiously informed of all that had occurred. These preliminaries adjusted, Rose and Oliver returned home.

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Rose had by no means overrated the measure of the good doctor's wrath, for Nancy's history was no sooner unfolded to him than he poured forth a shower of mingled threats and execrations; threatened to make her the first victim of the combined ingenuity of Messrs. Blathers and Duff, and actually put on his hat preparatory to sallying forth immediately to obtain the assistance of those worthies. And doubtless he would, in this first outbreak, have carried the intention into effect without a moment's consideration of the consequences if he had not been restrained, in part, by corresponding violence on the side of Mr. Brownlow, who was himself of an irascible temperament, and partly by such arguments and representations as seemed best calculated to dissuade him from his hotbrained purpose.

"Then what the devil is to be done?" said the impetuous doctor, when they had rejoined the two ladies. "Are we to pass a vote of thanks to all these vagabonds, male and female, and beg them to accept a hundred pounds or so apiece as a trifling mark of our esteem, and some slight acknowledgment of their kindness to Oliver?"

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"Not exactly that," rejoined Mr. Brownlow laughing; "but we must proceed gently and with great care."

"Gentleness and care!" exclaimed the doctor. "I'd send them one and all to——"

"Never mind where," interposed Mr. Brownlow. "But reflect whether sending them any where is likely to attain the object we have in view."

"What object?" asked the doctor.

"Simply the discovery of Oliver's parentage, and regaining for him the inheritance of which, if this story be true, he has been fraudulently deprived."

"Ah!" said Mr. Losberne, cooling himself with his pocket-handkerchief; "I almost forgot that."

"You see," pursued Mr. Brownlow, "placing this poor girl entirely out of the question, and supposing it were possible to bring these scoundrels to justice without compromising her safety, what good should we bring about?"

[87]

"Hanging a few of them at least, in all probability," suggested the doctor, "and transporting the rest."

"Very good," replied Mr. Brownlow smiling, "but no doubt they will bring that about themselves in the fulness of time, and if we step in to forestal them, it seems to me that we shall be performing a very Quixotic act in direct opposition to our own interest, or at least to Oliver's, which is the same thing."

"How?" inquired the doctor.

"Thus. It is quite clear that we shall have the most extreme difficulty in getting to the bottom of this mystery, unless we can bring this man, Monks, upon his knees. That can only be done by stratagem, and by catching him when he is not surrounded by these people. For, suppose he were apprehended, we have no proof against him. He is not even (so far as we know, or as the facts appear to us) concerned with the gang in any of their robberies. If he were not discharged, it is very unlikely that he could receive any further punishment than being committed to prison as a rogue and vagabond, and of course ever afterwards his mouth is so obstinately closed that he

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might as well, for our purposes, be deaf, dumb, blind, and an idiot."

"Then," said the doctor impetuously, "I put it to you again, whether you think it reasonable that this promise to the girl should be considered binding; a promise made with the best and kindest intentions, but really—"

"Do not discuss the point, my dear young lady, pray," said Mr. Brownlow interrupting Rose as she was about to speak. "The promise shall be kept. I don't think it will in the slightest degree interfere with our proceedings. But before we can resolve upon any precise course of action, it will be necessary to see the girl, to ascertain from her whether she will point out this Monks on the understanding that she is to be dealt with by us, and not by the law; or if she will not or cannot do that, to procure from her such an account of his haunts and description of his person as will enable us to identify him. She cannot be seen until next Sunday night; this is Tuesday. I would suggest that, in the mean time, we remain perfectly quiet, and keep these matters secret even from Oliver himself."

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Although Mr. Losberne received with many wry faces a proposal involving a delay of five whole days, he was fain to admit that no better course occurred to him just then; and as both Rose and Mrs. Maylie sided very strongly with Mr. Brownlow, that gentleman's proposition was carried unanimously.

"I should like," he said, "to call in the aid of my friend Grimwig. He is a strange creature, but a shrewd one, and might prove of material assistance to us; I should say that he was bred a lawyer, and quitted the bar in disgust because he had only one brief and a motion of course in ten years, though whether that is a recommendation or not, you must determine for yourselves."

"I have no objection to your calling in your friend if I may call in mine," said the doctor.

"We must put it to the vote," replied Mr. Brownlow, "who may he be?"

[90]

"That lady's son, and this young lady's—very old friend," said the doctor, motioning towards Mrs. Maylie, and concluding with an expressive glance at her niece.

Rose blushed deeply, but she did not make any audible objection to this motion (possibly she felt in a hopeless minority), and Harry Maylie and Mr. Grimwig were accordingly added to the committee.

"We stay in town of course," said Mrs. Maylie, "while there remains the slightest prospect of prosecuting this inquiry with a chance of success. I will spare neither trouble nor expense in behalf of the object in whom we are all so deeply interested, and I am content to remain here, if it be for twelve months, so long as you assure me that any hope remains."

"Good," rejoined Mr. Brownlow, "and as I see on the faces about me a disposition to inquire how it happened that I was not in the way to corroborate Oliver's tale, and had so suddenly left the kingdom, let me stipulate that I shall be asked no questions until such time as I may deem it expedient to forestal them by telling my own story. Believe me that I make this request with good reason, for I might otherwise excite hopes destined never to be realized, and only increase difficulties and disappointments already quite numerous enough. Come; supper has been announced, and young Oliver, who is all alone in the next room, will have begun to think, by this time, that we have wearied of his company, and entered into some dark conspiracy to thrust him forth upon the world."

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With these words the old gentleman gave his hand to Mrs. Maylie, and escorted her into the supper-room. Mr. Losberne followed, leading Rose, and the council was for the present effectually broken up.

CHAPTER XLI.

[92]

AN OLD ACQUAINTANCE OF OLIVER'S, EXHIBITING DECIDED MARKS OF GENIUS, BECOMES A PUBLIC CHARACTER IN THE METROPOLIS.

UPON the very same night when Nancy, having lulled Mr. Sikes to sleep, hurried on her self-imposed mission to Rose Maylie, there advanced towards London by the Great North Road two persons, upon whom it is expedient that this history should bestow some attention.

They were a man and woman, or perhaps they would be better described as a male and female; for the former was one of those long-limbed, knock-kneed, shambling, bony figures, to whom it is difficult to assign any precise age,—looking as they do, when they are yet boys, like undergrown men, and when they are almost men, like overgrown boys. The woman was young, but of a robust and hardy make, as she need have been to bear the weight of the heavy bundle which was strapped to her back. Her companion was not encumbered with much luggage, as there merely dangled from a stick which he carried over his shoulder a small parcel wrapped in a common handkerchief, and apparently light enough. This circumstance, added to the length of his legs, which were of unusual extent, enabled him with much ease to keep some half-dozen paces in advance of his companion, to whom he occasionally turned with an impatient jerk of the head as if reproaching her tardiness, and urging her to greater exertion.

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Thus they toiled along the dusty road, taking little heed of any object within sight, save when

they stepped aside to allow a wider passage for the mail-coaches which were whirling out of town, until they passed through Highgate archway, when the foremost traveller stopped and called impatiently to his companion,

"Come on, can't yer? What a lazybones yer are, Charlotte."

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"It's a heavy load, I can tell you," said the female, coming up almost breathless with fatigue.

"Heavy! What are yer talking about?—what are yer made for?" rejoined the male traveller, changing his own little bundle as he spoke, to the other shoulder. "Oh, there yer are, resting again! Well, if yer ain't enough to tire any body's patience out, I don't know what is."

"Is it much farther?" asked the woman, resting herself on a bank, and looking up with the perspiration streaming from her face.

"Much farther! Yer as good as there," said the long-legged trumper pointing out before him. "Look there—those are the lights of London."

"They're a good two mile off at least," said the woman despondingly.

"Never mind whether they're two mile off or twenty," said Noah Claypole, for he it was; "but get up and come on, or I'll kick yer; and so I give yer notice."

[95]

As Noah's red nose grew redder with anger, and as he crossed the road while speaking, as if fully prepared to put his threat into execution, the woman rose without any further remark and trudged onwards by his side.

"Where do you mean to stop for the night, Noah?" she asked, after they had walked a few hundred yards.

"How should I know?" replied Noah, whose temper had been considerably impaired by walking.

"Near, I hope," said Charlotte.

"No, not near," replied Mr. Claypole; "there—not near; so don't think it."

"Why not?"

"When I tell yer that I don't mean to do a thing, that's enough, without any why, or because either," replied Mr. Claypole with dignity.

"Well, you needn't be so cross," said his companion.

"A pretty thing it would be, wouldn't it, to go and stop at the very first public-house outside the town, so that Sowerberry, if he come up after us, might poke in his old nose, and have us taken back in a cart with handcuffs on," said Mr. Claypole in a jeering tone. "No, I shall go and lose myself among the narrowest streets I can find, and not stop till we come to the very out-of-the-wayest house I can set eyes on. 'Cod, yer may thank yer stars I've got a head; for if we hadn't gone at first the wrong road on purpose, and come back across country, yer'd have been locked up hard and fast a week ago, my lady, and serve yer right for being a fool."

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"I know I ain't as cunning as you are," replied Charlotte; "but don't put all the blame on me, and say I should have been locked up. You would have been if I had been, any way."

"Yer took the money from the till, yer know yer did," said Mr. Claypole.

"I took it for you, Noah, dear," rejoined Charlotte.

"Did I keep it?" asked Mr. Claypole.

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"No; you trusted in me, and let me carry it like a dear, and so you are," said the lady, chucking him under the chin, and drawing her arm through his.

This was indeed the case; but as it was not Mr. Claypole's habit to repose a blind and foolish confidence in any body, it should be observed, in justice to that gentleman, that he had trusted Charlotte to this extent, in order that, if they were pursued, the money might be found on her, which would leave him an opportunity of asserting his utter innocence of any theft, and greatly facilitate his chances of escape. Of course he entered at this juncture into no explanation of his motives, and they walked on very lovingly together.

In pursuance of this cautious plan, Mr. Claypole went on without halting until he arrived at the Angel at Islington, where he wisely judged, from the crowd of passengers and number of vehicles, that London began in earnest. Just pausing to observe which appeared the most crowded streets, and consequently the most to be avoided, he crossed into Saint John's Road, and was soon deep in the obscurity of the intricate and dirty ways which, lying between Gray's Inn Lane and Smithfield, render that part of the town one of the lowest and worst that improvement has left in the midst of London.

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Through these streets Noah Claypole walked, dragging Charlotte after him, now stepping into the kennel to embrace at a glance the whole external character of some small public-house, and now jogging on again as some fancied appearance induced him to believe it too public for his purpose. At length he stopped in front of one more humble in appearance and more dirty than

any he had yet seen; and, having crossed over and surveyed it from the opposite pavement, graciously announced his intention of putting up there for the night.

"So give us the bundle," said Noah, unstrapping it from the woman's shoulders, and slinging it over his own; "and don't yer speak except when yer spoken to. What's the name of the house—t-h-r—three what?"

"Cripples," said Charlotte.

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"Three Cripples," repeated Noah, "and a very good sign too. Now, then, keep close at my heels, and come along." With these injunctions, he pushed the rattling door with his shoulder, and entered the house followed by his companion.

There was nobody in the bar but a young Jew, who, with his two elbows on the counter, was reading a dirty newspaper. He stared very hard at Noah, and Noah stared very hard at him.

If Noah had been attired in his charity-boy's dress, there might have been some reason for the Jew's opening his eyes so wide; but as he had discarded the coat and badge, and wore a short smock-frock over his leathers, there seemed no particular reason for his appearance exciting so much attention in a public-house.

"Is this the Three Cripples?" asked Noah.

"That is the dabe of this house," replied the Jew.

"A gentleman we met on the road coming up from the country recommended us here," said Noah, nudging Charlotte, perhaps to call her attention to this most ingenious device for attracting respect, and perhaps to warn her to betray no surprise. "We want to sleep here to-night."

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"I'b dot certaid you cad," said Barney, who was the attendant sprite; "but I'll idquire."

"Show us the tap, and give us a bit of cold meat and a drop of beer while yer inquiring, will yer?" said Noah.

Barney complied by ushering them into a small back-room, and setting the required viands before them; having done which, he informed the travellers that they could be lodged that night, and left the amiable couple to their refreshment.

Now, this back-room was immediately behind the bar, and some steps lower, so that any person connected with the house, undrawing a small curtain which concealed a single pane of glass fixed in the wall of the last-named apartment, about five feet from its flooring, could not only look down upon any guests in the back-room without any great hazard of being observed (the glass being in a dark angle of the wall, between which and a large upright beam the observer had to thrust himself), but could, by applying his ear to the partition, ascertain with tolerable distinctness their subject of conversation. The landlord of the house had not withdrawn his eye from this place of espial for five minutes, and Barney had only just returned from making the communication above related, when Fagin, in the course of his evening's business came into the bar to inquire after some of his young pupils.

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"Hush!" said Barney: "stradegers id the next roob."

"Strangers!" repeated the old man in a whisper.

"Ah! ad rub uds too," added Barney. "Frob the cuttry, but subthig in your way, or I'b bistaked."

Fagin appeared to receive this communication with great interest, and, mounting on a stool, cautiously applied his eye to the pane of glass, from which secret post he could see Mr. Claypole taking cold beef from the dish and porter from the pot, and administering homœopathic doses of both to Charlotte, who sat patiently by, eating and drinking at his pleasure.

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"Aha!" whispered the Jew, looking round to Barney, "I like the fellow's looks. He'd be of use to us; he knows how to train the girl already. Don't make as much noise as a mouse, my dear, and let me hear 'em talk—let me hear 'em."

The Jew again applied his eye to the glass, and turning his ear to the partition, listened attentively, with a subtle and eager look upon his face that might have appertained to some old goblin.

"So I mean to be a gentleman," said Mr. Claypole, kicking out his legs, and continuing a conversation, the commencement of which Fagin had arrived too late to hear. "No more jolly old coffins, Charlotte, but a gentleman's life for me; and, if yer like, yer shall be a lady."

"I should like that well enough, dear," replied Charlotte; "but tills ain't to be emptied every day, and people to get clear off after it."

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"Tills be blowed!" said Mr. Claypole; "there's more things besides tills to be emptied."

"What do you mean?" asked his companion.

"Pockets, women's ridicules, houses, mail-coaches, banks," said Mr. Claypole, rising with the porter.

"But you can't do all that, dear," said Charlotte.

"I shall look out to get into company with them as can," replied Noah. "They'll be able to make us useful some way or another. Why, you yourself are worth fifty women; I never see such a precious sly and deceitful creetur as yer can be when I let yer."

"Lor, how nice it is to hear you say so!" exclaimed Charlotte, imprinting a kiss upon his ugly face.

"There, that'll do: don't yer be too affectionate, in case I'm cross with yer," said Noah, disengaging himself with great gravity. "I should like to be the captain of some band, and have the whopping of 'em, and follering 'em about, unbeknown to themselves. That would suit me, if there was good profit; and if we could only get in with some gentlemen of this sort, I say it would be cheap at that twenty-pound note you've got,—especially as we don't very well know how to get rid of it ourselves."

[104]

After expressing this opinion, Mr. Claypole looked into the porter-pot with an aspect of deep wisdom, and having well shaken its contents, nodded condescendingly to Charlotte, and took a draught, wherewith he appeared greatly refreshed. He was meditating another, when the sudden opening of the door and appearance of a stranger interrupted him.

The stranger was Mr. Fagin, and very amiable he looked, and a very low bow he made as he advanced, and, setting himself down at the nearest table, ordered something to drink of the grinning Barney.



The Jew & Morris Bolter begin to understand each other.

"A pleasant night, sir, but cool for the time of year," said Fagin, rubbing his hands. "From the country, I see, sir?"

[105]

"How do yer see that?" asked Noah Claypole.

"We have not so much dust as that in London," replied the Jew, pointing from Noah's shoes to those of his companion, and from them to the two bundles.

"Yer a sharp feller," said Noah. "Ha! ha! only hear that, Charlotte!"

"Why, one need be sharp in this town, my dear," replied the Jew, sinking his voice to a confidential whisper, "and that's the truth."

The Jew followed up this remark by striking the side of his nose with his right forefinger,—a gesture which Noah attempted to imitate, though not with complete success, in consequence of his own nose not being large enough for the purpose. However, Mr. Fagin seemed to interpret the endeavour as expressing a perfect coincidence with his opinion, and put about the liquor which Barney reappeared with, in a very friendly manner.

"Good stuff that," observed Mr. Claypole, smacking his lips.

[106]

"Dear," said Fagin. "A man need be always emptying a till, or a pocket, or a woman's reticule, or a house, or a mail-coach, or a bank, if he drinks it regularly."

Mr. Claypole no sooner heard this extract from his own remarks than he fell back in his chair, and looked from the Jew to Charlotte with a countenance of ashy paleness and excessive terror.

"Don't mind me, my dear," said Fagin, drawing his chair closer. "Ha! ha! it was lucky it was only me that heard you by chance. It was very lucky it was only me."

"I didn't take it," stammered Noah, no longer stretching out his legs like an independent gentleman, but coiling them up as well as he could under his chair; "it was all her doing: yer've got it now, Charlotte, yer know yer have."

"No matter who's got it, or who did it, my dear!" replied Fagin, glancing, nevertheless, with a hawk's eye at the girl and the two bundles. "I'm in that way myself, and I like you for it." [107]

"In what way?" asked Mr. Claypole, a little recovering.

"In that way of business," rejoined Fagin, "and so are the people of the house. You've hit the right nail upon the head, and are as safe here as you could be. There is not a safer place in all this town than is the Cripples; that is, when I like to make it so, and I've taken a fancy to you and the young woman; so I've said the word, and you may make your minds easy."

Noah Claypole's mind might have been at ease after this assurance, but his body certainly was not, for he shuffled and writhed about into various uncouth positions, eyeing his new friend meanwhile with mingled fear and suspicion.

"I'll tell you more," said the Jew, after he had reassured the girl, by dint of friendly nods and muttered encouragements. "I have got a friend that I think can gratify your darling wish and put you in the right way, where you can take whatever department of the business you think will suit you best at first, and be taught all the others." [108]

"Yer speak as if yer were in earnest," replied Noah.

"What advantage would it be to me to be anything else?" inquired the Jew, shrugging his shoulders. "Here. Let me have a word with you outside."

"There's no occasion to trouble ourselves to move," said Noah, getting his legs by gradual degrees abroad again. "She'll take the luggage up stairs the while. Charlotte, see to them bundles."

This mandate, which had been delivered with great majesty, was obeyed without the slightest demur, and Charlotte made the best of her way off with the packages while Noah held the door open, and watched her out.

"She's kept tolerably well under, ain't she, sir?" he asked as he resumed his seat, in the tone of a keeper who has tamed some wild animal.

"Quite perfect," rejoined Fagin, clapping him on the shoulder. "You're a genius, my dear."

"Why, I suppose if I wasn't I shouldn't be here," replied Noah. "But, I say, she'll be back if yer lose time." [109]

"Now, what do you think?" said the Jew. "If you was to like my friend, could you do better than join him?"

"Is he in a good way of business, that's where it is?" responded Noah, winking one of his little eyes.

"The top of the tree," said the Jew, "employs a power of hands; and has the very best society in the profession."

"Regular town-maders?" asked Mr. Claypole.

"Not a countryman among'em; and I don't think he'd take you even on my recommendation if he didn't run rather short of assistants just now," replied the Jew.

"Should I have to hand over?" said Noah, slapping his breeches-pocket.

"It couldn't possibly be done without," replied Fagin, in a most decided manner.

"Twenty pound, though,—it's a lot of money!"

"Not when it's in a note you can't ged rid of," retorted Fagin. "Number and date taken, I suppose; payment stopped at the Bank? Ah! It's not worth much to him; it'll have to go abroad, and he couldn't sell it for a great deal in the market." [110]

"When could I see him?" asked Noah doubtfully.

"To-morrow morning," replied the Jew.

"Where?"

"Here."

"Um!" said Noah. "What's the wages?"

"Live like a gentleman,—board and lodging, pipes and spirits free,—half of all you earn, and half of all the young woman earns," replied Mr. Fagin.

Whether Noah Claypole, whose rapacity was none of the least comprehensive, would have

acceded even to these glowing terms had he been a perfectly free agent is very doubtful; but as he recollected that, in the event of his refusal it was in the power of his new acquaintance to give him up to justice immediately (and more unlikely things had come to pass), he gradually relented, and said he thought that would suit him.

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"But, yer see," observed Noah, "as she will be able to do a good deal, I should like to take something very light."

"A little fancy work?" suggested Fagin.

"Ah! something of that sort," replied Noah. "What do you think would suit me now? Something not too trying for the strength, and not very dangerous, you know; that's the sort of thing!"

"I heard you talk of something in the spy way upon the others, my dear?" said the Jew. "My friend wants somebody who would do that well very much."

"Why, I did mention that, and I shouldn't mind turning my hand to it sometimes," rejoined Mr. Claypole slowly; "but it wouldn't pay by itself, you know."

"That's true!" observed the Jew, ruminating or pretending to ruminate. "No, it might not."

"What do you think, then?" asked Noah, anxiously regarding him. "Something in the sneaking way, where it was pretty sure work, and not much more risk than being at home."

[112]

"What do you think of the old ladies?" asked the Jew. "There's a good deal of money made in snatching their bags and parcels, and running round the corner."

"Don't they holler out a good deal, and scratch sometimes?" asked Noah, shaking his head. "I don't think that would answer my purpose. Ain't there any other line open?"

"Stop," said the Jew, laying his hand on Noah's knee. "The kinchin lay."

"What's that?" demanded Mr. Claypole.

"The kinchins, my dear," said the Jew, "is the young children that's sent on errands by their mothers, with sixpences and shillings, and the lay is just to take their money away—they've always got it ready in their hands,—and then knock 'em into the kennel, and walk off very slow, as if there was nothing else the matter but a child fallen down and hurt itself. Ha! ha! ha!"

"Ha! ha!" roared Mr. Claypole, kicking up his legs in an ecstasy. "Lord, that's the very thing!"

[113]

"To be sure it is," replied Fagin; "and you can have a few good beats chalked out in Camden-town, and Battle-bridge, and neighbourhoods like that, where they're always going errands, and upset as many kinchins as you want any hour in the day. Ha! ha! ha!"

With this Fagin poked Mr. Claypole in the side, and they joined in a burst of laughter both long and loud.

"Well, that's all right!" said Noah, when he had recovered himself, and Charlotte had returned. "What time to-morrow shall we say?"

"Will ten do?" asked the Jew, adding, as Mr. Claypole nodded assent, "What name shall I tell my good friend?"

"Mr. Bolter," replied Noah, who had prepared himself for such an emergency. "Mr. Morris Bolter. This is Mrs. Bolter."

"Mrs. Bolter's humble servant," said Fagin, bowing with grotesque politeness. "I hope I shall know her better very shortly."

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"Do you hear the gentleman, Char-lotte?" thundered Mr. Claypole.

"Yes, Noah, dear!" replied Mrs. Bolter, extending her hand.

"She calls me Noah, as a sort of fond way of talking," said Mr. Morris Bolter, late Claypole, turning to the Jew. "You understand?"

"Oh yes, I understand—perfectly," replied Fagin, telling the truth for once. "Good night! Good night!"

With many adieus and good wishes Mr. Fagin went his way; and Noah Claypole, bespeaking his good lady's attention, proceeded to enlighten her relative to the arrangement he had made, with all that haughtiness and air of superiority becoming not only a member of the sterner sex, but a gentleman who appreciated the dignity of a special appointment on the kinchin lay in London and its vicinity.

CHAPTER XLII.

[115]

WHEREIN IS SHOWN HOW THE ARTFUL DODGER GOT INTO TROUBLE.

"AND so it was you that was your own friend, was it?" asked Mr. Claypole, otherwise Bolter,

when, by virtue of the compact entered into between them, he had removed next day to the Jew's house. "Cod, I thought as much last night!"

"Every man's his own friend, my dear," replied Fagin, with his most insinuating grin. "He hasn't as good a one as himself anywhere."

"Except sometimes," replied Morris Bolter, assuming the air of a man of the world. "Some people are nobody's enemies but their own, yer know."

"Don't believe that," said the Jew. "When a man's his own enemy, it's only because he's too much his own friend, not because he's careful for every body but himself. Pooh! pooh! There ain't such a thing in nature." [116]

"There oughtn't to be, if there is," replied Mr. Bolter.

"That stands to reason," said the Jew. "Some conjurers say that number three is the magic number, and some say number seven. It's neither, my friend, neither. It's number one."

"Ha! ha!" cried Mr. Bolter. "Number one for ever."

"In a little community like ours, my dear," said the Jew, who felt it necessary to qualify this position, "we have a general number one; that is, you can't consider yourself as number one without considering me too as the same, and all the other young people."

"Oh, the devil!" exclaimed Mr. Bolter.

"You see," pursued the Jew, affecting to disregard this interruption, "we are so mixed up together and identified in our interests that it must be so. For instance, it's your object to take care of number one—meaning yourself." [117]

"Certainly," replied Mr. Bolter. "Yer about right there."

"Well, you can't take care of yourself, number one, without taking care of me, number one."

"Number two, you mean," said Mr. Bolter, who was largely endowed with the quality of selfishness.

"No, I don't!" retorted the Jew. "I'm of the same importance to you as you are to yourself."

"I say," interrupted Mr. Bolter, "yer a very nice man, and I'm very fond of yer; but we ain't quite so thick together as all that comes to."

"Only think," said the Jew, shrugging his shoulders, and stretching out his hands, "only consider. You've done what's a very pretty thing, and what I love you for doing; but what at the same time would put the cravat round your throat that's so very easily tied and so very difficult to unloosen—in plain English, the halter!"

Mr. Bolter put his hand to his neckerchief as if he felt it inconveniently tight, and murmured an assent, qualified in tone but not in substance. [118]

"The gallows," continued Fagin, "the gallows, my dear, is an ugly finger-post, which points out a very short and sharp turning that has stopped many a bold fellow's career on the broad highway. To keep in the easy road, and keep it at a distance, is object number one with you."

"Of course it is," replied Mr. Bolter. "What do yer talk about such things for?"

"Only to show you my meaning clearly," said the Jew, raising his eyebrows. "To be able to do that, you depend upon me; to keep my little business all snug, I depend upon you. The first is your number one, the second my number one. The more you value your number one, the more careful you must be of mine; so we come at last to what I told you at first—that a regard for number one holds us all together, and must do so unless we would all go to pieces in company."

"That's true," rejoined Mr. Bolter, thoughtfully. "Oh! yer a' cunning old codger!" [119]

Mr. Fagin saw with delight that this tribute to his powers was no mere compliment, but that he had really impressed his recruit with a sense of his wily genius, which it was most important that he should entertain in the outset of their acquaintance. To strengthen an impression so desirable and useful, he followed up the blow by acquainting him in some detail with the magnitude and extent of his operations; blending truth and fiction together as best served his purpose, and bringing both to bear with so much art, that Mr. Bolter's respect visibly increased, and became tempered, at the same time, with a degree of wholesome fear, which it was highly desirable to awaken.

"It's this mutual trust we have in each other that consoles me under heavy losses," said the Jew. "My best hand was taken from me yesterday morning."

"Yer don't mean to say he died?" cried Mr. Bolter.

"No, no," replied Fagin, "not so bad as that. Not quite so bad."

"What, I suppose he was——" [120]

"Wanted," interposed the Jew. "Yes, he was wanted."

"Very particular?" inquired Mr. Bolter.

"No," replied the Jew, "not very. He was charged with attempting to pick a pocket, and they found a silver snuff-box on him,—his own, my dear, his own, for he took snuff himself, and was very fond of it. They remanded him till to-day, for they thought they knew the owner. Ah! he was worth fifty boxes and I'd give the price of as many to have him back. You should have known the Dodger, my dear; you should have known the Dodger."

"Well, but I shall know him, I hope; don't yer think so?" said Mr. Bolter.

"I'm doubtful about it," replied the Jew, with a sigh. "If they don't get any fresh evidence it'll only be a summary conviction, and we shall have him back again after six weeks or so; but, if they do, it's a case of lagging. They know what a clever lad he is; he'll be a lifer: they'll make the Artful nothing less than a lifer."

"What do yer mean by lagging, and a lifer?" demanded Mr. Bolter. "What's the good of talking in that way to me? why don't yer speak so as I can understand yer?" [121]

Fagin was about to translate these mysterious expressions into the vulgar tongue, and, being interpreted, Mr. Bolter would have been informed, that they represented that combination of words, "transportation for life," when the dialogue was cut short by the entry of Master Bates, with his hands in his breeches' pockets, and his face twisted into a look of semi-comical woe.

"It's all up, Fagin," said Charley; when he and his new companion had been made known to each other.

"What do you mean?" asked the Jew, with trembling lips.

"They've found the gentleman as owns the box; two or three more's a coming to 'dentify him, and the Artful's booked for a passage out," replied Master Bates. "I must have a full suit of mourning, Fagin, and a hatband, to wisit him in, afore he sets out upon his travels. To think of Jack Dawkins—lummy Jack—the Dodger—the Artful Dodger—going abroad for a common twopenny-halfpenny sneeze-box! I never thought he'd ha' done it under a gold watch, chain, and seals, at the lowest. Oh, why didn't he rob some rich old gentleman, of all his walables, and go out as a gentleman, and not like a common prig, without no honour nor glory!" [122]

With this expression of feeling for his unfortunate friend, Master Bates sat himself on the nearest chair, with an aspect of chagrin and despondency.

"What do you talk about his having neither honour nor glory for?" exclaimed Fagin, darting an angry look at his pupil. "Wasn't he always top-sawyer among you all?—is there one of you that could touch him, or come near him on any scent—eh?"

"Not one!" replied Master Bates, in a voice rendered husky by regret—"not one!"

"Then what do you talk of?" replied the Jew, angrily; "what are you blubbering for?"

"'Cause it isn't on the rec-ord, is it?" said Charley, chafed into perfect defiance of his venerable friend by the current of his regrets; "'cause it can't come out in the indictment; 'cause nobody will never know half of what he was. How will he stand in the Newgate Calendar? P'raps not be there at all. Oh, my eye, my eye, wot a blow it is!" [123]

"Ha! ha!" cried the Jew, extending his right hand, and turning to Mr. Bolter, in a fit of chuckling which shook him as though he had the palsy; "see what a pride they take in their profession, my dear. Isn't it beautiful?"

Mr. Bolter nodded assent; and the Jew, after contemplating the grief of Charley Bates for some seconds, with evident satisfaction, stepped up to that young gentleman, and patted him on the shoulder.

"Never mind, Charley," said Fagin, soothingly; "it'll come out, it'll be sure to come out. They'll all know what a clever fellow he was; he'll shew it himself, and not disgrace his old pals and teachers. Think how young he is, too! What a distinction, Charley, to be lagged at his time of life!"

"Well, it is a honour,—that is!" said Charley, a little consoled. [124]

"He shall have all he wants," continued the Jew. "He shall be kept in the Stone Jug, Charley, like a gentleman—like a gentleman, with his beer every day, and money in his pocket to pitch and toss with, if he can't spend it."

"No, shall he though?" cried Charley Bates.

"Ay, that he shall," replied the Jew; "and we'll have a big-wig, Charley,—one that's got the greatest gift of the gab,—to carry on his defence, and he shall make a speech for himself, too, if he likes, and we'll read it all in the papers—'Artful Dodger—shrieks of laughter—here the court was convulsed'—eh, Charley, eh?"

"Ha! ha!" laughed Master Bates, "what a lark that would be, wouldn't it, Fagin? I say, how the Artful would bother 'em, wouldn't he?"

"Would!" cried the Jew. "He shall—he will!"

"Ah, to be sure, so he will!" repeated Charley, rubbing his hands.

"I think I see him now," cried the Jew, bending his eyes upon his pupil.

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"So do I," cried Charley Bates—"ha! ha! ha! so do I. I see it all afore me, upon my soul I do, Fagin. What a game! what a regular game! All the big-wigs trying to look solemn, and Jack Dawkins addressing of 'em as intimate and comfortable as if he was the judge's own son making a speech arter dinner—ha! ha! ha!"

In fact the Jew had so well humoured his young friend's eccentric disposition, that Master Bates, who had at first been disposed to consider the imprisoned Dodger rather in the light of a victim, now looked upon him as the chief actor in a scene of most uncommon and exquisite humour, and felt quite impatient for the arrival of the time when his old companion should have so favourable an opportunity of displaying his abilities.

"We must know how he gets on to-day by some handy means or other," said Fagin. "Let me think."

"Shall I go?" asked Charley.

"Not for the world," replied the Jew. "Are you mad, my dear?—stark mad, that you'd walk into the very place where—No, Charley, no—one is enough to lose at a time."

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"You don't mean to go yourself, I suppose?" said Charley with a humorous leer.

"That wouldn't quite fit," replied Fagin, shaking his head.

"Then why don't you send this new cove?" asked Master Bates, laying his hand on Noah's arm; "nobody knows him."

"Why, if he didn't mind," observed the Jew.

"Mind!" interposed Charley. "What should *he* have to mind?"

"Really nothing, my dear," said Fagin, turning to Mr. Bolter, "really nothing."

"Oh, I dare say about that, yer know," observed Noah, backing towards the door, and shaking his head with a kind of sober alarm. "No, no—none of that. It's not in my department, that isn't."

"Wot department has he got, Fagin?" inquired Master Bates, surveying Noah's lank form with much disgust. "The cutting away when there's anything wrong, and the eating all the wittles when there's everything right; is that his branch?"

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"Never mind," retorted Mr. Bolter; "and don't yer take liberties with yer superiors, little boy, or yer'll find yerself in the wrong shop."

Master Bates laughed so vehemently at this magnificent threat, that it was some time before Fagin could interpose and represent to Mr. Bolter that he incurred no possible danger in visiting the police-office; that, inasmuch as no account of the little affair in which he had been engaged, nor any description of his person, had yet been forwarded to the metropolis, it was very probable that he was not even suspected of having resorted to it for shelter; and that, if he were properly disguised, it would be as safe a spot for him to visit as any in London, inasmuch as it would be of all places the very last to which he could be supposed likely to resort of his own free will.

Persuaded in part, by these representations, but overborne in a much greater degree by his fear of the Jew, Mr. Bolter at length consented, with a very bad grace, to undertake the expedition. By Fagin's directions he immediately substituted for his own attire a waggoner's frock, velveteen breeches, and leather leggings, all of which articles the Jew had at hand. He was likewise furnished with a felt hat well garnished with turnpike tickets, and a carter's whip. Thus equipped he was to saunter into the office as some country fellow from Covent Garden market might be supposed to do for the gratification of his curiosity; and as he was as awkward, ungainly, and raw-boned a fellow as need be, Mr. Fagin had no fear but that he would look the part to perfection.

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These arrangements completed, he was informed of the necessary signs and tokens by which to recognise the Artful Dodger, and was conveyed by Master Bates through dark and winding ways to within a very short distance of Bow-street. Having described the precise situation of the office, and accompanied it with copious directions how he was to walk straight up the passage, and when he got into the yard take the door up the steps on the right-hand side, and pull off his hat as he went into the room, Charley Bates bade him hurry on alone, and promised to bide his return on the spot of their parting.

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Noah Claypole, or Morris Bolter, as the reader pleases, punctually followed the directions he had received, which—Master Bates being pretty well acquainted with the locality—were so exact that he was enabled to gain the magisterial presence without asking any question or meeting with any interruption by the way. He found himself jostled among a crowd of people, chiefly women, who were huddled together in a dirty frowsy room, at the upper end of which was a raised platform railed off from the rest, with a dock for the prisoners on the left hand against the wall, a box for the witnesses in the middle, and a desk for the magistrates on the right; the awful locality last-named being screened off by a partition which concealed the bench from the common gaze, and left the vulgar to imagine (if they could) the full majesty of justice.

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There were only a couple of women in the dock, who were nodding to their admiring friends, while the clerk read some depositions to a couple of policemen and a man in plain clothes who

leant over the table. A jailer stood reclining against the dock-rail, tapping his nose listlessly with a large key, except when he repressed an undue tendency to conversation among the idlers, by proclaiming silence; or looked sternly up to bid some woman "Take that baby out," when the gravity of justice was disturbed by feeble cries, half-smothered in the mother's shawl, from some meagre infant. The room smelt close and unwholesome, the walls were dirt-discoloured, and the ceiling blackened. There was an old smoky bust over the mantel-shelf, and a dusty clock above the dock—the only thing present that seemed to go on as it ought; for depravity, or poverty, or an habitual acquaintance with both, had left a taint on all the animate matter, hardly less unpleasant than the thick greasy scum on every inanimate object that frowned upon it.

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Noah looked eagerly about him for the Dodger, but although there were several women who would have done very well for that distinguished character's mother or sister, and more than one man who might be supposed to bear a strong resemblance to his father, nobody at all answering the description given him of Mr. Dawkins was to be seen. He waited in a state of much suspense and uncertainty until the women, being committed for trial, went flaunting out, and then was quickly relieved by the appearance of another prisoner whom he felt at once could be no other than the object of his visit.

It was indeed Mr. Dawkins, who, shuffling into the office with the big coat sleeves tucked up as usual, his left hand in his pocket and his hat in his right, preceded the jailer with a rolling gait altogether indescribable, and taking his place in the dock, requested in an audible voice to know what he was placed in that 'ere disgraceful situation for.

"Hold your tongue, will you?" said the jailer.

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"I'm an Englishman, an't I?" rejoined the Dodger. "Where are my privileges?"

"You'll get your privileges soon enough," retorted the jailer, "and pepper with 'em."

"We'll see wot the Secretary of State for the Home Affairs has got to say to the beaks, if I don't," replied Mr. Dawkins. "Now then, wot is this here business? I shall thank the madg'strates to dispose of this here little affair, and not to keep me while they read the paper, for I've got an appointment with a genelman in the city, and as I'm a man of my word and wery punctual in business matters, he'll go away if I ain't there to my time, and then pr'aps there won't be an action for damage against those as kept me away. Oh no, certainly not!"

At this point the Dodger, with a show of being very particular with a view to proceedings to be had thereafter, desired the jailer to communicate "the names of them two old files as was on the bench," which so tickled the spectators that they laughed almost as heartily as Master Bates could have done if he had heard the request.

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"Silence there!" cried the jailer.

"What is this?" inquired one of the magistrates.

"A pick-pocketing case, your worship."

"Has that boy ever been here before?"

"He ought to have been a many times," replied the jailer. "He has been pretty well everywhere else. I know him well, your worship."

"Oh! you know me, do you?" cried the Artful, making a note of the statement. "Wery good. That's a case of deformation of character, any way."

Here there was another laugh, and another cry of silence.

"Now then, where are the witnesses?" said the clerk.

"Ah! that's right," added the Dodger. "Where are they? I should like to see 'em."

This wish was immediately gratified, for a policeman stepped forward who had seen the prisoner attempt the pocket of an unknown gentleman in a crowd, and indeed take a handkerchief therefrom, which being a very old one, he deliberately put back again, after trying it on his own countenance. For this reason he took the Dodger into custody as soon as he could get near him, and the said Dodger being searched had upon his person a silver snuff-box with the owner's name engraved upon the lid. This gentleman had been discovered on reference to the Court Guide, and being then and there present, swore that the snuff-box was his, and that he had missed it on the previous day, the moment he had disengaged himself from the crowd before referred to. He had also remarked a young gentleman in the throng particularly active in making his way about, and that young gentleman was the prisoner before him.

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"Have you anything to ask this witness, boy?" said the magistrate.

"I wouldn't abase myself by descending to hold any conversation with him," replied the Dodger.

"Have you anything to say at all?"

[135]

"Do you hear his worship ask if you've anything to say?" inquired the jailer nudging the silent Dodger with his elbow.

"I beg your pardon," said the Dodger, looking up with an air of abstraction. "Did you address

yourself to me, my man?"

"I never see such an out-and-out young wagabond, your worship," observed the officer with a grin. "Do you mean to say anything, you young shaver?"

"No," replied the Dodger, "not here, for this ain't the shop for justice; besides which my attorney is a-breakfasting this morning with the Vice President of the House of Commons; but I shall have something to say elsewhere, and so will he, and so will a very numerous and respectable circle of acquaintance as'll make them beaks wish they'd never been born, or that they'd got their footman to hang 'em up to their own hat-pegs, 'fore they let 'em come out this morning to try it upon me. I'll—"

"There, he's fully committed!" interposed the clerk. "Take him away."

"Come on," said the jailer.

"Oh ah! I'll come on," replied the Dodger, brushing his hat with the palm of his hand. "Ah! (to the Bench) it's no use your looking frightened; I won't show you no mercy, not a ha'porth of it. *You'll* pay for this, my fine fellers; I wouldn't be you for something. I wouldn't go free now if you was to fall down on your knees and ask me. Here, carry me off to prison. Take me away."

With these last words the Dodger suffered himself to be led off by the collar, threatening till he got into the yard to make a parliamentary business of it; and then grinning in the officer's face with great glee and self-approval.

Having seen him locked up by himself in a little cell, Noah made the best of his way back to where he had left Master Bates. After waiting here some time he was joined by that young gentleman, who had prudently abstained from showing himself until he had looked carefully abroad from a snug retreat, and ascertained that his new friend had not been followed by any impertinent person.

The two hastened back together to bear to Mr. Fagin the animating news that the Dodger was doing full justice to his bringing-up, and establishing for himself a glorious reputation.

CHAPTER XLIII.

**THE TIME ARRIVES FOR NANCY TO REDEEM HER PLEDGE TO ROSE MAYLIE. SHE FAILS.
NOAH CLAYPOLE IS EMPLOYED BY FAGIN ON A SECRET MISSION.**

ADEPT as she was in all the arts of cunning and dissimulation, the girl Nancy could not wholly conceal the effect which the knowledge of the step she had taken, worked upon her mind. She remembered that both the crafty Jew and the brutal Sikes had confided to her schemes which had been hidden from all others, in the full confidence that she was trustworthy and beyond the reach of their suspicion; and vile as those schemes were, desperate as were their originators, and bitter as were her feelings towards the Jew, who had led her step by step deeper and deeper down into an abyss of crime and misery, whence was no escape, still there were times when even towards him she felt some relenting lest her disclosure should bring him within the iron grasp he had so long eluded, and he should fall at last—richly as he merited such a fate—by her hand.

But these were the mere wanderings of a mind unable wholly to detach itself from old companions and associations, though enabled to fix itself steadily on one object, and resolved not to be turned aside by any consideration. Her fears for Sikes would have been more powerful inducements to recoil while there was yet time; but she had stipulated that her secret should be rigidly kept—she had dropped no clue which could lead to his discovery—she had refused, even for his sake, a refuge from all the guilt and wretchedness that encompassed her—and what more could she do? She was resolved.

Though every mental struggle terminated in this conclusion, they forced themselves upon her again and again, and left their traces too. She grew pale and thin even within a few days. At times she took no heed of what was passing before her, or no part in conversations where once she would have been the loudest. At others she laughed without merriment, and was noisy without cause or meaning. At others—often within a moment afterwards—she sat silent and dejected, brooding with her head upon her hands, while the very effort by which she roused herself told more forcibly than even these indications that she was ill at ease, and that her thoughts were occupied with matters very different and distant from those in course of discussion by her companions.

It was Sunday night, and the bell of the nearest church struck the hour. Sikes and the Jew were talking, but they paused to listen. The girl looked up from the low seat on which she crouched and listened too, intently. Eleven.

"An hour this side of midnight," said Sikes, raising the blind to look out, and returning to his seat. "Dark and heavy it is too. A good night for business this."

"Ah!" replied the Jew. "What a pity, Bill, my dear, that there's none quite ready to be done."

"You're right for once," replied Sikes gruffly. "It is a pity, for I'm in the humour too."

The Jew sighed, and shook his head despondingly.

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"We must make up for lost time when we've got things into a good train, that's all I know," said Sikes.

"That's the way to talk, my dear," replied the Jew, venturing to pat him on the shoulder. "It does me good to hear you."

"Does you good, does it!" cried Sikes. "Well, so be it."

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed the Jew, as if he were relieved by even this concession. "You're like yourself to-night, Bill—quite like yourself."

"I don't feel like myself when you lay that withered old claw on my shoulder, so take it away," said Sikes, casting off the Jew's hand.

"It makes you nervous, Bill,—reminds you of being nabbed, does it?" said the Jew, determined not to be offended.

"Reminds me of being nabbed by the devil," returned Sikes, "not by a trap. There never was another man with such a face as yours, unless it was your father, and I suppose *he* is singeing his grizzled red beard by this time, unless you came straight from the old 'un without any father at all betwixt you, which I shouldn't wonder at a bit."

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Fagin offered no reply to this compliment; but, pulling Sikes by the sleeve, pointed his finger towards Nancy, who had taken advantage of the foregoing conversation to put on her bonnet, and was now leaving the room.

"Hallo!" cried Sikes. "Nance. Where's the gal going to at this time of night?"

"Not far."

"What answer's that?" returned Sikes. "Where are you going?"

"I say, not far."

"And I say where?" retorted Sikes in a loud voice. "Do you hear me?"

"I don't know where," replied the girl.

"Then I do," said Sikes, more in the spirit of obstinacy than because he had any real objection to the girl going where she listed. "Nowhere. Sit down."

"I'm not well. I told you that before," rejoined the girl. "I want a breath of air."

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"Put your head out of the winder, and take it there," replied Sikes.

"There's not enough there," said the girl. "I want it in the street."

"Then you won't have it," replied Sikes, with which assurance he rose, locked the door, took the key out, and pulling her bonnet from her head, flung it up to the top of an old press. "There," said the robber. "Now stop quietly where you are, will you."

"It's not such a matter as a bonnet would keep me," said the girl turning very pale. "What do you mean, Bill? Do you know what you're doing?"

"Know what I'm— Oh!" cried Sikes turning to Fagin, "she's out of her senses, you know, or she daren't talk to me in that way."

"You'll drive me on to something desperate," muttered the girl placing both hands upon her breast as though to keep down by force some violent outbreak. "Let me go, will you,—this minute,—this instant—"

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"No!" roared Sikes.

"Tell him to let me go, Fagin. He had better. It'll be better for him. Do you hear me?" cried Nancy, stamping her foot upon the ground.

"Hear you!" repeated Sikes, turning round in his chair to confront her. "Ay, and if I hear you for half a minute longer, the dog shall have such a grip on your throat as'll tear some of that screaming voice out. Wot has come over you, you jade—wot is it?"

"Let me go," said the girl with great earnestness; then sitting herself down on the floor before the door, she said,— "Bill, let me go; you don't know what you're doing—you don't indeed. For only one hour—do—do."

"Cut my limbs off one by one!" cried Sikes, seizing her roughly by the arm, "if I don't think the gal's stark raving mad. Get up."

"Not till you let me go—not till you let me go—never—never!" screamed the girl. Sikes looked on for a minute watching his opportunity, and suddenly pinioning her hands dragged her, struggling and wrestling with him by the way, into a small room adjoining, where he sat himself on a bench, and thrusting her into a chair, held her down by force. She struggled and implored by turns until twelve o'clock had struck, and then, wearied and exhausted, ceased to contest the point any further. With a caution, backed by many oaths, to make no more efforts to go out that

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night, Sikes left her to recover at leisure, and rejoined the Jew.

"Phew!" said the housebreaker, wiping the perspiration from his face. "Wot a precious strange gal that is!"

"You may say that, Bill," replied the Jew thoughtfully. "You may say that."

"Wot did she take it into her head to go out to-night for, do you think?" asked Sikes. "Come; you should know her better than me—wot does it mean?"

"Obstinacy—woman's obstinacy, I suppose, my dear," replied the Jew shrugging his shoulders. [146]

"Well, I suppose it is," growled Sikes. "I thought I had tamed her, but she's as bad as ever."

"Worse," said the Jew thoughtfully. "I never knew her like this, for such a little cause."

"Nor I," said Sikes. "I think she's got a touch of that fever in her blood yet, and it won't come out—eh?"

"Like enough," replied the Jew.

"I'll let her a little blood without troubling the doctor, if she's took that way again," said Sikes.

The Jew nodded an expressive approval of this mode of treatment.

"She was hanging about me all day and night too when I was stretched on my back; and you, like a black-hearted wolf as you are, kept yourself aloof," said Sikes. "We was very poor too all the time, and I think one way or other it's worried and fretted her, and that being shut up here so long has made her restless—eh?" [147]

"That's it, my dear," replied the Jew in a whisper.—"Hush!"

As he uttered these words, the girl herself appeared and resumed her former seat. Her eyes were swollen and red; she rocked herself to and fro, tossed her head, and after a little time, burst out laughing.

"Why, now she's on the other tack!" exclaimed Sikes, turning a look of excessive surprise upon his companion.

The Jew nodded to him to take no further notice just then, and in a few minutes the girl subsided into her accustomed demeanour. Whispering Sikes that there was no fear of her relapsing, Fagin took up his hat and bade him good-night. He paused when he reached the door, and looking round, asked if somebody would light him down the dark stairs.

"Light him down," said Sikes, who was filling his pipe. "It's a pity he should break his neck himself, and disappoint the sightseers. There; show him a light."

Nancy followed the old man down stairs with the candle. When they reached the passage he laid his finger on his lip, and drawing close to the girl, said in a whisper, [148]

"What is it, Nancy, dear?"

"What do you mean?" replied the girl in the same tone.

"The reason of all this," replied Fagin.

"If *he*"—he pointed with his skinny forefinger up the stairs—"is so hard with you, (he's a brute, Nance, a brute-beast) why don't you——"

"Well!" said the girl, as Fagin paused, with his mouth almost touching her ear, and his eyes looking into hers.

"No matter just now," said the Jew; "we'll talk of this again. You have a friend in me, Nance; a staunch friend. I have the means at hand, quiet and close. If you want revenge on those that treat you like a dog—like a dog! worse than his dog, for he humours him sometimes—come to me. I say; come to me. He is the mere hound of a day, but you know me of old, Nance—of old."

"I know you well," replied the girl, without manifesting the least emotion. "Good night." [149]

She shrunk back as Fagin offered to lay his hand on hers, but said good night again in a steady voice, and, answering his parting look with a nod of intelligence, closed the door between them.

Fagin walked towards his own home, intent upon the thoughts that were working within his brain. He had conceived the idea—not from what had just passed, though that had tended to confirm him, but slowly and by degrees—that Nancy, wearied of the housebreaker's brutality, had conceived an attachment for some new friend. Her altered manner, her repeated absences from home alone, her comparative indifference to the interests of the gang for which she had once been so zealous, and, added to these, her desperate impatience to leave home that night at a particular hour, all favoured the supposition, and rendered it, to him at least, almost a matter of certainty. The object of this new liking was not among his myrmidons. He would be a valuable acquisition with such an assistant as Nancy, and must (thus Fagin argued) be secured without delay. [150]

There was another and a darker object to be gained. Sikes knew too much, and his ruffian taunts had not galled the Jew the less because the wounds were hidden. The girl must know well

that if she shook him off, she could never be safe from his fury, and that it would be surely wreaked—to the maiming of limbs, or perhaps the loss of life—on the object of her more recent fancy. “With a little persuasion,” thought Fagin, “what more likely than that she would consent to poison him? Women have done such things, and worse, to secure the same object before now. There would be the dangerous villain—the man I hate—gone; another secured in his place; and my influence over the girl, with the knowledge of this crime to back it, unlimited.”

These things passed through the mind of Fagin during the short time he sat alone in the housebreaker’s room; and with them uppermost in his thoughts, he had taken the opportunity afterwards afforded him of sounding the girl in the broken hints he threw out at parting. There was no expression of surprise, no assumption of an inability to understand his meaning. The girl clearly comprehended it. Her glance at parting showed *that*. [151]

But perhaps she would recoil from a plot to take the life of Sikes, and that was one of the chief ends to be attained. “How,” thought the Jew, as he crept homewards, “can I increase my influence with her? what new power can I acquire?”

Such brains are fertile in expedients. If, without extracting a confession from herself, he laid a watch, discovered the object of her altered regard, and threatened to reveal the whole history to Sikes (of whom she stood in no common fear) unless she entered into his designs, could he not secure her compliance?

“I can,” said Fagin almost aloud. “She durst not refuse me then—not for her life, not for her life! I have it all. The means are ready, and shall be set to work. I shall have you yet.”

He cast back a dark look and a threatening motion of the hand towards the spot where he had left the bolder villain, and went on his way, busying his bony hands in the folds of his tattered garment, which he wrenched tightly in his grasp as though there were a hated enemy crushed with every motion of his fingers. [152]

He rose betimes next morning, and waited impatiently for the appearance of his new associate, who, after a delay which seemed interminable, at length presented himself, and commenced a voracious assault upon the breakfast.

“Bolter,” said the Jew, drawing up a chair and seating himself opposite to him.

“Well, here I am,” returned Noah. “What’s the matter? Don’t yer ask me to do anything till I have done eating. That’s a great fault in this place. Yer never get time enough over yer meals.”

“You can talk as you eat, can’t you?” said Fagin, cursing his dear young friend’s greediness from the very bottom of his heart.

“Oh yes, I can talk; I get on better when I talk,” said Noah, cutting a monstrous slice of bread. “Where’s Charlotte?” [153]

“Out,” said Fagin. “I sent her out this morning with the other young woman, because I wanted us to be alone.”

“Oh!” said Noah, “I wish yer’d ordered her to make some buttered toast first. Well. Talk away. Yer won’t interrupt me.”

There seemed indeed no great fear of anything interrupting him, as he had evidently sat down with a determination to do a great deal of business.

“You did well yesterday, my dear,” said the Jew, “beautiful! Six shillings and ninepence halfpenny on the very first day! The kinchin lay will be a fortune to you.”

“Don’t yer forget to add three pint-pots and a milk-can,” said Mr. Bolter.

“No, no, my dear,” replied the Jew. “The pint-pots were great strokes of genius, but the milk-can was a perfect masterpiece.”

“Pretty well, I think, for a beginner,” remarked Mr. Bolter complacently. “The pots I took off airy railings, and the milk-can was standing by itself outside a public-house, so I thought it might get rusty with the rain, or catch cold, yer know. Ha! ha! ha!” [154]

The Jew affected to laugh very heartily; and Mr. Bolter, having had his laugh out, took a series of large bites, which finished his first hunk of bread and butter, and assisted himself to a second.

“I want you, Bolter,” said Fagin, leaning over the table, “to do a piece of work for me, my dear, that needs great care and caution.”

“I say,” rejoined Bolter, “don’t yer go shoving me into danger, or sending me to any more police-offices. That don’t suit me, that don’t; and so I tell yer.”

“There’s not the smallest danger in it—not the very smallest,” said the Jew; “it’s only to dodge a woman.”

“An old woman?” demanded Mr. Bolter.

“A young one,” replied Fagin.

“I can do that pretty well, I know,” said Bolter. “I was a regular cunning sneak when I was at [155]

school. What am I to dodge her for? not to—”

“Not to do anything,” interrupted the Jew, “but to tell me where she goes to, who she sees, and, if possible, what she says; to remember the street, if it is a street, or the house, if it is a house, and to bring me back all the information you can.”

“What’ll yer give me?” asked Noah, setting down his cup, and looking his employer eagerly in the face.

“If you do it well, a pound, my dear—one pound,” said Fagin, wishing to interest him in the scent as much as possible. “And that’s what I never gave yet for any job of work where there wasn’t valuable consideration to be gained.”

“Who is she?” inquired Noah.

“One of us.”

“Oh Lor!” cried Noah, curling up his nose. “Yer doubtful of her, are yer?”

“She has found out some new friends, my dear, and I must know who they are,” replied the Jew.

“I see,” said Noah. “Just to have the pleasure of knowing them, if they’re respectable people, eh?—Ha! ha! ha! I’m your man.” [156]

“I knew you would be,” cried Fagin, elated by the success of his proposal.

“Of course, of course,” replied Noah. “Where is she? Where am I to wait for her? When am I to go?”

“All that, my dear, you shall hear from me. I’ll point her out at the proper time,” said Fagin. “You keep ready, and leave the rest to me.”

That night, and the next, and the next again, the spy sat booted and equipped in his carter’s dress, ready to turn out at a word from Fagin. Six nights passed,—six long weary nights,—and on each Fagin came home with a disappointed face, and briefly intimated that it was not yet time. On the seventh he returned earlier, and with an exultation he could not conceal. It was Sunday.

“She goes abroad to-night,” said Fagin, “and on the right errand, I’m sure; for she has been alone all day, and the man she is afraid of will not be back much before daybreak. Come with me. Quick!” [157]

Noah started up without saying a word, for the Jew was in a state of such intense excitement that it infected him. They left the house stealthily, and, hurrying through a labyrinth of streets, arrived at length before a public-house, which Noah recognised as the same in which he had slept on the night of his arrival in London.

It was past eleven o’clock, and the door was closed. It opened softly on its hinges as the Jew gave a low whistle. They entered without noise, and the door was closed behind them.

Scarcely venturing to whisper, but substituting dumb show for words, Fagin and the young Jew who had admitted them pointed out the pane of glass to Noah, and signed to him to climb up and observe the person in the adjoining room.

“Is that the woman?” he asked, scarcely above his breath.

The Jew nodded yes.

“I can’t see her face well,” whispered Noah. “She is looking down, and the candle is behind her.” [158]

“Stay there,” whispered Fagin. He signed to Barney, who withdrew. In an instant the lad entered the room adjoining, and, under pretence of snuffing the candle, moved it into the required position, and, speaking to the girl, caused her to raise her face.

“I see her now,” cried the spy.

“Plainly?” asked the Jew.

“I should know her among a thousand.”

He hastily descended as the room-door opened, and the girl came out. Fagin drew him behind a small partition which was curtained off, and they held their breaths as she passed within a few feet of their place of concealment, and emerged by the door at which they had entered.

“Hist!” cried the lad who held the door. “Now.”

Noah exchanged a look with Fagin, and darted out.

“To the left,” whispered the lad; “take the left hand, and keep on the other side.”

He did so, and by the light of the lamps saw the girl’s retreating figure already at some distance before him. He advanced as near as he considered prudent, and kept on the opposite side of the street, the better to observe her motions. She looked nervously round twice or thrice, and once stopped to let two men who were following close behind her pass on. She seemed to [159]

gather courage as she advanced, and to walk with a steadier and firmer step. The spy preserved the same relative distance between them, and followed with his eye upon her.

CHAPTER XLIV.

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THE APPOINTMENT KEPT.

THE church clocks chimed three quarters past eleven as two figures emerged on London Bridge. One, which advanced with a swift and rapid step, was that of a woman, who looked eagerly about her as though in quest of some expected object; the other figure was that of a man, who slunk along in the deepest shadow he could find, and at some distance accommodated his pace to hers, stopping when she stopped, and, as she moved again, creeping stealthily on, but never allowing himself, in the ardour of his pursuit, to gain upon her footsteps. Thus they crossed the bridge from the Middlesex to the Surrey shore, when the woman, apparently disappointed in her anxious scrutiny of the foot-passengers, turned back. The movement was sudden, but he who watched her was not thrown off his guard by it, for shrinking into one of the recesses which surmount the piers of the bridge, and leaning over the parapet the better to conceal his figure, he suffered her to pass by on the opposite pavement, and when she was about the same distance in advance as she had been before, he slipped quietly down and followed her again. At nearly the centre of the bridge she stopped. The man stopped too.

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It was a very dark night. The day had been unfavourable, and at that hour and place there were few people stirring. Such as there were hurried quickly past, very possibly without seeing, but certainly without noticing, either the woman or the man who kept her in view. Their appearance was not calculated to attract the importunate regards of such of London's destitute population, as chanced to take their way over the bridge that night in search of some cold arch or doorless hovel wherein to lay their heads; they stood there in silence, neither speaking nor spoken to by any one who passed.

A mist hung over the river, deepening the red glare of the fires that burnt upon the small craft moored off the different wharfs, and rendering darker and more indistinct the mirky buildings on the banks. The old smoke-stained storehouses on either side rose heavy and dull from the dense mass of roofs and gables, and frowned sternly upon water too black to reflect even their lumbering shapes. The tower of old Saint Saviour's church, and the spire of Saint Magnus, so long the giant-warders of the ancient bridge, were visible in the gloom; but the forest of shipping below bridge, and the thickly scattered spires of churches above, were nearly all hidden from the sight.

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The girl had taken a few restless turns to and fro—closely watched meanwhile by her hidden observer—when the heavy bell of St. Paul's tolled for the death of another day. Midnight had come upon the crowded city. The palace, the night-cellar, the jail, the madhouse; the chambers of birth and death, of health and sickness; the rigid face of the corpse and the calm sleep of the child—midnight was upon them all.

The hour had not struck two minutes, when a young lady, accompanied by a grey-haired gentleman, alighted from a hackney-carriage within a short distance of the bridge, and, having dismissed the vehicle, walked straight towards it. They had scarcely set foot upon its pavement when the girl started, and immediately made towards them.

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They walked onwards, looking about them with the air of persons who entertained some very slight expectation which had little chance of being realised, when they were suddenly joined by this new associate. They halted with an exclamation of surprise, but suppressed it immediately, for a man in the garments of a countryman came close up—brushed against them, indeed—at that precise moment.

"Not here," said Nancy hurriedly. "I am afraid to speak to you here. Come away—out of the public road—down the steps yonder."

As she uttered these words, and indicated with her hand the direction in which she wished them to proceed, the countryman looked round, and roughly asking what they took up the whole pavement for, passed on.

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The Meeting.

The steps to which the girl had pointed were those which, on the Surrey bank, and on the same side of the bridge as Saint Saviour's church, form a landing-stairs from the river. To this spot the man bearing the appearance of a countryman hastened unobserved; and after a moment's survey of the place, he began to descend.

These stairs are a part of the bridge; they consist of three flights. Just below the end of the second, going down, the stone wall on the left terminates in an ornamental pier, or pedestal, facing towards the Thames. At this point the lower steps widen, so that a person turning that angle of the wall is necessarily unseen by any others on the stairs who chance to be above him, if only a step. The countryman looked hastily round when he reached this point, and as there seemed no better place of concealment, and the tide being out there was plenty of room, he slipped aside, with his back to the pier, and there waited, pretty certain that they would come no lower, and that even if he could not hear what was said, he could follow them again with safety.

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So tardily stole the time in this lonely place, and so eager was the spy to penetrate the motives of an interview so different from what he had been led to expect, that he more than once gave the matter up for lost, and persuaded himself either that they had stopped far above, or resorted to some entirely different spot to hold their mysterious conversation. He was on the very point of emerging from his hiding-place, and regaining the road above, when he heard the sound of footsteps, and directly afterwards of voices, almost close at his ear.

He drew himself straight upright against the wall, and, scarcely breathing, listened attentively.

"This is far enough," said a voice, which was evidently that of the gentleman. "I will not suffer this young lady to go any further. Many people would have distrusted you too much to have come even so far, but you see I am willing to humour you."

"To humour me!" cried the voice of the girl whom he had followed. "You're considerate, indeed, sir. To humour me! Well, well, it's no matter."

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"Why, for what," said the gentleman in a kinder tone, "for what purpose can you have brought us to this strange place? Why not have let me speak to you above there, where it is light, and there is something stirring, instead of bringing us to this dark and dismal hole?"

"I told you before," replied Nancy, "that I was afraid to speak to you there. I don't know why it is," said the girl, shuddering, "but I have such a fear and dread upon me to-night that I can hardly stand."

"A fear of what?" asked the gentleman, who seemed to pity her.

"I scarcely know of what," replied the girl. "I wish I did. Horrible thoughts of death, and shrouds with blood upon them, and a fear that has made me burn as if I was on fire, have been upon me all day. I was reading a book to-night to wile the time away, and the same things came into the print."

"Imagination," said the gentleman, soothing her.

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"No imagination," replied the girl in a hoarse voice. "I'll swear I saw 'coffin' written in every page of the book in large black letters,—ay, and they carried one close to me in the streets to-night."

"There is nothing unusual in that," said the gentleman. "They have passed me often."

"*Real ones*," rejoined the girl. "This was not."

There was something so uncommon in her manner that the flesh of the concealed listener crept as he heard the girl utter these words, and the blood chilled within him. He had never experienced a greater relief than hearing the sweet voice of the young lady as she begged her to be calm, and not allow herself to become the prey of such fearful fancies.

"Speak to her kindly," said the young lady to her companion. "Poor creature! She seems to need it."

"Your haughty religious people would have held their heads up to see me as I am to-night, and preached of flames and vengeance," cried the girl. "Oh, dear lady, why ar'n't those who claim to be God's own folks as gentle and as kind to us poor wretches as you, who, having youth and beauty and all that they have lost, might be a little proud instead of so much humbler!"

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"Ah!" said the gentleman, "a Turk turns his face, after washing it well, to the East when he says his prayers; these good people, after giving their faces such a rub with the World as takes the smiles off, turn with no less regularity to the darkest side of Heaven. Between the Mussulman and the Pharisee, commend me to the first."

These words appeared to be addressed to the young lady, and were perhaps uttered with the view of affording Nancy time to recover herself. The gentleman shortly afterwards addressed himself to her.

"You were not here last Sunday night," he said.

"I couldn't come," replied Nancy; "I was kept by force."

"By whom?"

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"Bill—Him that I told the young lady of before."

"You were not suspected of holding any communication with anybody on the subject which has brought us here to-night, I hope?" asked the old gentleman anxiously.

"No," replied the girl, shaking her head. "It's not very easy for me to leave him unless he knows why; I couldn't have seen the lady when I did, but that I gave him a drink of laudanum before I came away."

"Did he awake before you returned?" inquired the gentleman.

"No; and neither he nor any of them suspect me."

"Good," said the gentleman. "Now listen to me."

"I am ready," replied the girl, as he paused for a moment.

"This young lady," the gentleman began, "has communicated to me and some other friends who can be safely trusted, what you told her nearly a fortnight since. I confess to you that I had doubts at first whether you were to be implicitly relied upon, but now I firmly believe you are."

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"I am," said the girl earnestly.

"I repeat that I firmly believe it. To prove to you that I am disposed to trust you, I tell you without reserve, that we propose to extort the secret, whatever it may be, from the fears of this man Monks. But if—if—" said the gentleman, "he cannot be secured, or, if secured, cannot be acted upon as we wish, you must deliver up the Jew."

"Fagin!" cried the girl, recoiling.

"That man must be delivered up by you," said the gentleman.

"I will not do it—I will never do it," replied the girl. "Devil that he is, and worse than devil as he has been to me, I will never do that."

"You will not?" said the gentleman, who seemed fully prepared for this answer.

"Never!" returned the girl.

"Tell me why?"

"For one reason," rejoined the girl firmly, "for one reason, that the lady knows and will stand by me in, I know she will, for I have her promise; and for this other reason besides, that, bad life as he has led, I have led a bad life too; there are many of us who have kept the same courses together, and I'll not turn upon them, who might—any of them—have turned upon me, but didn't, bad as they are."

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"Then," said the gentleman quickly, as if this had been the point he had been aiming to attain—"put Monks into my hands, and leave him to me to deal with."

"What if he turns against the others?"

"I promise you that in that case, if the truth is forced from him, there the matter will rest;

there must be circumstances in Oliver's little history which it would be painful to drag before the public eye, and if the truth is once elicited, they shall go scot free."

"And if it is not?" suggested the girl.

"Then," pursued the gentleman, "this Jew shall not be brought to justice without your consent. In such a case I could show you reasons, I think, which would induce you to yield it." [172]

"Have I the lady's promise for that?" asked the girl eagerly.

"You have," replied Rose. "My true and faithful pledge."

"Monks would never learn how you knew what you do?" said the girl, after a short pause.

"Never," replied the gentleman. "The intelligence should be so brought to bear upon him, that he could never even guess."

"I have been a liar, and among liars from a little child," said the girl after another interval of silence, "but I will take your words."

After receiving an assurance from both that she might safely do so, she proceeded in a voice so low that it was often difficult for the listener to discover even the purport of what she said, to describe by name and situation the public-house whence she had been followed that night. From the manner in which she occasionally paused, it appeared as if the gentleman were making some hasty notes of the information she communicated. When she had thoroughly explained the localities of the place, the best position from which to watch it without exciting observation, and the night and hour on which Monks was most in the habit of frequenting it, she seemed to consider a few moments for the purpose of recalling his features and appearance more forcibly to her recollection. [173]

"He is tall," said the girl, "and a strongly made man, but not stout; he has a lurking walk, and as he walks, constantly looks over his shoulder, first on one side and then on the other. Don't forget that, for his eyes are sunk in his head so much deeper than any other man's, that you might almost tell him by that alone. His face is dark, like his hair and eyes, but, although he can't be more than six or eight and twenty, withered and haggard. His lips are often discoloured and disfigured with the marks of teeth, for he has desperate fits, and sometimes even bites his hands and covers them with wounds—why did you start?" said the girl, stopping suddenly.

The gentleman replied in a hurried manner that he was not conscious of having done so, and begged her to proceed. [174]

"Part of this," said the girl, "I've drawn out from other people at the house I tell you of, for I have only seen him twice, and both times he was covered up in a large cloak. I think that's all I can give you to know him by. Stay though," she added. "Upon his throat, so high that you can see a part of it below his neckerchief when he turns his face, there is—"

"A broad red mark, like a burn or scald," cried the gentleman.

"How's this!" said the girl. "You know him!"

The young lady uttered a cry of extreme surprise, and for a few moments they were so still that the listener could distinctly hear them breathe.

"I think I do," said the gentleman, breaking silence. "I should by your description. We shall see. Many people are singularly like each other, though,—it may not be the same." [175]

As he expressed himself to this effect with assumed carelessness, he took a step or two nearer the concealed spy, as the latter could tell from the distinctness with which he heard him mutter, "It must be he!"

"Now," he said, returning, so it seemed by the sound, to the spot where he had stood before, "you have given us most valuable assistance, young woman, and I wish you to be the better for it. What can I do to serve you?"

"Nothing," replied Nancy.

"You will not persist in saying that," rejoined the gentleman with a voice and emphasis of kindness that might have touched a much harder and more obdurate heart. "Think now. Tell me."

"Nothing, sir," rejoined the girl, weeping. "You can do nothing to help me. I am past all hope, indeed."

"You put yourself beyond its pale," said the gentleman; "the past has been a dreary waste with you, of youthful energies mis-spent, and such priceless treasures lavished as the Creator bestows but once and never grants again, but for the future you may hope. I do not say that it is in our power to offer you peace of heart and mind, for that must come as you seek it; but a quiet asylum, either in England, or, if you fear to remain here, in some foreign country, it is not only within the compass of our ability but our most anxious wish to secure to you. Before the dawn of morning, before this river wakes to the first glimpse of daylight, you shall be placed as entirely beyond the reach of your former associates, and leave as utter an absence of all traces behind you, as if you were to disappear from the earth this moment. Come. I would not have you go back to exchange one word with any old companion, or take one look at any old haunt, or breathe the [176]

very air which is pestilence and death to you. Quit them all, while there is time and opportunity."

"She will be persuaded now," cried the young lady. "She hesitates, I am sure."

"I fear, not, my dear," said the gentleman.

[177]

"No sir, I do not," replied the girl after a short struggle. "I am chained to my old life. I loathe and hate it now, but I cannot leave it. I must have gone too far to turn back,—and yet I don't know, for if you had spoken to me so some time ago, I should have laughed it off. But," she said, looking hastily round, "this fear comes over me again. I must go home."

"Home!" repeated the young lady, with great stress upon the word.

"Home, lady," rejoined the girl. "To such a home as I have raised for myself with the work of my whole life. Let us part. I shall be watched or seen. Go, go. If I have done you any service, all I ask is, that you leave me, and let me go my way alone."

"It is useless," said the gentleman with a sigh. "We compromise her safety perhaps by staying here. We may have detained her longer than she expected already."

"Yes, yes," urged the girl. "You have."

"What," cried the young lady, "can be the end of this poor creature's life?"

[178]

"What!" repeated the girl. "Look before you, lady. Look at that dark water. How many times do you read of such as we who spring into the tide, and leave no living thing to care for or bewail them. It may be years hence, or it may be only months, but I shall come to that at last."

"Do not speak thus, pray," returned the young lady, sobbing.

"It will never reach your ears, dear lady, and God forbid such horrors should!"—replied the girl. "Good night, good night."

The gentleman turned away.

"This purse," cried the young lady. "Take it for my sake, that you may have some resource in an hour of need and trouble."

"No, no," replied the girl. "I have not done this for money. Let me have that to think of. And yet—give me something that you have worn: I should like to have something—no, no, not a ring—your gloves or handkerchief—anything that I can keep as having belonged to you, sweet lady. There. Bless you—God bless you. Good night, good night."

[179]

The violent agitation of the girl, and the apprehension of some discovery which would subject her to ill-usage and violence, seemed to determine the gentleman to leave her as she requested. The sound of retreating footsteps were audible, and the voices ceased.

The two figures of the young lady and her companion soon afterwards appeared upon the bridge. They stopped at the summit of the stairs.

"Hark!" cried the young lady, listening. "Did she call! I thought I heard her voice."

"No, my love," replied Mr. Brownlow, looking sadly back. "She has not moved, and will not till we are gone."

Rose Maylie lingered, but the old gentleman drew her arm through his, and led her with gentle force away. As they disappeared, the girl sunk down nearly at her full length upon one of the stone stairs, and vented the anguish of her heart in bitter tears.

After a time she rose, and with feeble and tottering steps ascended to the street. The astonished listener remained motionless on his post for some minutes afterwards, and having ascertained with many cautious glances round him that he was again alone, crept slowly from his hiding-place, and returned, stealthily and in the shade of the wall, in the same manner as he had descended.

[180]

Peeping out more than once when he reached the top, to make sure that he was unobserved, Noah Claypole darted away at his utmost speed, and made for the Jew's house as fast as his legs would carry him.

CHAPTER XLV.

[181]

FATAL CONSEQUENCES.

IT was nearly two hours before daybreak—that time which in the autumn of the year may be truly called the dead of night, when the streets are silent and deserted, when even sound appears to slumber, and profligacy and riot have staggered home to dream—it was at this still and silent hour that the Jew sat watching in his old lair, with face so distorted and pale, and eyes so red and bloodshot, that he looked less like a man than like some hideous phantom, moist from the grave, and worried by an evil spirit.

He sat crouching over a cold hearth, wrapped in an old torn coverlet, with his face turned towards a wasting candle that stood upon a table by his side. His right hand was raised to his lips, and as, absorbed in thought, he bit his long black nails, he disclosed among his toothless gums a few such fangs as should have been a dog's or rat's. [182]

Stretched upon a mattress on the floor lay Noah Claypole fast asleep. Towards him the old man sometimes directed his eyes for an instant, then brought them back again to the candle, which, with long-burnt wick drooping almost double, and hot grease falling down in clots upon the table, plainly showed that his thoughts were busy elsewhere.

Indeed they were. Mortification at the overthrow of his notable scheme, hatred of the girl who had dared to palter with strangers, an utter distrust of the sincerity of her refusal to yield him up, bitter disappointment at the loss of his revenge on Sikes, the fear of detection and ruin and death, and a fierce and deadly rage kindled by all,—these were the passionate considerations that following close upon each other with rapid and ceaseless whirl shot through the brain of Fagin, as every evil thought and blackest purpose lay working at his heart. [183]

He sat without changing his attitude in the least, or appearing to take the smallest heed of time, until his quick ear seemed to be attracted by a footstep in the street.

"At last," muttered the Jew, wiping his dry and fevered mouth. "At last."

The bell rang gently as he spoke. He crept up stairs to the door, and presently returned accompanied by a man muffled to the chin, who carried a bundle under one arm. Sitting down and throwing back his outer coat, the man displayed the burly frame of Sikes.

"There," he said, laying the bundle on the table. "Take care of that, and do the most you can with it. It's been trouble enough to get; I thought I should have been here three hours ago."

Fagin laid his hand upon the bundle, and locking it in the cupboard, sat down again without speaking. But he did not take his eyes off the robber for an instant during this action, and now that they sat over against each other face to face, he looked fixedly at him, with his lips quivering so violently, and his face so altered by the emotions which had mastered him, that the housebreaker involuntarily drew back his chair, and surveyed him with a look of real affright. [184]

"Wot now?" cried Sikes. "Wot do you look at a man so for?—Speak, will you?"

The Jew raised his right hand, and shook his trembling forefinger in the air, but his passion was so great, that the power of speech was for the moment gone.

"Damme!" said Sikes, feeling in his breast with a look of alarm. "He's gone mad. I must look to myself here."

"No, no," rejoined Fagin, finding his voice. "It's not—you're not the person, Bill. I've no—no fault to find with you."

"Oh, you haven't, haven't you?" said Sikes, looking sternly at him, and ostentatiously passing a pistol into a more convenient pocket. "That's lucky—for one of us. Which one that is, don't matter."

"I've got that to tell you, Bill," said the Jew, drawing his chair nearer, "will make you worse than me." [185]

"Aye?" returned the robber with an incredulous air. "Tell away. Look sharp, or Nance will think I'm lost."

"Lost!" cried Fagin. "She has pretty well settled that in her own mind already."

Sikes looked with an aspect of great perplexity into the Jew's face, and reading no satisfactory explanation of the riddle there, clenched his coat collar in his huge hand, and shook him soundly.

"Speak, will you!" he said; "or if you don't, it shall be for want of breath. Open your mouth and say wot you've got to say in plain words. Out with it, you thundering old cur, out with it."

"Suppose that lad that's lying there——" Fagin began.

Sikes turned round to where Noah was sleeping as if he had not previously observed him. "Well," he said, resuming his former position.

"Suppose that lad," pursued the Jew, "was to peach—blow upon us all—first seeking out the right folks for the purpose, and then having a meeting with 'em in the street to paint our likenesses, describe every mark that they might know us by, and the crib where we might be most easily taken. Suppose he was to do all this, and besides to blow upon a plant we've all been in, more or less—of his own fancy; not grabbed, trapped, tried, earwigged by the parson and brought to it on bread and water,—but of his own fancy; to please his own taste; stealing out at nights to find those most interested against us, and peaching to them. Do you hear me?" cried the Jew, his eyes flashing with rage. "Suppose he did all this, what then?" [186]

"What then!" replied Sikes with a tremendous oath. "If he was left alive till I came, I'd grind his skull under the iron heel of my boot into as many grains as there are hairs upon his head."

"What if *I* did it!" cried the Jew almost in a yell. "*I*, that know so much, and could hang so many besides myself!" [187]

"I don't know," replied Sikes, clenching his teeth and turning white at the mere suggestion. "I'd do something in the jail that 'ud get me put in irons; and if I was tried along with you, I'd fall upon you with them in the open court, and beat your brains out afore the people. I should have such strength," muttered the robber, poisoning his brawny arm, "that I could smash your head as if a loaded waggon had gone over it."

"You would."

"Would I!" said the housebreaker. "Try me."

"If it was Charley, or the Dodger, or Bet, or——"

"I don't care who," replied Sikes impatiently. "Whoever it was, I'd serve them the same."

Fagin again looked hard at the robber, and motioning him to be silent, stooped over the bed upon the floor, and shook the sleeper to rouse him. Sikes leant forward in his chair, looking on with his hands upon his knees as if wondering much what all this questioning and preparation was to end in. [188]

"Bolter, Bolter. Poor lad!" said Fagin, looking up with an expression of devilish anticipation, and speaking slowly and with marked emphasis. "He's tired—tired with watching for *her* so long, —watching for *her*, Bill."

"Wot d'ye mean?" asked Sikes, drawing back.

The Jew made no answer, but bending over the sleeper again, hauled him into a sitting posture. When his assumed name had been repeated several times, Noah rubbed his eyes, and giving a heavy yawn looked sleepily about him.

"Tell me that again—once again, just for him to hear," said the Jew, pointing to Sikes as he spoke.

"Tell yer what?" asked the sleepy Noah, shaking himself pettishly.

"That about—NANCY," said the Jew, clutching Sikes by the wrist, as if to prevent his leaving the house before he had heard enough. "You followed her?" [189]

"Yes."

"To London Bridge?"

"Yes."

"Where she met two people?"

"So she did."

"A gentleman, and a lady that she had gone to of her own accord before, who asked her to give up all her pals, and Monks first, which she did—and to describe him, which she did—and to tell her what house it was that we meet at and go to, which she did—and where it could be best watched from, which she did—and what time the people went there, which she did. She did all this. She told it all every word without a threat, without a murmur—she did—didn't she?" cried the Jew, half mad with fury.

"All right," replied Noah, scratching his head. "That's just what it was!"

"What did they say about last Sunday?" demanded the Jew.

"About last Sunday!" replied Noah, considering. "Why, I told yer that before."

"Again. Tell it again!" cried Fagin, tightening his grasp on Sikes, and brandishing his other hand aloft as the foam flew from his lips. [190]

"They asked her," said Noah, who, as he grew more wakeful, seemed to have a dawning perception who Sikes was, "they asked her why she didn't come last Sunday as she promised. She said she couldn't—"

"Why—why?" interrupted the Jew triumphantly. "Tell him that."

"Because she was forcibly kept at home by Bill, the man she had told them of before," replied Noah.

"What more of him?" cried the Jew. "What more of the man she had told them of before? Tell him that, tell him that."

"Why, that she couldn't very easily get out of doors unless he knew where she was going to," said Noah; "and so the first time she went to see the lady, she—ha! ha! ha! it made me laugh when she said it, that it did—she gave him a drink of laudanum."

"Hell's fire!" cried Sikes, breaking fiercely from the Jew. "Let me go!"

Flinging the old man from him, he rushed from the room, and darted wildly and furiously up the stairs. [191]

"Bill, Bill!" cried the Jew, following him hastily. "A word. Only a word."

The word would not have been exchanged, but that the housebreaker was unable to open the door, on which he was expending fruitless oaths and violence when the Jew came panting up.

"Let me out," said Sikes. "Don't speak to me—it's not safe. Let me out, I say."

"Hear me speak a word," rejoined the Jew, laying his hand upon the lock, "You won't be——"

"Well," replied the other.

"You won't be—too—violent, Bill?" whined the Jew.

The day was breaking, and there was light enough for the men to see each other's faces. They exchanged one brief glance; there was a fire in the eyes of both which could not be mistaken.

"I mean," said Fagin, showing that he felt all disguise was now useless, "not too violent for safety. Be crafty, Bill, and not too bold." [192]

Sikes made no reply, but, pulling open the door of which the Jew had turned the lock, dashed into the silent streets.

Without one pause or moment's consideration, without once turning his head to the right or left or raising his eyes to the sky or lowering them to the ground but looking straight before him with savage resolution, his teeth so tightly compressed that the strained jaw seemed starting through his skin, the robber held on his headlong course, nor muttered a word, nor relaxed a muscle, until he reached his own door. He opened it softly with a key, strode lightly up the stairs, and entering his own room, double-locked the door, and lifting a heavy table against it, drew back the curtain of the bed.

The girl was lying half-dressed upon it. He had roused her from her sleep, for she raised herself with a hurried and startled look.

"Get up," said the man. [193]

"It *is* you, Bill!" said the girl, with an expression of pleasure at his return.

"It is," was the reply. "Get up."

There was a candle burning, but the man hastily drew it from the candlestick and hurled it under the grate. Seeing the faint light of early day without, the girl rose to undraw the curtain.

"Let it be," said Sikes, thrusting his hand before her. "There's light enough for wot I've got to do."

"Bill," said the girl, in the low voice of alarm, "why do you look like that at me?"

The robber sat regarding her for a few seconds with dilated nostrils and heaving breast, and then grasping her by the head and throat dragged her into the middle of the room, and looking once towards the door, placed his heavy hand upon her mouth.

"Bill, Bill—" gasped the girl, wrestling with the strength of mortal fear,— "I—I won't scream or cry—not once—hear me—speak to me—tell me what I have done."

"You know, you she devil!" returned the robber, suppressing his breath. "You were watched to-night; every word you said was heard." [194]

"Then spare my life for the love of Heaven as I spared yours," rejoined the girl, clinging to him. "Bill, dear Bill, you cannot have the heart to kill me. Oh! think of all I have given up only this one night for you. You *shall* have time to think, and save yourself this crime; I will not loose my hold, you cannot throw me off. Bill, Bill, for dear God's sake, for your own, for mine, stop before you spill my blood. I have been true to you, upon my guilty soul I have."

The man struggled violently to release his arms, but those of the girl were clasped round his, and tear her as he would he could not tear them away.

"Bill," cried the girl, striving to lay her head upon his breast, "the gentleman and that dear lady told me to-night of a home in some foreign country where I could end my days in solitude and peace. Let me see them again, and beg them on my knees to show the same mercy and goodness to you, and let us both leave this dreadful place, and far apart lead better lives, and forget how we have lived except in prayers, and never see each other more. It is never too late to repent. They told me so—I feel it now—but we must have time—a little, little time!" [195]

The housebreaker freed one arm, and grasped his pistol. The certainty of immediate detection if he fired flashed across his mind even in the midst of his fury, and he beat it twice with all the force he could summon, upon the upturned face that almost touched his own.

She staggered and fell, nearly blinded with the blood that rained down from a deep gash in her forehead, but raising herself with difficulty on her knees drew from her bosom a white handkerchief—Rose Maylie's own—and holding it up in her folded hands as high towards Heaven as her feeble strength would let her, breathed one prayer for mercy to her Maker.

It was a ghastly figure to look upon. The murderer staggering backward to the wall, and shutting out the sight with his hand, seized a heavy club and struck her down. [196]

THE FLIGHT OF SIKES.

OF all bad deeds that under cover of the darkness had been committed within wide London's bounds since night hung over it, that was the worst. Of all the horrors that rose with an ill scent upon the morning air, that was the foulest and most cruel.

The sun,—the bright sun, that brings back not light alone, but new life and hope and freshness to man—burst upon the crowded city in clear and radiant glory. Through costly-coloured glass and paper-mended window, through cathedral dome and rotten crevice, it shed its equal ray. It lighted up the room where the murdered woman lay. It did. He tried to shut it out, but it would stream in. If the sight had been a ghastly one in the dull morning, what was it now in all that brilliant light!

[198]

He had not moved: he had been afraid to stir. There had been a moan and motion of the hand; and with terror added to hate he had struck and struck again. Once he threw a rug over it; but it was worse to fancy the eyes, and imagine them moving towards him, than to see them glaring upwards as if watching the reflection of the pool of gore that quivered and danced in the sunlight on the ceiling. He had plucked it off again. And there was the body—mere flesh and blood, no more—but *such* flesh, and *such* blood!

He struck a light, kindled a fire, and thrust the club into it. There was human hair upon the end which blazed and shrunk into a light cinder, and, caught by the air, whirled up the chimney. Even that frightened him, sturdy as he was, but he held the weapon till it broke, and then piled it on the coals to burn away, and smoulder into ashes. He washed himself and rubbed his clothes; there were spots that would not be removed, but he cut the pieces out, and burnt them. How those stains were dispersed about the room! The very feet of the dog were bloody.

[199]

All this time he had never once turned his back upon the corpse; no, not for a moment. Such preparations completed, he moved backwards towards the door, dragging the dog with him, lest he should carry out new evidences of the crime into the streets. He shut the door softly, locked it, took the key, and left the house.

He crossed over, and glanced up at the window, to be sure that nothing was visible from the outside. There was the curtain still drawn, which she would have opened to admit the light she never saw again. It lay nearly under there. *He* knew that. God, how the sun poured down upon the very spot!

The glance was instantaneous. It was a relief to have got free of the room. He whistled on the dog, and walked rapidly away.

He went through Islington; strode up the hill at Highgate on which stands the stone in honour of Whittington; turned down to Highgate Hill, unsteady of purpose, and uncertain where to go; struck off to the right again almost as soon as he began to descend it, and taking the foot path across the fields, skirted Caen Wood, and so came out on Hampstead Heath. Traversing the hollow by the Vale of Health, he mounted the opposite bank, and crossing the road which joins the villages of Hampstead and Highgate, made along the remaining portion of the heath to the fields at North End, in one of which he laid himself down under a hedge and slept.

[200]

Soon he was up again, and away,—not far into the country, but back towards London by the high-road—then back again—then over another part of the same ground as he had already traversed—then wandering up and down in fields and lying on ditches' brinks to rest, and starting up to make for some other spot and do the same, and ramble on again.

Where could he go to, that was near and not too public, to get some meat and drink? Hendon. That was a good place, not far off, and out of most people's way. Thither he directed his steps,—running sometimes, and sometimes, with a strange perversity, loitering at a snail's pace, or stopping altogether and idly breaking the hedges with his stick. But when he got there, all the people he met—the very children at the doors—seemed to view him with suspicion. Back he turned again, without the courage to purchase bit or drop, though he had tasted no food for many hours; and once more he lingered on the Heath, uncertain where to go.

[201]

He wandered over miles and miles of ground and still came back to the old place; morning and noon had passed, and the day was on the wane, and still he rambled to and fro, and up and down, and round and round, and still lingered about the same spot. At last he got away, and shaped his course for Hatfield.

It was nine o'clock at night when the man quite tired out, and the dog limping and lame from the unaccustomed exercise, turned down the hill by the church of the quiet village, and plodding along the little street crept into a small public-house, whose scanty light had guided them to the spot. There was a fire in the tap-room, and some country-labourers were drinking before it. They made room for the stranger, but he sat down in the furthest corner, and ate and drank alone, or rather with his dog, to whom he cast a morsel of food from time to time.

[202]

The conversation of the men assembled here turned upon the neighbouring land and farmers, and when those topics were exhausted, upon the age of some old man who had been buried on the previous Sunday; the young men present considering him very old, and the old men present declaring him to have been quite young—not older, one white-haired grandfather said, than he

was—with ten or fifteen year of life in him at least—if he had taken care; if he had taken care.

There was nothing to attract attention or excite alarm in this. The robber, after paying his reckoning, sat silent and unnoticed in his corner, and had almost dropped asleep, when he was half wakened by the noisy entrance of a new-comer.

This was an antic fellow, half pedlar and half mountebank, who travelled about the country on foot to vend hones, strops, razors, washballs, harness-paste, medicines for dogs and horses, cheap perfumery, cosmetics, and such-like wares, which he carried in a case slung to his back. His entrance was the signal for various homely jokes with the countrymen, which slackened not until he had made his supper, and opened his box of treasures, when he ingeniously contrived to unite business with amusement. [203]

“And what be that stoof—good to eat, Harry?” asked a grinning countryman, pointing to some composition-cakes in one corner.

“This,” said the fellow, producing one, “this is the infallible and invaluable composition for removing all sorts of stain, rust, dirt, mildew, spick, speck, spot, or spatter, from silk, satin, linen, cambric, cloth, crape, stuff, carpet, merino, muslin, bombazeen, or woollen stuff. Wine stains, fruit stains, beer stains, water stains, paint stains, pitch stains, any stains—all come out at one rub with the infallible and invaluable composition. If a lady stains her honour, she has only need to swallow one cake and she’s cured at once—for it’s poison. If a gentleman wants to prove his, he has only need to bolt one little square, and he has put it beyond question—for it’s quite as satisfactory as a pistol-bullet, and a great deal nastier in the flavour, consequently the more credit in taking it. One penny a square. With all these virtues, one penny a square.” [204]

There were two buyers directly, and more of the listeners plainly hesitated. The vender observing this, increased in loquacity.

“It’s all bought up as fast as it can be made,” said the fellow. “There are fourteen water-mills, six steam-engines, and a galvanic battery always a-working upon it, and they can’t make it fast enough, though the men work so hard that they die off, and the widows is pensioned directly with twenty pound a-year for each of the children, and a premium of fifty for twins. One penny a square—two halfpence is all the same, and four farthings is received with joy. One penny a square. Wine-stains, fruit-stains, beer-stains, water-stains, paint-stains, pitch-stains, mud-stains, blood-stains—here is a stain upon the hat of a gentleman in company that I’ll take clean out before he can order me a pint of ale.” [205]

“Hah!” cried Sikes starting up. “Give that back.”

“I’ll take it clean out, sir,” replied the man, winking to the company, “before you can come across the room to get it. Gentlemen all, observe the dark stain upon this gentleman’s hat, no wider than a shilling, but thicker than a half-crown. Whether it is a wine-stain, fruit-stain, beer-stain, water-stain, paint-stain, pitch-stain, mud-stain, or blood-stain—”

The man got no farther, for Sikes with a hideous imprecation overthrew the table, and tearing the hat from him, burst out of the house.

With the same perversity of feeling and irresolution that had fastened upon him, despite himself, all day, the murderer, finding that he was not followed, and that they most probably considered him some drunken sullen fellow, turned back up the town, and getting out of the glare of the lamps of a stage-coach that was standing in the street, was walking past, when he recognised the mail from London, and saw that it was standing at the little post-office. He almost knew what was to come, but he crossed over and listened. [206]

The guard was standing at the door waiting for the letter-bag. A man dressed like a gamekeeper came up at the moment, and he handed him a basket which lay ready on the pavement.

“That’s for your people,” said the guard. “Now, look alive in there, will you.”

“Damn that ’ere bag, it warn’t ready night afore last: this won’t do, you know.”

“Anything new up in town, Ben?” asked the gamekeeper, drawing back to the window-shutters, the better to admire the horses.

“No, nothing that I knows on,” replied the man, pulling on his gloves. “Corn’s up a little. I heerd talk of a murder, too, down Spitalfields way, but I don’t reckon much upon it.”

“Oh, that’s quite true,” said a gentleman inside, who was looking out of the window. “And a very dreadful murder it was.”

“Was it, sir?” rejoined the guard, touching his hat. “Man or woman, pray, sir?” [207]

“A woman,” replied the gentleman. “It is supposed——”

“Now, Ben,” cried the coachman impatiently.

“Damn that ’ere bag,” said the guard; “are you gone to sleep in there?”

“Coming,” cried the office-keeper, running out.

“Coming,” growled the guard. “Ah, and so’s the young ’ooman of property that’s going to take

a fancy to me, but I don't know when. Here, give hold. All ri—ight!"

The horn sounded a few cheerful notes, and the coach was gone.

Sikes remained standing in the street, apparently unmoved by what he had just heard, and agitated by no stronger feeling than a doubt where to go. At length he went back again, and took the road which leads from Hatfield to St. Albans.

He went on doggedly; but as he left the town behind him, and plunged further and further into the solitude and darkness of the road, he felt a dread and awe creeping upon him which shook him to the core. Every object before him, substance or shadow, still or moving, took the semblance of some fearful thing; but these fears were nothing compared to the sense that haunted him of that morning's ghastly figure following at his heels. He could trace its shadow in the gloom, supply the smallest item of the outline, and note how stiff and solemn it seemed to stalk along. He could hear its garments rustling in the leaves, and every breath of wind came laden with that last low cry. If he stopped, it did the same. If he ran, it followed—not running too, that would have been a relief, but like a corpse endowed with the mere machinery of life, and borne upon one slow melancholy wind that never rose or fell. [208]

At times he turned with desperate determination, resolved to beat this phantom off, though it should look him dead; but the hair rose from his head, and his blood stood still; for it had turned with him and was behind him then. He had kept it before him that morning, but it was behind him now—always. He leant his back against a bank, and felt that it stood above him, visibly out against the cold night-sky. He threw himself upon the road—on his back upon the road. At his head it stood, silent, erect, and still—a living grave-stone with its epitaph in blood. [209]

Let no man talk of murderers escaping justice, and hint that Providence must sleep. There were twenty score of violent deaths in one long minute of that agony of fear.

There was a shed in a field he passed that offered shelter for the night. Before the door were three tall poplar trees, which made it very dark within, and the wind moaned through them with a dismal wail. He *could not* walk on till daylight came again, and here he stretched himself close to the wall—to undergo new torture.

For now a vision came before him, as constant and more terrible than that from which he had escaped. Those widely staring eyes, so lustreless and so glassy, that he had better borne to see than think upon, appeared in the midst of the darkness; light in themselves, but giving light to nothing. There were but two, but they were everywhere. If he shut out the sight, there came the room with every well-known object—some, indeed, that he would have forgotten if he had gone over its contents from memory—each in its accustomed place. The body was in *its* place, and its eyes were as he saw them when he stole away. He got up and rushed into the field without. The figure was behind him. He re-entered the shed and shrunk down once more. The eyes were there before he had lain himself along. [210]

And here he remained in such terror as none but he can know, trembling in every limb, and the cold sweat starting from every pore, when suddenly there arose upon the night-wind the noise of distant shouting, and the roar of voices mingled in alarm and wonder. Any sound of men in that lonely place, even though it conveyed a real cause of alarm, was something to him. He regained his strength and energy at the prospect of personal danger, and springing to his feet rushed into the open air. [211]

The broad sky seemed on fire. Rising into the air with showers of sparks, and rolling one above the other, were sheets of flame, lighting the atmosphere for miles round, and driving clouds of smoke in the direction where he stood. The shouts grew louder as new voices swelled the roar, and he could hear the cry of Fire mingled with the ringing of an alarm-bell, the fall of heavy bodies, and the crackling of flames as they twined round some new obstacle, and shot aloft as though refreshed by food. The noise increased as he looked. There were people there—men and women—light, bustle. It was like new life to him. He darted onward—straight, headlong—dashing through brier and brake and leaping gate and fence as madly as the dog who careered with loud and sounding bark before him.

He came upon the spot. There were half-dressed figures tearing to and fro, some endeavouring to drag the frightened horses from the stables, others driving the cattle from the yard and out-houses, and others coming laden from the burning pile amidst a shower of falling sparks, and the tumbling down of red-hot beams. The apertures, where doors and windows stood an hour ago, disclosed a mass of raging fire; walls rocked and crumbled into the burning well; the molten lead and iron poured down, white hot, upon the ground. Women and children shrieked, and men encouraged each other with noisy shouts and cheers. The clanking of the engine-pumps and the spirting and hissing of the water as it fell upon the blazing wood added to the tremendous roar. He shouted, too, till he was hoarse; and flying from memory and himself plunged into the thickest of the throng. [212]

Hither and thither he dived that night—now working at the pumps, and now hurrying through the smoke and flame, but never ceasing to engage himself wherever noise and men were thickest. Up and down the ladders, upon the roofs of buildings, over floors that quaked and trembled with his weight, under the lee of falling bricks and stones,—in every part of that great fire was he, but he bore a charmed life, and had neither scratch nor bruise, nor weariness nor thought, till morning dawned again and only smoke and blackened ruins remained. [213]

This mad excitement over, there returned with tenfold force the dreadful consciousness of his crime. He looked suspiciously about him, for the men were conversing in groups, and he feared to be the subject of their talk. The dog obeyed the significant beck of his finger, and they drew off stealthily together. He passed near an engine where some men were seated, and they called to him to share in their refreshment. He took some bread and meat; and as he drank a draught of beer, heard the firemen, who were from London, talking about the murder. "He has gone to Birmingham, they say," said one: "but they'll have him yet, for the scouts are out, and by to-morrow night there'll be a cry all through the country."

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Sikes attempting to destroy his dog.

He hurried off and walked till he almost dropped upon the ground; then lay down in a lane, and had a long, but broken and uneasy, sleep. He wandered on again, irresolute and undecided, and oppressed with the fear of another solitary night.

Suddenly he took the desperate resolution of going back to London.

"There's somebody to speak to there, at all events," he thought. "A good hiding-place, too. They'll never expect to nab me there after this country scent. Why can't I lay by for a week or so, and forcing blunt from Fagin get abroad to France! Dam'me, I'll risk it."

He acted upon this impulse without delay, and choosing the least frequented roads began his journey back, resolved to lie concealed within a short distance of the metropolis, and, entering it at dusk by a circuitous route, to proceed straight to that part of it which he had fixed on for his destination.

The dog, though,—if any descriptions of him were out, it would not be forgotten that the dog was missing and had probably gone with him. This might lead to his apprehension as he passed along the streets. He resolved to drown him, and walked on looking about for a pond; picking up a heavy stone and tying it to his handkerchief as he went.

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The animal looked up into his master's face while these preparations were making—and, whether his instinct apprehended something of their purpose, or the robber's sidelong look at him was sterner than ordinary—skulked a little further in the rear than usual, and cowered as he came more slowly along. When his master halted at the brink of a pool and looked round to call him, he stopped outright.

"Do you hear me call 'come here?'" cried Sikes whistling.

The animal came up from the very force of habit; but as Sikes stooped to attach the handkerchief to his throat, he uttered a low growl and started back.

"Come back," said the robber, stamping on the ground. The dog wagged his tail, but moved not. Here Sikes made a running noose and called him again.

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The dog advanced, retreated, paused an instant, turned and scoured away at his hardest speed.

The man whistled again and again, and sat down and waited in the expectation that he would return. But no dog appeared, and he resumed his journey.

MONKS AND MR. BROWNLOW AT LENGTH MEET. THEIR CONVERSATION, AND THE INTELLIGENCE THAT INTERRUPTS IT.

THE twilight was beginning to close in, when Mr. Brownlow alighted from a hackney-coach at his own door, and knocked softly. The door being opened, a sturdy man got out of the coach and stationed himself on one side of the steps, while another man who had been seated on the box dismounted too, and stood upon the other side. At a sign from Mr. Brownlow, they helped out a third man, and taking him between them, hurried him into the house. This man was Monks.

They walked in the same manner up the stairs without speaking, and Mr. Brownlow, preceding them, led the way into a back-room. At the door of this apartment, Monks, who had ascended with evident reluctance, stopped. The two men looked to the old gentleman as if for instructions. [218]

"He knows the alternative," said Mr. Brownlow. "If he hesitates or moves a finger but as you bid him, drag him into the street, call for the aid of the police, and impeach him as a felon in my name."

"How dare you say this of me?" asked Monks.

"How dare you urge me to it, young man?" replied Mr. Brownlow, confronting him with a steady look. "Are you mad enough to leave this house? Unhand him. There, sir. You are free to go, and we to follow. But I warn you, by all I hold most solemn and most sacred, that the instant you set foot in the street, that instant will I have you apprehended on a charge of fraud and robbery. I am resolute and immovable. If you are determined to be the same, your blood be upon your own head!"

"By what authority am I kidnapped in the street and brought here by these dogs?" asked Monks, looking from one to the other of the men who stood beside him. [219]

"By mine," replied Mr. Brownlow. "Those persons are indemnified by me. If you complain of being deprived of your liberty—you had power and opportunity to retrieve it as you came along, but you deemed it advisable to remain quiet—I say again, throw yourself for protection upon the law. I will appeal to the law too; but when you have gone too far to recede, do not sue to me for leniency when the power will have passed into other hands, and do not say I plunged you down the gulf into which you rushed yourself."

Monks was plainly disconcerted, and alarmed besides. He hesitated.

"You will decide quickly," said Mr. Brownlow, with perfect firmness and composure. "If you wish me to prefer my charges publicly, and consign you to a punishment the extent of which, although I can, with a shudder, foresee, I cannot control, once more, I say, you know the way. If not, and you appeal to my forbearance, and the mercy of those you have deeply injured, seat yourself without a word in that chair. It has waited for you two whole days." [220]

Monks muttered some unintelligible words, but wavered still.

"You will be prompt," said Mr. Brownlow. "A word from me, and the alternative has gone for ever."

Still the man hesitated.

"I have not the inclination to parley further," said Mr. Brownlow, "and, as I advocate the dearest interests of others, I have not the right."

"Is there—" demanded Monks with a faltering tongue,— "is there—no middle course?"

"None; emphatically none."

Monks looked at the old gentleman with an anxious eye, but, reading in his countenance nothing but severity and determination, walked into the room, and, shrugging his shoulders, sat down.

"Lock the door on the outside," said Mr. Brownlow to the attendants, "and come when I ring."

The men obeyed, and the two were left alone together. [221]

"This is pretty treatment, sir," said Monks, throwing down his hat and cloak, "from my father's oldest friend."

"It is because I was your father's oldest friend, young man," returned Mr. Brownlow. "It is because the hopes and wishes of young and happy years were bound up with him, and that fair creature of his blood and kindred who rejoined her God in youth and left me here a solitary, lonely man,—it is because he knelt with me beside his only sister's death-bed when he was yet a boy, on the morning that would—but Heaven willed otherwise—have made her my young wife,—it is because my seared heart clung to him from that time forth through all his trials and errors, till he died,—it is because old recollections and associations fill my heart, and even the sight of you brings with it old thoughts of him,—it is all these things that move me to treat you gently now—yes, Edward Leeford, even now—and blush for your unworthiness who bear the name."

"What has the name to do with it?" asked the other, after contemplating, half in silence, and half in dogged wonder, the agitation of his companion. "What is the name to me?" [222]

"Nothing," replied Mr. Brownlow, "nothing to you. But it was *hers*, and even at this distance of time brings back to me, an old man, the glow and thrill which I once felt only to hear it repeated by a stranger. I am very glad you have changed it—very—very."

"This is all mighty fine," said Monks (to retain his assumed designation) after a long silence, during which he had jerked himself in sullen defiance to and fro, and Mr. Brownlow had sat shading his face with his hand. "But what do you want with me?"

"You have a brother," said Mr. Brownlow rousing himself—"a brother, the whisper of whose name in your ear, when I came behind you in the street, was in itself almost enough to make you accompany me hither in wonder and alarm."

"I have no brother," replied Monks. "You know I was an only child. Why do you talk to me of brothers? You know that, as well as I." [223]

"Attend to what I do know and you may not," said Mr. Brownlow. "I shall interest you by and by. I know that of the wretched marriage, into which family pride and the most sordid and narrowest of all ambition forced your unhappy father when a mere boy, you were the sole and most unnatural issue," returned Mr. Brownlow.

"I don't care for hard names," interrupted Monks with a jeering laugh. "You know the fact, and that's enough for me."

"But I also know," pursued the old gentleman, "the misery, the slow torture, the protracted anguish of that ill-assorted union; I know how listlessly and wearily each of that wretched pair dragged on their heavy chain through a world that was poisoned to them both; I know how cold formalities were succeeded by open taunts; how indifference gave place to dislike, dislike to hate, and hate to loathing, until at last they wrenched the clanking bond asunder, and retiring a wide space apart, carried each a galling fragment, of which nothing but death could break the rivets, to hide it in new society beneath the gayest looks they could assume. Your mother succeeded: she forgot it soon—but it rusted and cankered at your father's heart for years." [224]

"Well, they were separated," said Monks, "and what of that?"

"When they had been separated for some time," returned Mr. Brownlow, "and your mother, wholly given up to continental frivolities, had utterly forgotten the young husband ten good years her junior, who with prospects blighted lingered on at home, he fell among new friends. *This* circumstance, at least, you know already."

"Not I," said Monks, turning away his eyes and beating his foot upon the ground, as a man who is determined to deny everything. "Not I."

"Your manner, no less than your actions, assures me that you have never forgotten it, or ceased to think of it with bitterness," returned Mr. Brownlow. "I speak of fifteen years ago, when you were not more than eleven years old, and your father but one-and-thirty—for he was, I repeat, a boy, when *his* father ordered him to marry. Must I go back to events that cast a shade upon the memory of your parent, or will you spare it and disclose to me the truth?" [225]

"I have nothing to disclose," rejoined Monks in evident confusion. "You must talk on if you will."

"These new friends, then," said Mr. Brownlow, "were a naval officer retired from active service, whose wife had died some half-a-year before, and left him with two children—there had been more, but of all their family happily but two survived. They were both daughters; one a beautiful creature of nineteen, and the other a mere child of two or three years old."

"What's this to me?" asked Monks.

"They resided," said Mr. Brownlow, without seeming to hear the interruption, "in a part of the country to which your father in his wanderings had repaired, and where he had taken up his abode. Acquaintance, intimacy, friendship, fast followed on each other. Your father was gifted as few men are—he had his sister's soul and person. As the old officer knew him more and more, he grew to love him. I would that it had ended there. His daughter did the same." [226]

The old gentleman paused; Monks was biting his lips, with his eyes fixed upon the floor; seeing this, he immediately resumed.

"The end of a year found him contracted, solemnly contracted to that daughter; the object of the first, true, ardent, only passion of a guileless, untried girl."

"Your tale is of the longest," observed Monks moving restlessly in his chair.

"It is a true tale of grief, and trial, and sorrow, young man," returned Mr. Brownlow, "and such tales usually are; if it were one of unmixed joy and happiness, it would be very brief. At length one of those rich relations to strengthen whose interest and importance your father had been sacrificed, as others are often—it is no uncommon case—died, and to repair the misery he had been instrumental in occasioning, left him *his* panacea for all griefs—Money. It was necessary that he should immediately repair to Rome, whither this man had sped for health, and where he had died, leaving his affairs in great confusion. He went, was seized with mortal illness there, was followed the moment the intelligence reached Paris by your mother, who carried you with her; he died the day after her arrival, leaving no will—*no will*—so that the whole property fell to [227]

her and you.”

At this part of the recital Monks held his breath, and listened with a face of intense eagerness, though his eyes were not directed towards the speaker. As Mr. Brownlow paused, he changed his position with the air of one who has experienced a sudden relief, and wiped his hot face and hands.

“Before he went abroad, and as he passed through London on his way,” said Mr. Brownlow slowly, and fixing his eyes upon the other’s face—“he came to me.”

“I never heard of that,” interrupted Monks in a tone intended to appear incredulous, but savouring more of disagreeable surprise.

“He came to me, and left with me, among some other things, a picture—a portrait painted by himself—a likeness of this poor girl—which he did not wish to leave behind, and could not carry forward on his hasty journey. He was worn by anxiety and remorse almost to a shadow; talked in a wild, distracted way of ruin and dishonour worked by him; confided to me his intention to convert his whole property at any loss into money, and, having settled on his wife and you a portion of his recent acquisition, to fly the country—I guessed too well he would not fly alone—and never see it more. Even from me, his old and early friend, whose strong attachment had taken root in the earth that covered one most dear to both—even from me he withheld any more particular confession, promising to write and tell me all, and after that to see me once again for the last time on earth. Alas! *That* was the last time. I had no letter, and I never saw him more.

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“I went,” said Mr. Brownlow, after a short pause, “I went when all was over to the scene of his—I will use the term the world would use, for harshness or favour are now alike to him—of his guilty love; resolved that if my fears were realized that erring child should find one heart and home open to shelter and compassionate her. The family had left that part a week before; they had called in such trifling debts as were outstanding, discharged them, and left the place by night. Why or whither none could tell.”

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Monks drew his breath yet more freely, and looked round with a smile of triumph.

“When your brother,” said Mr. Brownlow, drawing nearer to the other’s chair—“When your brother,—a feeble, ragged, neglected child,—was cast in my way by a stronger hand than chance, and rescued by me from a life of vice and infamy”—

“What!” cried Monks, starting.

“By me,” said Mr. Brownlow. “I told you I should interest you before long. I say by me—I see that your cunning associate suppressed my name, although, for aught he knew, it would be quite strange to your ears. When he was rescued by me, then, and lay recovering from sickness in my house, his strong resemblance to this picture I have spoken of struck me with astonishment. Even when I first saw him, in all his dirt and misery, there was a lingering expression in his face that came upon me like a glimpse of some old friend flashing on one in a vivid dream. I need not tell you he was snared away before I knew his history—”

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“Why not?” asked Monks hastily.

“Because you know it well.”

“I!”

“Denial to me is vain,” replied Mr. Brownlow. “I shall show you that I know more than that.”

“You—you—can’t prove anything against me,” stammered Monks. “I defy you to do it!”

“We shall see,” returned the old gentleman with a searching glance. “I lost the boy, and no efforts of mine could recover him. Your mother being dead, I knew that you alone could solve the mystery if anybody could, and as when I had last heard of you you were on your own estate in the West Indies—whither, as you well know, you retired upon your mother’s death to escape the consequences of vicious courses here—I made the voyage. You had left it months before, and were supposed to be in London, but no one could tell where. I returned. Your agents had no clue to your residence. You came and went, they said, as strangely as you had ever done, sometimes for days together and sometimes not for months, keeping to all appearance the same low haunts and mingling with the same infamous herd who had been your associates when a fierce ungovernable boy. I wearied them with new applications. I paced the streets by night and day, but until two hours ago all my efforts were fruitless, and I never saw you for an instant.”

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“And now you do see me,” said Monks, rising boldly, “what then? Fraud and robbery are high-sounding words—justified, you think, by a fancied resemblance in some young imp to an idle daub of a dead man’s Brother! You don’t even know that a child was born of this maudlin pair; you don’t even know that.”

“I *did not*,” replied Mr. Brownlow, rising too; “but within the last fortnight I have learnt it all. You have a brother; you know it, and him. There was a will, which your mother destroyed, leaving the secret and the gain to you at her own death. It contained a reference to some child likely to be the result of this sad connection, which child was born, and accidentally encountered by you, when your suspicions were first awakened by his resemblance to his father. You repaired to the place of his birth. There existed proofs—proofs long suppressed—of his birth and parentage. Those proofs were destroyed by you, and now, in your own words to your accomplice the Jew,

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'the only proofs of the boy's identity lie at the bottom of the river, and the old hag that received them from the mother is rotting in her coffin.' Unworthy son, coward, liar,—you, who hold your councils with thieves and murderers in dark rooms at night,—you, whose plots and wiles have hurled a violent death upon the head of one worth millions such as you,—you, who from your cradle were gall and bitterness to your own father's heart, and in whom all evil passions, vice, and profligacy, festered till they found a vent in a hideous disease which has made your face an index even to your mind—you, Edward Leeford, do you brave me still!"

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"No, no, no!" returned the coward, overwhelmed by these accumulated charges.

"Every word!" cried the old gentleman, "every word that has passed between you and this detested villain, is known to me. Shadows on the wall have caught your whispers, and brought them to my ear; the sight of the persecuted child has turned vice itself and given it the courage and almost the attributes of virtue. Murder has been done, to which you were morally if not really a party."

"No, no," interposed Monks. "I—I—know nothing of that; I was going to inquire the truth of the story when you overtook me. I didn't know the cause, I thought it was a common quarrel."

"It was the partial disclosure of your secrets," replied Mr. Brownlow. "Will you disclose the whole?"

"Yes, I will."

"Set your hand to a statement of truth and facts, and repeat it before witnesses?"

"That I promise too."

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"Remain quietly here until such a document is drawn up, and proceed with me to such a place as I may deem most advisable, for the purpose of attesting it?"

"If you insist upon that, I'll do that also," replied Monks.

"You must do more than that," said Mr. Brownlow. "Make restitution to an innocent and unoffending child, for such he is, although the offspring of a guilty and most miserable love. You have not forgotten the provisions of the will. Carry them into execution so far as your brother is concerned, and then go where you please. In this world you need meet no more."

While Monks was pacing up and down, meditating with dark and evil looks on this proposal and the possibilities of evading it—torn by his fears on the one hand and his hatred on the other—the door was hurriedly unlocked, and a gentleman, Mr. Losberne, entered the room in violent agitation.

"The man will be taken," he cried. "He will be taken to-night!"

"The murderer?" asked Mr. Brownlow.

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"Yes, yes," replied the other. "His dog has been seen lurking about some old haunt, and there seems little doubt that his master either is, or will be, there under cover of the darkness. Spies are hovering about in every direction; I have spoken to the men who are charged with his capture, and they tell me he can never escape. A reward of a hundred pounds is proclaimed by Government to-night."

"I will give fifty more," said Mr. Brownlow, "and proclaim it with my own lips upon the spot if I can reach it. Where is Mr. Maylie?"

"Harry—as soon as he had seen your friend here safe in a coach with you, he hurried off to where he heard this," replied the doctor, "and mounting his horse sallied forth to join the first party at some place in the outskirts agreed upon between them."

"The Jew"—said Mr. Brownlow; "what of him?"

"When I last heard he had not been taken, but he will be, or is, by this time. They're sure of him."

"Have you made up your mind?" asked Mr. Brownlow, in a low voice, of Monks.

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"Yes," he replied. "You—you—will be secret with me?"

"I will. Remain here till I return. It is your only hope of safety."

They left the room, and the door was again locked.

"What have you done?" asked the doctor in a whisper.

"All that I could hope to do, and even more. Coupling the poor girl's intelligence with my previous knowledge, and the result of our good friend's inquiries on the spot, I left him no loophole of escape, and laid bare the whole villany which by these lights became plain as day. Write and appoint the evening after to-morrow at seven, for the meeting. We shall be down there a few hours before, but shall require rest, and especially the young lady, who *may* have greater need of firmness than either you or I can quite foresee just now. But my blood boils to avenge this poor murdered creature. Which way have they taken?"

"Drive straight to the office and you will be in time," replied Mr. Losberne. "I will remain

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here.”

The two gentlemen hastily separated; each in a fever of excitement wholly uncontrollable.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

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THE PURSUIT AND ESCAPE.

NEAR to that part of the Thames on which the church at Rotherhithe abuts, where the buildings on the banks are dirtiest and the vessels on the river blackest with the dust of colliers and the smoke of close-built low-roofed houses, there exists, at the present day, the filthiest, the strangest, the most extraordinary of the many localities that are hidden in London, wholly unknown, even by name, to the great mass of its inhabitants.

To reach this place, the visitor has to penetrate through a maze of close, narrow, and muddy streets, thronged by the roughest and poorest of water-side people, and devoted to the traffic they may be supposed to occasion. The cheapest and least delicate provisions are heaped in the shops, the coarsest and commonest articles of wearing apparel dangle at the salesman's door, and stream from the house-parapet and windows. Jostling with unemployed labourers of the lowest class, ballast-heavers, coal-whippers, brazen women, ragged children, and the very raff and refuse of the river, he makes his way with difficulty along, assailed by offensive sights and smells from the narrow alleys which branch off on the right and left, and deafened by the clash of ponderous waggons that bear great piles of merchandise from the stacks of warehouses that rise from every corner. Arriving at length in streets remoter and less-frequented than those through which he has passed, he walks beneath tottering house-fronts projecting over the pavement, dismantled walls that seem to totter as he passes, chimneys half crushed half hesitating to fall, windows guarded by rusty iron bars that time and dirt have almost eaten away, and every imaginable sign of desolation and neglect.

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In such a neighbourhood, beyond Dockhead in the Borough of Southwark, stands Jacob's Island, surrounded by a muddy ditch, six or eight feet deep and fifteen or twenty wide when the tide is in, once called Mill Pond, but known in these days as Folly Ditch. It is a creek or inlet from the Thames, and can always be filled at high water by opening the sluices at the Lead Mills from which it took its old name. At such times, a stranger, looking from one of the wooden bridges thrown across it at Mill-lane, will see the inhabitants of the houses on either side lowering from their back doors and windows, buckets, pails, domestic utensils of all kinds, in which to haul the water up; and when his eye is turned from these operations to the houses themselves, his utmost astonishment will be excited by the scene before him. Crazy wooden galleries common to the backs of half a-dozen houses, with holes from which to look upon the slime beneath; windows broken and patched, with poles thrust out on which to dry the linen that is never there; rooms so small, so filthy, so confined, that the air would seem too tainted even for the dirt and squalor which they shelter; wooden chambers thrusting themselves out above the mud, and threatening to fall into it—as some have done; dirt-besmearred walls and decaying foundations; every repulsive lineament of poverty, every loathsome indication of filth, rot, and garbage;—all these ornament the banks of Folly Ditch.

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In Jacob's Island the warehouses are roofless and empty; the walls are crumbling down; the windows are windows no more; the doors are falling into the street; the chimneys are blackened, but they yield no smoke. Thirty or forty years ago, before losses and chancery suits came upon it, it was a thriving place; but now it is a desolate island indeed. The houses have no owners; they are broken open, and entered upon by those who have the courage, and there they live and there they die. They must have powerful motives for a secret residence, or be reduced to a destitute condition indeed, who seek a refuge in Jacob's Island.

In an upper room of one of these houses—a detached house of fair size, ruinous in other respects, but strongly defended at door and window, of which the back commanded the ditch in manner already described,—there were assembled three men, who, regarding each other every now and then with looks expressive of perplexity and expectation, sat for some time in profound and gloomy silence. One of these was Toby Crackit, another Mr. Chitling, and the third a robber of fifty years, whose nose had been almost beaten in, in some old scuffle, and whose face bore a frightful scar which might probably be traced to the same occasion. This man was a returned transport, and his name was Kags.

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“I wish,” said Toby turning to Mr. Chitling, “that you had picked out some other crib when the two old ones got too warm, and not come here, my fine feller.”

“Why didn't you, blunder-head?” said Kags.

“Well, I thought you'd have been a little more glad to see me than this,” replied Mr. Chitling, with a melancholy air.

“Why look'e, young gentleman,” said Toby, “when a man keeps himself so very exclusive as I have done, and by that means has a snug house over his head with nobody prying and smelling about it, it's rather a startling thing to have the honour of a wisit from a young gentleman (however respectable and pleasant a person he may be to play cards with at conweniency)

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circumstanced as you are.”

“Especially when the exclusive young man has got a friend stopping with him that’s arrived sooner than was expected from foreign parts, and is too modest to want to be presented to the Judges on his return,” added Mr. Kags.

There was a short silence, after which Toby Crackit, seeming to abandon as hopeless any further effort to maintain his usual devil-may-care swagger, turned to Chitling and said—

“When was Fagin took then?”

“Just at dinner-time—two o’clock this afternoon,” was the reply. “Charley and I made our lucky up the wash’us chimney, and Bolter got into the empty water-butt, head downwards, but his legs was so precious long that they stuck out at the top, and so they took him too.”

“And Bet?”

“Poor Bet! She went to see the body, to speak to who it was,” replied Chitling, his countenance falling more and more, “and went off mad, screaming and raving, and beating her head against the boards, so they put a strait weskut on her and took her to the hospital—and there she is.” [244]

“Wot’s come of young Bates?” demanded Kags.

“He hung about, not to come over here afore dark, but he’ll be here soon,” replied Chitling. “There’s nowhere else to go to now, for the people at the Cripples are all in custody, and the bar of the ken—I went up there and saw it with my own eyes—is filled with traps.”

“This is a smash,” observed Toby, biting his lips. “There’s more than one will go with this.”

“The sessions are on,” said Kags: “if they get the inquest over; if Bolter turns King’s evidence, as of course he will, from what he’s said already; they can prove Fagin an accessory before the fact, and get the trial on on Friday; he’ll swing in six days from this, by G—!”

“You should have heard the people groan,” said Chitling; “the officers fought like devils or they’d have torn him away. He was down once, but they made a ring round him, and fought their way along. You should have seen how he looked about him, all muddy and bleeding, and clung to them as if they were his dearest friends. I can see ’em now, not able to stand upright with the pressing of the mob, and dragging him along amongst ’em; I can see the people jumping up, one behind another, and snarling with their teeth and making at him like wild beasts; I can see the blood upon his hair and beard, and hear the dreadful cries with which the women worked themselves into the centre of the crowd at the street corner, and swore they’d tear his heart out!” The horror-stricken witness of this scene pressed his hands upon his ears, and with his eyes fast closed got up and paced violently to and fro like one distracted. [245]

Whilst he was thus engaged, and the two men sat by in silence with their eyes fixed upon the floor, a pattering noise was heard upon the stairs, and Sikes’s dog bounded into the room. They ran to the window, down stairs, and into the street. The dog had jumped in at an open window; he made no attempt to follow them, nor was his master to be seen.

“What’s the meaning of this!” said Toby, when they had returned. “He can’t be coming here. I—I—hope not.” [246]

“If he was coming here, he’d have come with the dog,” said Kags, stooping down to examine the animal, who lay panting on the floor. “Here; give us some water for him; he has run himself faint.”

“He’s drunk it all up, every drop,” said Kags, after watching the dog some time in silence. “Covered with mud—lame—half-blind—he must have come a long way.”

“Where can he have come from!” exclaimed Toby. “He’s been to the other kens of course, and finding them filled with strangers come on here, where he’s been many a time and often. But where can he have come from first, and how comes he here alone, without the other!”

“He” (none of them called the murderer by his old name) “He can’t have made away with himself. What do you think?” said Chitling.

Toby shook his head.

“If he had,” said Kags, “the dog ’ud want to lead us away to where he did it. No: I think he’s got out of the country, and left the dog behind. He must have given him the slip somehow, or he wouldn’t be so easy.” [247]

This solution appearing the most probable one was adopted as the right, and the dog creeping under a chair, coiled himself up to sleep, without further notice from anybody.

It being now dark the shutter was closed, and a candle lighted and placed upon the table. The terrible events of the two days had made a deep impression upon all three, increased by the danger and uncertainty of their own position. They drew their chairs closer together, starting at every sound. They spoke little, and that in whispers, and were as silent and awe-stricken as if the remains of the murdered woman lay in the next room.

They had sat thus some time, when suddenly was heard a hurried knocking at the door below.

"Young Bates," said Kags, looking angrily round to check the fear he felt himself.

The knocking came again. "No, it wasn't he. He never knocked like that."

Crackit went to the window, and, shaking all over, drew in his head. There was no need to tell them who it was; his pale face was enough. The dog too was on the alert in an instant, and ran whining to the door. [248]

"We must let him in," he said, taking up the candle.

"Isn't there any help for it?" asked the other man in a hoarse voice.

"None. He *must* come in."

"Don't leave us in the dark," said Kags, taking down a candle from the chimney-piece, and lighting it with such a trembling hand that the knocking was twice repeated before he had finished.

Crackit went down to the door, and returned followed by a man with the lower part of his face buried in a handkerchief, and another tied over his head under his hat. He drew them slowly off—blanched face, sunken eyes, hollow cheeks, beard of three days' growth, wasted flesh, short thick breath; it was the very ghost of Sikes.

He laid his hand upon a chair which stood in the middle of the room, but shuddering as he was about to drop into it, and seeming to glance over his shoulder, dragged it back close to the wall—as close as it would go—ground it against it—and sat down. [249]

Not a word had been exchanged. He looked from one to another in silence. If an eye was furtively raised and met his, it was instantly averted. When his hollow voice broke silence, they all three started. They had never heard its tones before.

"How came that dog here?" he asked.

"Alone. Three hours ago."

"To-night's paper says that Fagin's taken. Is it true, or a lie?"

"Quite true."

They were silent again.

"Damn you all," said Sikes, passing his hand across his forehead. "Have you nothing to say to me?"

There was an uneasy movement among them, but nobody spoke.

"You that keep this house," said Sikes, turning his face to Crackit, "do you mean to sell me, or to let me lie here till this hunt is over?" [250]

"You may stop here, if you think it safe," returned the person addressed, after some hesitation.

Sikes carried his eyes slowly up the wall behind him, rather trying to turn his head than actually doing it, and said, "Is—it—the body—is it buried?"

They shook their heads.

"Why isn't it!" said the man with the same glance behind him. "Wot do they keep such ugly things as *that*, above the ground for?—Who's that knocking?"

Crackit intimated by a motion of his hand as he left the room that there was nothing to fear, and directly came back with Charley Bates behind him. Sikes sat opposite the door, so that the moment the boy entered the room he encountered his figure.

"Toby," said the boy falling back as Sikes turned his eyes towards him. "Why didn't you tell me this, down stairs?"

There had been something so tremendous in the shrinking off of the three, that the wretched man was willing to propitiate even this lad. Accordingly he nodded and made as though he would shake hands with him. [251]

"Let me go into some other room," said the boy retreating still further.

"Why, Charley?" said Sikes stepping forward. "Don't you—don't you know me?"

"Don't come nearer me," answered the boy, still retreating and looking with horror in his eyes upon the murderer's face. "You monster."

The man stopped half-way, and they looked at each other; but Sikes's eyes sunk gradually to the ground.

"Witness you three," cried the boy, shaking his clenched fist, and becoming more and more excited as he spoke. "Witness you three—I'm not afraid of him—if they come here after him, I'll give him up; I will. I tell you out at once; he may kill me for it if he likes or if he dares, but if I'm here I'll give him up. I'd give him up if he was to be boiled alive. Murder! Help! If there's the pluck of a man among you three, you'll help me. Murder. Help. Down with him." [252]

Pouring out these cries, and accompanying them with violent gesticulation, the boy actually threw himself single-handed upon the strong man, and in the intensity of his energy and the suddenness of his surprise brought him heavily to the ground.

The three spectators seemed quite transfixed and stupified. They offered no interference, and the boy and man rolled on the ground together, the former heedless of the blows that showered upon him, wrenching his hands tighter and tighter in the garments about the murderer's breast, and never ceasing to call for help with all his might.

The contest, however, was too unequal to last long. Sikes had him down and his knee was on his throat, when Crackit pulled him back with a look of alarm and pointed to the window. There were lights gleaming below, voices in loud and earnest conversation, the tramp of hurried footsteps—endless they seemed in number—crossing the nearest wooden-bridge. One man on horseback seemed to be among the crowd, for there was the noise of hoofs rattling on the uneven pavement; the gleam of lights increased, the footsteps came more thickly and noisily on. Then came a loud knocking at the door, and then a hoarse murmur from such a multitude of angry voices as would have made the boldest quail.

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"Help!" shrieked the boy in a voice that rent the air. "He's here; he's here. Break down the door."

"In the King's name," cried voices without; and the hoarse cry arose again, but louder.

"Break down the door," screamed the boy. "I tell you they'll never open it. Run straight to the room where the light is. Break down the door."

Strokes thick and heavy rattled upon the door and lower window-shutters as he ceased to speak, and a loud huzzah burst from the crowd;—giving the listener for the first time some adequate idea of its immense extent.

"Open the door of some place where I can lock this screeching Hell-babe," cried Sikes fiercely; running to and fro, and dragging the boy, now, as easily as if he were an empty sack. "That door. Quick." He flung him in, bolted it, and turned the key. "Is the down stairs door fast?"

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"Double-locked and chained," replied Crackit, who, with the other two men, still remained quite helpless and bewildered.

"The panels—are they strong?"

"Lined with sheet-iron."

"And the windows too?"

"Yes, and the windows."

"Damn you!" cried the desperate ruffian, throwing up the sash and menacing the crowd. "Do your worst; I'll cheat you yet!"

Of all the terrific yells that ever fell on mortal ears none could exceed the cry of that infuriated throng. Some shouted to those who were nearest to set the house on fire; others roared to the officers to shoot him dead. Among them all, none showed such fury as the man on horseback, who, throwing himself out of the saddle, and bursting through the crowd as if he were parting water, cried beneath the window, in a voice that rose above all others, "Twenty guineas to the man who brings a ladder."

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The nearest voices took up the cry, and hundreds echoed it. Some called for ladders, some for sledge-hammers; some ran with torches to and fro as if to seek them, and still came back and roared again; some spent their breath in impotent curses and execrations; some pressed forward with the ecstasy of madmen, and thus impeded the progress of those below; some among the boldest attempted to climb up by the water-spout and crevices in the wall; and all waved to and fro in the darkness beneath like a field of corn moved by an angry wind, and joined from time to time in one loud furious roar.

"The tide,—" cried the murderer, as he staggered back into the room, and shut the faces out, "the tide was in as I came up. Give me a rope, a long rope. They're all in front. I may drop into the Folly Ditch, and clear off that way. Give me a rope, or I shall do three more murders and kill myself at last."

The panic-stricken men pointed to where such articles were kept; the murderer, hastily selecting the longest and strongest cord, hurried up to the house-top.

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All the windows in the rear of the house had been long ago bricked up, except one small trap in the room where the boy was locked, and that was too small even for the passage of his body. But from this aperture he had never ceased to call on those without to guard the back, and thus when the murderer emerged at last on the house-top by the door in the roof, a loud shout proclaimed the fact to those in front, who immediately began to pour round, pressing upon each other in one unbroken stream.

He planted a board which he had carried up with him for the purpose so firmly against the door that it must be matter of great difficulty to open it from the inside, and creeping over the tiles, looked over the low parapet.

The water was out, and the ditch a bed of mud.

The crowd had been hushed during these few moments, watching his motions and doubtful of his purpose, but the instant they perceived it and knew it was defeated, they raised a cry of triumphant execration to which all their previous shouting had been whispers. Again and again it rose. Those who were at too great a distance to know its meaning, took up the sound; it echoed and re-echoed; it seemed as though the whole city had poured its population out to curse him. [257]

On pressed the people from the front—on, on, on, in one strong struggling current of angry faces, with here and there a glaring torch to light them up and show them out in all their wrath and passion. The houses on the opposite side of the ditch had been entered by the mob; sashes were thrown up, or torn bodily out; there were tiers and tiers of faces in every window, and cluster upon cluster of people clinging to every house-top. Each little bridge (and there were three in sight) bent beneath the weight of the crowd upon it; and still the current poured on to find some nook or hole from which to vent their shouts, and only for an instant see the wretch.

“They have him now,” cried a man on the nearest bridge. “Hurrah!” [258]

The crowd grew light with uncovered heads, and again the shout uprose.

“I promise fifty pounds,” cried an old gentleman from the same quarter, “fifty pounds to the man who takes him alive. I will remain here till he comes to ask me for it.”

There was another roar. At this moment the word was passed among the crowd that the door was forced at last, and that he who had first called for the ladder had mounted into the room. The stream abruptly turned as this intelligence ran from mouth to mouth, and the people at the windows, seeing those upon the bridges pouring back, quitted their stations and running into the street joined the concourse that now thronged pell-mell to the spot they had left, each man crushing and striving with his neighbour, and all panting with impatience to get near the door and look upon the criminal as the officers brought him out. The cries and shrieks of those who were pressed almost to suffocation or trampled down and trodden under foot in the confusion were dreadful; the narrow ways were completely blocked up; and at this time, between the rush of some to regain the space in front of the house and the unavailing struggles of others to extricate themselves from the mass, the immediate attention was distracted from the murderer, although the universal eagerness for his capture was, if possible, increased. [259]

The man had shrunk down, thoroughly quelled by the ferocity of the crowd and the impossibility of escape, but seeing this sudden change with no less rapidity than it occurred, he sprung upon his feet, determined to make one last effort for his life by dropping into the ditch, and, at the risk of being stifled, endeavouring to creep away in the darkness and confusion.

Roused into new strength and energy, and stimulated by the noise within the house which announced that an entrance had really been effected, he set his foot against the stack of chimneys, fastened one end of the rope tightly and firmly round it, and with the other made a strong running noose by the aid of his hands and teeth almost in a second. He could let himself down by the cord to within a less distance of the ground than his own height, and had his knife ready in his hand to cut it then and drop. [260]

At the very instant that he brought the loop over his head previous to slipping it beneath his arm-pits, and when the old gentleman before-mentioned (who had clung so tight to the railing of the bridge as to resist the force of the crowd, and retain his position) earnestly warned those about him that the man was about to lower himself down—at that very instant the murderer, looking behind him on the roof, threw his arms above his head, and uttered a yell of terror.

“The eyes again!” he cried in an unearthly screech. Staggering as if struck by lightning, he lost his balance and tumbled over the parapet; the noose was at his neck; it ran up with his weight tight as a bow-string and swift as the arrow it speeds. He fell for five-and-thirty feet. There was a sudden jerk, a terrific convulsion of the limbs, and there he hung, with the open knife clenched in his stiffening hand.

The old chimney quivered with the shock, but stood it bravely. The murderer swung lifeless against the wall, and the boy, thrusting aside the dangling body which obscured his view, called to the people to come and take him out for God’s sake. [261]

A dog, which had lain concealed till now, ran backwards and forwards on the parapet with a dismal howl, and collecting himself for a spring jumped for the dead man’s shoulders. Missing his aim, he fell into the ditch, turning completely over as he went, and striking his head against a stone, dashed out his brains.

CHAPTER XLIX.

AFFORDING AN EXPLANATION OF MORE MYSTERIES THAN ONE, AND COMPREHENDING A PROPOSAL OF MARRIAGE WITH NO WORD OF SETTLEMENT OR PIN-MONEY.

THE events narrated in the last chapter were yet but two days old, when Oliver found himself, at three o’clock in the afternoon, in a traveling-carriage rolling fast towards his native town. Mrs. Maylie and Rose and Mrs. Bedwin and the good doctor were with him; and Mr. Brownlow [262]

followed in a post-chaise, accompanied by one other person whose name had not been mentioned.

They had not talked much upon the way, for Oliver was in a flutter of agitation and uncertainty which deprived him of the power of collecting his thoughts, and almost of speech, and appeared to have scarcely less effect on his companions who shared it in at least an equal degree. He and the two ladies had been very carefully made acquainted by Mr. Brownlow with the nature of the admissions which had been forced from Monks, and although they knew that the object of their present journey was to complete the work which had been so well begun, still the whole matter was enveloped in enough of doubt and mystery to leave them in endurance of the most intense suspense.

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The same kind friend had, with Mr. Losberne's assistance, cautiously stopped all channels of communication through which they could receive intelligence of the dreadful occurrences that had so recently taken place. "It was quite true," he said, "that they must know them before long, but it might be at a better time than the present, and it could not be at a worse." So they travelled on in silence, each busied with reflections on the object which had brought them together, and no one disposed to give utterance to the thoughts which crowded upon all.

But if Oliver, under these influences, had remained silent while they journeyed towards his birth-place by a road he had never seen, how the whole current of his recollections ran back to old times, and what a crowd of emotions were wakened up in his breast, when they turned into that which he had traversed on foot a poor houseless wandering boy, without a friend to help him or a roof to shelter his head!

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"See there, there—" cried Oliver, eagerly clasping the hand of Rose, and pointing out at the carriage window,— "that's the stile I came over, there are the hedges I crept behind for fear any one should overtake me and force me back, yonder is the path across the fields leading to the old house where I was a little child. Oh Dick, Dick, my dear old friend, if I could only see you now!"

"You will see him soon," replied Rose, gently taking his folded hands between her own. "You shall tell him how happy you are, and how rich you have grown, and that in all your happiness you have none so great as the coming back to make him happy too."

"Yes, yes," said Oliver, "and we'll—we'll take him away from here, and have him clothed and taught, and send him to some quiet country place where he may grow strong and well,—shall we?"

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Rose nodded "yes," for the boy was smiling through such happy tears that she could not speak.

"You will be kind and good to him, for you are to every one," said Oliver. "It will make you cry, I know, to hear what he can tell; but never mind, never mind, it will be all over, and you will smile again, I know that too—to think how changed he is; you did the same with me. He said 'God bless you' to me when I ran away," cried the boy with a burst of affectionate emotion; "and I will say 'God bless *you*' now, and show him how I love him for it!"

As they approached the town and at length drove through its narrow streets, it became matter of no small difficulty to restrain the boy within reasonable bounds. There was Sowerberry's the undertaker's, just as it used to be, only smaller and less imposing in appearance than he remembered it—all the well-known shops and houses, with almost every one of which he had some slight incident connected—Gamfield's cart, the very cart he used to have, standing at the old public-house door—the workhouse, the dreary prison of his youthful days, with its dismal windows frowning on the street—the same lean porter standing at the gate, at sight of whom Oliver involuntarily shrunk back, and then laughed at himself for being so foolish, then cried, then laughed again—scores of faces at the doors and windows that he knew quite well—nearly everything as if he had left it but yesterday and all his recent life had been but a happy dream.

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But it was pure, earnest, joyful reality. They drove straight to the door of the chief hotel (which Oliver used to stare up at with awe, and think a mighty palace, but which had somehow fallen off in grandeur and size); and here was Mr. Grimwig all ready to receive them, kissing the young lady, and the old one too, when they got out of the coach, as if he were the grandfather of the whole party, all smiles and kindness, and not offering to eat his head—no, not once; not even when he contradicted a very old postboy about the nearest road to London, and maintained he knew it best, though he had only come that way once, and that time fast asleep. There was dinner prepared, and there were bed-rooms ready, and everything was arranged as if by magic.

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Notwithstanding all this, when the hurry of the first half hour was over, the same silence and constraint prevailed that had marked their journey down. Mr. Brownlow did not join them at dinner, but remained in a separate room. The two other gentlemen hurried in and out with anxious faces, and, during the short intervals that they were present, conversed apart. Once Mrs. Maylie was called away, and after being absent for nearly an hour, returned with eyes swollen with weeping. All these things made Rose and Oliver, who were not in any new secrets, nervous and uncomfortable. They sat wondering in silence, or, if they exchanged a few words, spoke in whispers, as if they were afraid to hear the sound of their own voices.

At length, when nine o'clock had come and they began to think they were to hear no more that night, Mr. Losberne and Mr. Grimwig entered the room, followed by Mr. Brownlow and a man whom Oliver almost shrieked with surprise to see; for they told him it was his brother, and it was the same man he had met at the market town and seen looking in with Fagin at the window of his

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little room. He cast a look of hate, which even then he could not dissemble, at the astonished boy, and sat down near the door. Mr. Brownlow, who had papers in his hand, walked to a table near which Rose and Oliver were seated.

"This is a painful task," said he, "but these declarations, which have been signed in London before many gentlemen, must be in substance repeated here. I would have spared you the degradation, but we must hear them from your own lips before we part, and you know why."

"Go on," said the person addressed, turning away his face. "Quick. I have done enough. Don't keep me here."

"This child," said Mr. Brownlow, drawing Oliver to him, and laying his hand upon his head, "is your half-brother; the illegitimate son of your father and my dear friend Edwin Leeford, by poor young Agnes Fleming, who died in giving him birth." [269]

"Yes," said Monks, scowling at the trembling boy, the beating of whose heart he might have heard. "That is their bastard child."

"The term you use," said Mr. Brownlow sternly, "is a reproach to those who long since passed beyond the feeble censure of this world. It reflects true disgrace on no one living, except you who use it. Let that pass. He was born in this town?"

"In the workhouse of this town," was the sullen reply. "You have the story there." He pointed impatiently to the papers as he spoke.

"I must have it here too," said Mr. Brownlow, looking round upon the listeners.

"Listen then," returned Monks. "His father being taken ill at Rome, as you know, was joined by his wife, my mother, from whom he had been long separated, who went from Paris and took me with her—to look after his property, for what I know, for she had no great affection for him, nor he for her. He knew nothing of us, for his senses were gone, and he slumbered on till next day, when he died. Among the papers in his desk were two, dated on the night his illness first came on, directed to yourself, and enclosed in a few short lines to you, with an intimation on the cover of the package that it was not to be forwarded till after he was dead. One of these papers was a letter to this girl Agnes, and the other a will." [270]

"What of the letter?" asked Mr. Brownlow.

"The letter?—A sheet of paper crossed and crossed again, with a penitent confession, and prayers to God to help her. He had palmed a tale on the girl that some secret mystery—to be explained one day—prevented his marrying her just then; and so she had gone on trusting patiently to him until she trusted too far, and lost what none could ever give her back. She was at that time within a few months of her confinement. He told her all he had meant to do to hide her shame, if he had lived, and prayed her, if he died, not to curse his memory, or think the consequences of their sin would be visited on her or their young child; for all the guilt was his. He reminded her of the day he had given her the little locket and the ring with her christian name engraved upon it, and a blank left for that which he hoped one day to have bestowed upon her—prayed her yet to keep it, and wear it next her heart, as she had done before—and then ran on wildly in the same words, over and over again, as if he had gone distracted—as I believe he had." [271]

"The will," said Mr. Brownlow, as Oliver's tears fell fast.

"I will go on to that."

"The will was in the same spirit as that letter. He talked of miseries which his wife had brought upon him, of the rebellious disposition, vice, malice, and premature bad passions of you, his only son, who had been trained to hate him; and left you and your mother each an annuity of eight hundred pounds. The bulk of his property he divided into two equal portions—one for Agnes Fleming; and the other for their child, if it should be born alive and ever come of age. If it was a girl, it was to come into the money unconditionally; but if a boy, only on the stipulation that in his minority he should never have stained his name with any public act of dishonour, meanness, cowardice, or wrong. He did this, he said, to mark his confidence in the mother, and his conviction—only strengthened by approaching death—that the child would share her gentle heart and noble nature. If he was disappointed in this expectation, then the money was to come to you; for then, and not till then, when both children were equal, would he recognize your prior claim upon his purse, who had none upon his heart, but had from an infant repulsed him with coldness and aversion." [272]

"My mother," said Monks in a louder tone, "did what a woman should have done—she burnt this will. The letter never reached its destination, but that and other proofs she kept, in case they ever tried to lie away the blot. The girl's father had the truth from her with every aggravation that her violent hate—I love her for it now—could add. Goaded by shame and dishonour, he fled with his children into a remote corner of Wales, changing his very name, that his friends might never know of his retreat; and here, no great while afterwards, he was found dead in his bed. The girl had left her home in secret some weeks before; he had searched for her on foot in every town and village near, and it was on the night that he returned home, assured that she had destroyed herself to hide her shame and his, that his old heart broke." [273]

There was a short silence here, until Mr. Brownlow took up the thread of the narrative.

"Years after this," he said, "this man's—Edward Leeford's mother—came to me. He had left her when only eighteen, robbed her of jewels and money, gambled, squandered, forged, and fled to London, where for two years he had associated with the lowest outcasts. She was sinking under a painful and incurable disease, and wished to recover him before she died. Inquiries were set on foot; strict searches made, unavailing for a long time, but ultimately successful; and he went back with her to France."

"There she died," said Monks, "after a lingering illness; and on her death-bed she bequeathed these secrets to me together with her unquenchable and deadly hatred of all whom they involved, though she need not have left me that, for I had inherited it long before. She would not believe that the girl had destroyed herself and the child too, but was filled with the impression that a male child had been born, and was alive. I swore to her if ever it crossed my path to hunt it down, never to let it rest, to pursue it with the bitterest and most unrelenting animosity, to vent upon it the hatred that I deeply felt, and to spit upon the empty vaunt of that insulting will by dragging it, if I could, to the very gallows-foot. She was right. He came in my way at last; I began well, and but for babbling drabs I would have finished as I began; I would, I would!"

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As the villain folded his arms tight together, and muttered curses on himself in the impotence of baffled malice, Mr. Brownlow turned to the terrified group beside him, and explained that the Jew, who had been his old accomplice and confident, had a large reward for keeping Oliver ensnared, of which some part was to be given up in the event of his being rescued, and that a dispute on this head had led to their visit to the country house for the purpose of identifying him.

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"The locket and ring?" said Mr. Brownlow, turning to Monks.

"I bought them from the man and woman I told you of, who stole them from the nurse, who stole them from the corpse," answered Monks without raising his eyes. "You know what became of them."

Mr. Brownlow merely nodded to Mr. Grimwig, who, disappearing with great alacrity, shortly returned, pushing in Mrs. Bumble, and dragging her unwilling consort after him.

"Do my hi's deceive me!" cried Mr. Bumble with ill-feigned enthusiasm, "or is that little Oliver? Oh O-li-ver, if you know'd how I've been a-grieving for you—!"

"Hold your tongue, fool," murmured Mrs. Bumble.

"Isn't natur, natur, Mrs. Bumble!" remonstrated the workhouse master. "Can't I be supposed to feel—I as brought him up porochially—when I see him a-setting here among ladies and gentlemen of the very affablest description! I always loved that boy as if he'd been my—my—my own grandfather," said Mr. Bumble, halting for an appropriate comparison. "Master Oliver, my dear, you remember the blessed gentleman in the white waistcoat? Ah! he went to heaven last week in a oak coffin with plated handles, Oliver."

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"Come, sir," said Mr. Grimwig tartly, "suppress your feelings."

"I will do my endeavours, sir," replied Mr. Bumble. "How do you do, sir? I hope you are very well."

This salutation was addressed to Mr. Brownlow, who had stepped up to within a short distance of the respectable couple, and who inquired, as he pointed to Monks,—

"Do you know that person?"

"No," replied Mrs. Bumble flatly.

"Perhaps *you* don't?" said Mr. Brownlow, addressing her spouse.

"I never saw him in all my life," said Mr. Bumble.

"Nor sold him anything, perhaps?"

"No," replied Mrs. Bumble.

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"You never had, perhaps, a certain gold locket and ring?" said Mr. Brownlow.

"Certainly not," replied the matron. "What are we brought here to answer to such nonsense as this for?"

Again Mr. Brownlow nodded to Mr. Grimwig, and again that gentleman limped away with extraordinary readiness. But not again did he return with a stout man and wife, for this time he led in two palsied women, who shook and tottered as they walked.

"You shut the door the night old Sally died," said the foremost one, raising her shrivelled hand, "but you couldn't shut out the sound nor stop the chinks."

"No, no," said the other, looking round her, and wagging her toothless jaws. "No, no, no."

"We heard her try to tell you what she'd done, and saw you take a paper from her hand, and watched you too, next day, to the pawnbroker's shop," said the first.

"Yes," added the second, "and it was a 'locket and gold ring.' We found out that, and saw it given you. We were bye. Oh! we were bye."

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"And we know more than that," resumed the first, "for she told us often, long ago, that the young mother had told her that, feeling she should never get over it, she was on her way, at the time that she was taken ill, to die near the grave of the father of the child."

"Would you like to see the pawnbroker himself?" asked Mr. Grimwig with a motion towards the door.

"No," replied the woman; "if he"—she pointed to Monks—"has been coward enough to confess, as I see he has, and you have sounded all these hags till you found the right ones, I have nothing more to say. I *did* sell them, and they're where you'll never get them. What then?"

"Nothing," replied Mr. Brownlow, "except that it remains for us to take care that you are neither of you employed in a situation of trust again. You may leave the room."

"I hope," said Mr. Bumble, looking about him with great ruefulness as Mr. Grimwig disappeared with the two old women, "I hope that this unfortunate little circumstance will not deprive me of my porochial office?"

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"Indeed it will," replied Mr. Brownlow; "you must make up your mind to that, and think yourself well off besides."

"It was all Mrs. Bumble—she *would* do it—" urged Mr. Bumble; first looking round to ascertain that his partner had left the room.

"That is no excuse," returned Mr. Brownlow. "You were present on the occasion of the destruction of these trinkets, and, indeed, are the more guilty of the two in the eye of the law, for the law supposes that your wife acts under your direction."

"If the law supposes that," said Mr. Bumble, squeezing his hat emphatically in both hands, "the law is a ass—a idiot. If that is the eye of the law, the law's a bachelor, and the worst I wish the law is, that his eye may be opened by experience—by experience."

Laying great stress on the repetition of these two words, Mr. Bumble fixed his hat on very tight, and putting his hands in his pockets followed his helpmate down stairs.

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"Young lady," said Mr. Brownlow, turning to Rose, "give me your hand. Do not tremble; you need not fear to hear the few remaining words we have to say."

"If they have—I do not know how they can, but if they have—any reference to me," said Rose, "pray let me hear them at some other time. I have not strength or spirits now."

"Nay," returned the old gentleman, drawing her arm through his; "you have more fortitude than this, I am sure. Do you know this young lady, sir?"

"Yes," replied Monks.

"I never saw you before," said Rose faintly.

"I have seen you often," returned Monks.

"The father of the unhappy Agnes had two daughters," said Mr. Brownlow. "What was the fate of the other—the child?"

"The child," replied Monks, "when her father died in a strange place, in a strange name, without a letter, book, or scrap of paper that yielded the faintest clue by which his friends or relatives could be traced—the child was taken by some wretched cottagers, who reared it as their own."

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"Go on," said Mr. Brownlow, signing to Mrs. Maylie to approach. "Go on!"

"You couldn't find the spot to which these people had repaired," said Monks, "but where friendship fails, hatred will often force a way. My mother found it after a year of cunning search—ay, and found the child."

"She took it, did she?"

"No. The people were poor, and began to sicken—at least the man did—of their fine humanity; so she left it with them, giving them a small present of money which would not last long, and promising more, which she never meant to send. She didn't quite rely, however, on their discontent and poverty for the child's unhappiness, but told the history of the sister's shame with such alterations as suited her, bade them take good heed of the child, for she came of bad blood, and told them she was illegitimate, and sure to go wrong one time or other. The circumstances countenanced all this; the people believed it; and there the child dragged on an existence miserable enough even to satisfy us, until a widow lady, residing then at Chester, saw the girl by chance, pitied her, and took her home. There was some cursed spell against us, for in spite of all our efforts she remained there and was happy: I lost sight of her two or three years ago, and saw her no more until a few months back."

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"Do you see her now?"

"Yes—leaning on your arm."

"But not the less my niece," cried Mrs. Maylie, folding the fainting girl in her arms,—“not the

less my dearest child. I would not lose her now for all the treasures of the world. My sweet companion, my own dear girl—”

“The only friend I ever had,” cried Rose, clinging to her,—“the kindest, best of friends. My heart will burst. I cannot—cannot—bear all this.”

“You have borne more, and been through all the best and gentlest creature that ever shed happiness on every one she knew,” said Mrs. Maylie, embracing her tenderly. “Come, come, my love, remember who this is who waits to clasp you in his arms, poor child,—see here—look, look, my dear.” [283]

“Not aunt,” cried Oliver, throwing his arms about her neck: “I’ll never call her aunt—sister, my own dear sister, that something taught my heart to love so dearly from the first—Rose, dear, darling Rose.”

Let the tears which fell, and the broken words which were exchanged in the long close embrace between the orphans, be sacred. A father, sister, and mother, were gained and lost in that one moment. Joy and grief were mingled in the cup, but there were no bitter tears, for even grief itself arose so softened, and clothed in such sweet and tender recollections, that it became a solemn pleasure, and lost all character of pain.

They were a long, long time alone. A soft tap at the door at length announced that some one was without. Oliver opened it, glided away, and gave place to Harry Maylie.

“I know it all,” he said, taking a seat beside the lovely girl. “Dear Rose, I know it all.” [284]

“I am not here by accident,” he added after a lengthened silence; “nor have I heard all this to-night, for I knew it yesterday—only yesterday. Do you guess that I have come to remind you of a promise?”

“Stay,” said Rose,—“you *do* know all?”

“All. You gave me leave, at any time within a year, to renew the subject of our last discourse.”

“I did.”

“Not to press you to alter your determination,” pursued the young man, “but to hear you repeat it, if you would. I was to lay whatever of station or fortune I might possess at your feet, and if you still adhered to your former determination, I pledged myself by no word or act to seek to change it.”

“The same reasons which influenced me then will influence me now,” said Rose firmly. “If I ever owed a strict and rigid duty to her, whose goodness saved me from a life of indigence and suffering, when should I ever feel it as I should to-night? It is a struggle,” said Rose, “but one I am proud to make; it is a pang, but one my heart shall bear.” [285]

“The disclosure of to-night—” Harry began.

“The disclosure of to-night,” replied Rose softly, “leaves me in the same position, with reference to you, as that in which I stood before.”

“You harden your heart against me, Rose,” urged her lover.

“Oh, Harry, Harry,” said the young lady, bursting into tears, “I wish I could, and spare myself this pain.”

“Then why inflict it on yourself?” said Harry, taking her hand. “Think, dear Rose, think what you have heard to-night.”

“And what have I heard! what have I heard!” cried Rose. “That a sense of his deep disgrace so worked upon my own father that he shunned all—there, we have said enough, Harry, we have said enough.”

“Not yet, not yet,” said the young man, detaining her as she rose. “My hopes, my wishes, prospects, feeling—every thought in life except my love for you—have undergone a change. I offer you, now, no distinction among a bustling crowd, no mingling with a world of malice and detraction, where the blood is called into honest cheeks by aught but real disgrace and shame; but a home—a heart and home—yes, dearest Rose, and those, and those alone, are all I have to offer.” [286]

“What does this mean!” faltered the young lady.

“It means but this—that when I left you last, I left you with the firm determination to level all fancied barriers between yourself and me; resolved that if my world could not be yours, I would make yours mine; that no pride of birth should curl the lip at you, for I would turn from it. This I have done. Those who have shrunk from me because of this, have shrunk from you, and proved you so far right. Such power and patronage—such relatives of influence and rank—as smiled upon me then, look coldly now; but there are smiling fields and waving trees in England’s richest county, and by one village church—mine, Rose, my own—there stands a rustic dwelling which you can make me prouder of than all the hopes I have renounced, measured a thousandfold. This is *my* rank and station now, and here I lay it down.” [287]

"It's a trying thing waiting supper for lovers," said Mr. Grimwig, waking up, and pulling his pocket handkerchief from over his head.

Truth to tell, the supper had been waiting a most unreasonable time. Neither Mrs. Maylie, nor Harry, nor Rose (who all came in together), could offer a word in extenuation.

"I had serious thoughts of eating my head to-night," said Mr. Grimwig, "for I began to think I should get nothing else. I'll take the liberty, if you'll allow me, of saluting the bride that is to be."

Mr. Grimwig lost no time in carrying this notice into effect upon the blushing girl; and the example being contagious, was followed both by the doctor and Mr. Brownlow. Some people affirm that Harry Maylie had been observed to set it originally in a dark room adjoining; but the best authorities consider this downright scandal, he being young and a clergyman. [288]

"Oliver, my child," said Mrs. Maylie, "where have you been, and why do you look so sad? There are tears stealing down your face at this moment. What is the matter?"

It is a world of disappointment—often to the hopes we most cherish, and hopes that do our nature the greatest honour.

Poor Dick was dead!

CHAPTER L.

 [289]

THE JEW'S LAST NIGHT ALIVE.

THE COURT was paved from floor to roof with human faces. Inquisitive and eager eyes peered from every inch of space; from the rail before the dock, away into the sharpest angle of the smallest corner in the galleries, all looks were fixed upon one man—the Jew. Before him and behind, above, below, on the right and on the left—he seemed to stand surrounded by a firmament all bright with beaming eyes.

He stood there, in all this glare of living light, with one hand resting on the wooden slab before him, the other held to his ear, and his head thrust forward to enable him to catch with greater distinctness every word that fell from the presiding judge, who was delivering his charge to the jury. At times he turned his eyes sharply upon them to observe the effect of the slightest featherweight in his favour; and when the points against him were stated with terrible distinctness, looked towards his counsel in mute appeal that he would even then urge something in his behalf. Beyond these manifestations of anxiety, he stirred not hand or foot. He had scarcely moved since the trial began; and now that the judge ceased to speak, he still remained in the same strained attitude of close attention, with his gaze bent on him as though he listened still. [290]

A slight bustle in the court recalled him to himself, and looking round, he saw that the jurymen had turned together to consider of their verdict. As his eyes wandered to the gallery, he could see the people rising above each other to see his face: some hastily applying their glasses to their eyes, and others whispering their neighbours with looks expressive of abhorrence. A few there were who seemed unmindful of him, and looked only to the jury in impatient wonder how they could delay, but in no one face—not even among the women, of whom there were many there—could he read the faintest sympathy with him, or any feeling but one of all-absorbing interest that he should be condemned. [291]

As he saw all this in one bewildered glance, the death-like stillness came again, and looking back, he saw that the jurymen had turned towards the judge. Hush!

They only sought permission to retire.

He looked wistfully into their faces, one by one, when they passed out, as though to see which way the greater number leant; but that was fruitless. The jailer touched him on the shoulder. He followed mechanically to the end of the dock, and sat down on a chair. The man pointed it out, or he should not have seen it.

He looked up into the gallery again. Some of the people were eating, and some fanning themselves with handkerchiefs, for the crowded place was very hot. There was one young man sketching his face in a little note-book. He wondered whether it was like, and looked on when the artist broke his pencil-point and made another with his knife, as any idle spectator might have done.

In the same way, when he turned his eyes towards the judge, his mind began to busy itself with the fashion of his dress, and what it cost, and how he put it on. There was an old fat gentleman on the bench, too, who had gone out some half an hour before, and now came back. He wondered within himself whether this man had been to get his dinner, what he had had, and where he had had it, and pursued this train of careless thought until some new object caught his eye and roused another. [292]

Not that all this time his mind was for an instant free from one oppressive overwhelming sense

of the grave that opened at his feet; it was ever present to him, but in a vague and general way, and he could not fix his thoughts upon it. Thus, even while he trembled and turned, burning hot at the idea of speedy death, he fell to counting the iron spikes before him, and wondering how the head of one had been broken off, and whether they would mend it or leave it as it was. Then he thought of all the horrors of the gallows and the scaffold, and stopped to watch a man sprinkling the floor to cool it—and then went on to think again.

At length there was a cry of silence, and a breathless look from all towards the door. The jury returned and passed him close. He could glean nothing from their faces; they might as well have been of stone. Perfect stillness ensued—not a rustle—not a breath—Guilty. [293]

The building rang with a tremendous shout, and another, and another, and then it echoed deep loud groans that gathered strength as they swelled out, like angry thunder. It was a peal of joy from the populace outside, greeting the news that he would die on Monday.

The noise subsided, and he was asked if he had anything to say why sentence of death should not be passed upon him. He had resumed his listening attitude, and looked intently at his questioner while the demand was made, but it was twice repeated before he seemed to hear it, and then he only muttered that he was an old man—an old man—an old man—and so dropping into a whisper, was silent again.

The judge assumed the black cap, and the prisoner still stood with the same air and gesture. A woman in the gallery uttered some exclamation, called forth by this dread solemnity; he looked hastily up as if angry at the interruption, and bent forward yet more attentively. The address was solemn and impressive, the sentence fearful to hear, but he stood like a marble figure, without the motion of a nerve. His haggard face was still thrust forward, his under-jaw hanging down, and his eyes staring out before him, when the jailer put his hand upon his arm, and beckoned him away. He gazed stupidly about him for an instant, and obeyed. [294]



Fagin in the condemned Cell.

They led him through a paved room under the court, where some prisoners were waiting till their turns came, and others were talking to their friends who crowded round a grate which looked into the open yard. There was nobody there to speak to *him*, but as he passed, the prisoners fell back to render him more visible to the people who were clinging to the bars, and they assailed him with opprobrious names, and screeched and hissed. He shook his fist and would have spat upon them, but his conductors hurried him on through a gloomy passage lighted by a few dim lamps, into the interior of the prison. [295]

Here he was searched, that he might not have about him the means of anticipating the law; this ceremony performed, they led him to one of the condemned cells, and left him there—alone.

He sat down on a stone bench opposite the door, which served for seat and bedstead, and casting his bloodshot eyes upon the ground tried to collect his thoughts. After a while he began to remember a few disjointed fragments of what the judge had said, though it had seemed to him at the time that he could not hear a word. These gradually fell into their proper places, and by degrees suggested more, so that in a little time he had the whole almost as it was delivered. To be hanged by the neck till he was dead—that was the end. To be hanged by the neck till he was dead.

As it came on very dark, he began to think of all the men he had known who had died upon the

scaffold—some of them through his means. They rose up in such quick succession that he could hardly count them. He had seen some of them die,—and joked too, because they died with prayers upon their lips. With what a rattling noise the drop went down; and how suddenly they changed from strong and vigorous men to dangling heaps of clothes!

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Some of them might have inhabited that very cell—sat upon that very spot. It was very dark; why didn't they bring a light? The cell had been built for many years—scores of men must have passed their last hours there—it was like sitting in a vault strewn with dead bodies—the cap, the noose, the pinioned arms—the faces that he knew even beneath that hideous veil—Light, light!

At length when his hands were raw with beating against the heavy door and walls, two men appeared, one bearing a candle which he thrust into an iron candlestick fixed against the wall, and the other dragging in a mattress on which to pass the night, for the prisoner was to be left alone no more.

Then came night—dark, dismal, silent night. Other watchers are glad to hear the church-clocks strike, for they tell of life and coming day. To the Jew they brought despair. The boom of every iron bell came laden with the one deep hollow sound—Death. What availed the noise and bustle of cheerful morning, which penetrated even there, to him? It was another form of knell, with mockery added to the warning.

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The day passed off—day, there was no day; it was gone as soon as come—and night came on again; night so long and yet so short; long in its dreadful silence, and short in its fleeting hours. One time he raved and blasphemed, and at another howled and tore his hair. Venerable men of his own persuasion had come to pray beside him, but he had driven them away with curses. They renewed their charitable efforts, and he beat them off.

Saturday night; he had only one night more to live. And as he thought of this, the day broke—Sunday.

It was not until the night of this last awful day that a withering sense of his helpless desperate state came in its full intensity upon his blighted soul; not that he had ever held any defined or positive hopes of mercy, but that he had never been able to consider more than the dim probability of dying so soon. He had spoken little to either of the two men who relieved each other in their attendance upon him, and they, for their parts, made no effort to rouse his attention. He had sat there awake, but dreaming. Now he started up every minute, and with gasping mouth and burning skin hurried to and fro, in such a paroxysm of fear and wrath that even they—used to such sights—recoiled from him with horror. He grew so terrible at last in all the tortures of his evil conscience, that one man could not bear to sit there, eyeing him alone, and so the two kept watch together.

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He cowered down upon his stone bed, and thought of the past. He had been wounded with some missiles from the crowd on the day of his capture, and his head was bandaged with a linen cloth. His red hair hung down upon his bloodless face; his beard was torn and twisted into knots; his eyes shone with a terrible light; his unwashed flesh crackled with the fever that burnt him up. Eight—nine—ten. If it was not a trick to frighten him, and those were the real hours treading on each other's heels, where would he be when they came round again! Eleven. Another struck ere the voice of the hour before had ceased to vibrate. At eight he would be the only mourner in his own funeral train; at eleven—

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Those dreadful walls of Newgate, which have hidden so much misery and such unspeakable anguish, not only from the eyes, but too often and too long from the thoughts of men, never held so dread a spectacle as that. The few who lingered as they passed and wondered what the man was doing who was to be hung to-morrow, would have slept but ill that night, if they could have seen him then.

From early in the evening until nearly midnight, little groups of two and three presented themselves at the lodge-gate, and inquired with anxious faces whether any reprieve had been received. These being answered in the negative, communicated the welcome intelligence to clusters in the street, who pointed out to one another the door from which he must come out, and showed where the scaffold would be built, and, walking with unwilling steps away, turned back to conjure up the scene. By degrees they fell off one by one, and for an hour in the dead of night, the street was left to solitude and darkness.

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The space before the prison was cleared, and a few strong barriers, painted black, had been already thrown across the road to break the pressure of the expected crowd, when Mr. Brownlow and Oliver appeared at the wicket, and presented an order of admission to the prisoner, signed by one of the sheriffs. They were immediately admitted into the lodge.

"Is the young gentleman to come too, sir?" said the man whose duty it was to conduct them. "It's not a sight for children, sir."

"It is not indeed, my friend," rejoined Mr. Brownlow, "but my business with this man is intimately connected with him, and as this child has seen him in the full career of his success and villany, I think it better—even at the cost of some pain and fear—that he should see him now."

These few words had been said apart, so as to be inaudible to Oliver. The man touched his hat, and glancing at him with some curiosity, opened another gate opposite to that at which they had entered, and led them on through dark and winding ways, towards the cells.

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"This," said the man, stopping in a gloomy passage where a couple of workmen were making some preparations in profound silence,—“this is the place he passes through. If you step this way, you can see the door he goes out at.”

He led them into a stone kitchen, fitted with coppers for dressing the prison food, and pointed to a door. There was an open grating above it, through which came the sound of men’s voices, mingled with the noise of hammering and the throwing down of boards. They were putting up the scaffold.

From this place they passed through several strong gates, opened by other turnkeys from the inner side, and having entered an open yard, ascended a flight of narrow steps, and came into a passage with a row of strong doors on the left hand. Motioning them to remain where they were, the turnkey knocked at one of these with his bunch of keys. The two attendants after a little whispering came out into the passage, stretching themselves as if glad of the temporary relief, and motioned the visitors to follow the jailer into the cell. They did so. [302]

The condemned criminal was seated on his bed, rocking himself from side to side, with a countenance more like that of a snared beast than the face of a man. His mind was evidently wandering to his old life, for he continued to mutter, without seeming conscious of their presence otherwise than as a part of his vision.

“Good boy, Charley—well done—” he mumbled. “Oliver too, ha! ha! ha! Oliver too—quite the gentleman now—quite the—take that boy away to bed.”

The jailer took the disengaged hand of Oliver, and whispering him not to be alarmed, looked on without speaking.

“Take him away to bed—” cried the Jew. “Do you hear me, some of you? He has been the—the—somehow the cause of all this. It’s worth the money to bring him up to it—Bolter’s throat, Bill; never mind the girl—Bolter’s throat as deep as you can cut. Saw his head off.” [303]

“Fagin,” said the jailer.

“That’s me!” cried the Jew, falling instantly into precisely the same attitude of listening that he had assumed upon his trial. “An old man, my Lord; a very old, old man.”

“Here,” said the turnkey, laying his hand upon his breast to keep him down. “Here’s somebody wants to see you, to ask you some questions, I suppose. Fagin, Fagin. Are you a man?”

“I shan’t be one long,” replied the Jew, looking up with a face retaining no human expression but rage and terror. “Strike them all dead! what right have they to butcher me?”

As he spoke he caught sight of Oliver and Mr. Brownlow, and shrinking to the furthest corner of the seat, demanded to know what they wanted there.

“Steady,” said the turnkey, still holding him down. “Now, sir, tell him what you want—quick, if you please, for he grows worse as the time gets on.” [304]

“You have some papers,” said Mr. Brownlow advancing, “which were placed in your hands for better security, by a man called Monks.”

“It’s all a lie together,” replied the Jew. “I haven’t one—not one.”

“For the love of God,” said Mr. Brownlow solemnly, “do not say that now, upon the very verge of death; but tell me where they are. You know that Sikes is dead; that Monks has confessed; that there is no hope of any further gain. Where are these papers?”

“Oliver,” cried the Jew, beckoning to him. “Here, here. Let me whisper to you.”

“I am not afraid,” said Oliver in a low voice, as he relinquished Mr. Brownlow’s hand.

“The papers,” said the Jew, drawing him towards him, “are in a canvass bag, in a hole a little way up the chimney in the top front-room. I want to talk to you, my dear—I want to talk to you.”

“Yes, yes,” returned Oliver. “Let me say a prayer. Do. Let me say one prayer; say only one upon your knees with me, and we will talk till morning.” [305]

“Outside, outside,” replied the Jew, pushing the boy before him towards the door, and looking vacantly over his head. “Say I’ve gone to sleep—they’ll believe *you*. You can get me out if you take me so. Now then, now then.”

“Oh! God forgive this wretched man!” cried the boy with a burst of tears.

“That’s right, that’s right,” said the Jew. “That’ll help us on. This door first; if I shake and tremble as we pass the gallows, don’t you mind, but hurry on. Now, now, now.”

“Have you nothing else to ask him, sir?” inquired the turnkey.

“No other question,” replied Mr. Brownlow. “If I hoped we could recall him to a sense of his position—”

“Nothing will do that, sir,” replied the man, shaking his head. “You had better leave him.”

The door of the cell opened, and the attendants returned. [306]

“Press on, press on,” cried the Jew. “Softly, but not so slow. Faster, faster!”

The men laid hands upon him, and disengaging Oliver from his grasp, held him back. He writhed and struggled with the power of desperation, and sent up shriek upon shriek that penetrated even those massive walls, and rang in their ears until they reached the open yard.

It was some time before they left the prison, for Oliver nearly swooned after this frightful scene, and was so weak that for an hour or more he had not the strength to walk.

Day was dawning when they again emerged. A great multitude had already assembled; the windows were filled with people smoking and playing cards to beguile the time; the crowd were pushing, quarrelling, and joking. Everything told of life and animation, but one dark cluster of objects in the very centre of all—the black stage, the cross-beam, the rope, and all the hideous apparatus of death.

CHAPTER LI.

[307]

AND LAST.

THE fortunes of those who have figured in this tale are nearly closed, and what little remains to their historian to relate is told in few and simple words.

Before three months had passed, Rose Fleming and Harry Maylie were married in the village church, which was henceforth to be the scene of the young clergyman’s labours; on the same day they entered into possession of their new and happy home.

Mrs. Maylie took up her abode with her son and daughter-in-law, to enjoy, during the tranquil remainder of her days, the greatest felicity that age and worth can know—the contemplation of the happiness of those on whom the warmest affections and tenderest cares of a well-spent life have been unceasingly bestowed.

[308]

It appeared, on a full and careful investigation, that if the wreck of property remaining in the custody of Monks (which had never prospered either in his hands or in those of his mother) were equally divided between himself and Oliver, it would yield to each little more than three thousand pounds. By the provisions of his father’s will, Oliver would have been entitled to the whole; but Mr. Brownlow, unwilling to deprive the elder son of the opportunity of retrieving his former vices and pursuing an honest career, proposed this mode of distribution, to which his young charge most joyfully acceded.

Monks, still bearing that assumed name, retired with his portion to a distant part of the New World, where, having quickly squandered it, he once more fell into his old courses, and, after undergoing a long confinement for some fresh act of fraud and knavery, at length sunk under an attack of his old disorder, and died in prison. As far from home, died the chief remaining members of his friend Fagin’s gang.

Mr. Brownlow adopted Oliver as his own son, and removing with him and the old housekeeper to within a mile of the parsonage house, where his dear friends resided, gratified the only remaining wish of Oliver’s warm and earnest heart, and thus linked together a little society, whose condition approached as nearly to one of perfect happiness as can ever be known in this changing world.

[309]

Soon after the marriage of the young people, the worthy doctor returned to Chertsey, where, bereft of the presence of his old friends, he would have been discontented if his temperament had admitted of such a feeling, and would have turned quite peevish if he had known how. For two or three months he contented himself with hinting that he feared the air began to disagree with him, and then finding that the place really was to him no longer what it had been before, settled his business on his assistant, took a bachelor’s cottage just outside the village of which his young friend was pastor, and instantaneously recovered. Here he took to gardening, planting, fishing, carpentering, and various other pursuits of a similar kind, all undertaken with his characteristic impetuosity; and in each and all, he has since become famous throughout the neighbourhood as a most profound authority.

[310]

Before his removal, he had managed to contract a strong friendship for Mr. Grimwig, which that eccentric gentleman cordially reciprocated. He is accordingly visited by him a great many times in the course of the year, and on all such occasions Mr. Grimwig plants, fishes, and carpenters with great ardour, doing everything in a very singular and unprecedented manner; but always maintaining, with his favourite asseveration, that his mode is the right one. On Sundays, he never fails to criticise the sermon to the young clergyman’s face, always informing Mr. Losberne, in strict confidence afterwards, that he considers it an excellent performance, but thinks it as well not to say so. It is a standing and very favourite joke for Mr. Brownlow to rally him on his old prophecy concerning Oliver, and to remind him of the night on which they sat with the watch between them waiting his return; but Mr. Grimwig contends that he was right in the main, and in proof thereof remarks that Oliver *did not come back*, after all, which always calls forth a laugh on his side, and increases his good humour.

[311]

Mr. Noah Claypole, receiving a free pardon from the crown in consequence of being admitted

approver against the Jew, and considering his profession not altogether as safe a one as he could wish, was for some little time at a loss for the means of a livelihood, not burdened with too much work. After some consideration he went into business as an informer, in which calling he realizes a genteel subsistence. His plan is to walk out once a week during church time, attended by Charlotte in respectable attire. The lady faints away at the doors of charitable publicans, and the gentleman being accommodated with threepennyworth of brandy to restore her, lays an information next day, and pockets half the penalty. Sometimes Mr. Claypole faints himself, but the result is the same.

Mr. and Mrs. Bumble, deprived of their situations, were gradually reduced to great indigence and misery, and finally became paupers in that very same workhouse in which they had once lorded it over others. Mr. Bumble has been heard to say, that in this reverse and degradation he has not even spirits to be thankful for being separated from his wife. [312]

As to Mr. Giles and Brittles, they still remain in their old posts, although the former is bald, and the last-named boy quite grey. They sleep at the parsonage, but divide their attentions so equally between its inmates, and Oliver, and Mr. Brownlow, and Mr. Losberne, that to this day the villagers have never been able to discover to which establishment they properly belong.

Master Charles Bates, appalled by Sikes's crime, fell into a train of reflection whether an honest life was not, after all, the best. Arriving at the conclusion that it certainly was, he turned his back upon the scenes of the past, resolved to amend it in some new sphere of action. He struggled hard and suffered much for some time; but having a contented disposition and a good purpose, succeeded in the end; and, from being a farmer's drudge and a carrier's lad, is now the merriest young grazier in all Northamptonshire. [313]

And now the hand that traces these words falters as it approaches the conclusion of its task, and would weave for a little longer space the thread of these adventures.

I would fain linger yet with a few of those among whom I have so long moved, and share their happiness by endeavouring to depict it. I would show Rose Maylie in all the bloom and grace of early womanhood, shedding upon her secluded path in life such soft and gentle light, as fell on all who trod it with her, and shone into their hearts,—I would paint her the life and joy of the fireside circle and the lively summer group; I would follow her through the sultry fields at noon, and hear the low tones of her sweet voice in the moonlit evening walk; I would watch her in all her goodness and charity abroad, and the smiling untiring discharge of domestic duties at home; I would paint her and her dead sister's child happy in their mutual love, and passing whole hours together in picturing the friends whom they had so sadly lost; I would summon before me once again those joyous little faces that clustered round her knee, and listen to their merry prattle; I would recall the tones of that clear laugh, and conjure up the sympathising tear that glistened in that soft blue eye. These, and a thousand looks and smiles and turns of thought and speech—I would fain recall them every one. [314]



Rose Maylie and Oliver.

How Mr. Brownlow went on from day to day, filling the mind of his adopted child with stores of knowledge, and becoming attached to him more and more as his nature developed itself, and showed the thriving seeds of all he could wish him to become—how he traced in him new traits of his early friend, that awakened in his own bosom old remembrances, melancholy and yet sweet and soothing—how the two orphans tried by adversity remembered its lessons in mercy to others, and mutual love, and fervent thanks to Him who had protected and preserved them—these are all

matters which need not to be told; for I have said that they were truly happy, and without strong affection, and humanity of heart, and gratitude to that Being whose code is mercy, and whose great attribute is benevolence to all things that breathe, true happiness can never be attained.

Within the altar of the old village church there stands a white marble tablet, which bears as yet but one word,—“Agnes!” There is no coffin in that tomb; and may it be many, many years before another name is placed above it. But if the spirits of the Dead ever come back to earth to visit spots hallowed by the love—the love beyond the grave—of those whom they knew in life, I do believe that the shade of that poor girl often hovers about that solemn nook—ay, though it *is* a church, and she was weak and erring.

THE END.

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Transcriber’s Notes:

Punctuation errors repaired. Text across three volumes sometimes spells “visitor” as “visiter.” This was retained.

Page 105, “perspiration” changed to “perspiration” (perspiration streamed down)

Page 124, paragraph break introduced before the line: (“Ay, that he shall,” replied the Jew)

Page 128, “artful” changed to “Artful” (recognise the Artful Dodger)

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK OLIVER TWIST, VOL. 3 (OF 3) ***

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