

**WALTER
BESANT**

THE ORANGE
GIRL

Walter Besant

The Orange Girl

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PROLOGUE

On a certain afternoon in May, about four or five of the clock, I was standing at the open window of my room in that Palace to which Fortune leads her choicest favourites – the College, or Prison, as some call it, of the King's Bench. I was at the time a prisoner for debt, with very little chance of ever getting out. More fortunate than most of the tenants, I was able to carry on my business. For instance, all that morning I had been engaged in composing a song – it was afterwards sung with great applause at the Dog and Duck; and on the bed reposed the instrument with which I earned the greater part of my daily bread – my faithful violin.

My window was on the ground-floor in the great building which was then new, for the Prison had been transferred from the other side two or three years before. This building contains more than two hundred rooms, and twice that number of prisoners. Many of the ground-floor rooms have been converted into shops – chandlers', grocers', mercers', hosiers'. You may buy anything in these shops, except a good book. I believe that there is no demand in the prison for such an article of commerce. Song-books and jest-books and cards on the other hand, are constantly called for. It was a day of bright sunshine. Outside, on the Grand Parade – otherwise called King Street – which is a broad footway flagged, strolled up and down in the sunshine an endless procession. They paced the pavement from East to West; they turned and paced it again from West to East. Among them were a few neatly attired, but by far the greater number, men and women, were slatternly, untidy, and slipshod. Their walk – nobody was ever seen to walk briskly in the Prison – was the characteristic scuffle easily acquired in this place; the men were mostly in slippers: some were in morning gowns: very few had their heads dressed: some wore old-fashioned wigs, rusty and uncombed: some, the poorer set, were bare-footed, and in such rags and tatters as would not be tolerated in the open streets. The faces of the people as they passed were various. There was the humorous face of the prisoner who takes fortune philosophically: there was the face always resentful: the face resigned: the face vacuous: the face of suffering: the face sodden with drink: the face vicious: the face soured: the face saddened: the face, like the clothes, ragged and ruined: everything but the face happy – that cannot be found in the King's Bench Prison. Children ran about playing and shouting: there were at this time many hundreds of children in the prison. Against the wall – 'tis surely twenty-five feet higher than is needed – the racquet and fives players carried on their games: at the lower end of the Parade some played the game called Bumble Puppy: here and there tables were set where men drank and smoked pipes of tobacco and played cards, though as yet it was only afternoon. The people talked as they went along, but not with animation: now and then one laughed; but the merriment of the College is very near the fount of tears; it hath a sound hysterical. Some conversed eagerly with visitors: by their eagerness you knew that they were newcomers. What did they talk about? The means of release? Yet so few do get out. For the first three or four years of imprisonment, when visitors call, prisoners talk of nothing else. After that time visitors cease to call: and there is no more talk of release. A man in the King's Bench is speedily forgotten. He becomes dead to the world: dead and forgotten. Surely there is no more pitiless and relentless enemy than a creditor. Yet in church every Sunday he asks, and expects, that mercy from his God which he himself refuses to his debtor.

On no other day in the year could the Prison look more cheerful. Yet as I stood at the window there fell upon me such sadness as belongs only to the Prison; it is a longing to be free: a yearning inconceivable for the green fields and the trees. Such moods are common in the Prison. I have seen men turn aside from their friends in the midst of a song, in the height of the revelry, and slink away

from the company with drooping head and bowed shoulders. It is indeed difficult not to feel this sadness from time to time. I was young: I had few friends, for a reason that I shall tell you presently. For aught that I could see there was nothing before me but a life-long imprisonment. Nobody, I say, can understand the strength and the misery of this yearning for liberty – for air – that sometimes seizes the prisoner and rends him and will not let him go. Yet I was better off than many, because, though I could in no way pay the money for which I was imprisoned, I was not without the means of a livelihood. I had, as I have said, my fiddle. So long as a man has a fiddle and can play it he need never want. To play the fiddle is the safest of all trades, because the fiddler is always wanted. If a company is drinking they will call for the fiddler to lift up their hearts: if there are girls with them they will call for the fiddler to make them dance: if they would sing they want the fiddler to lead them off: if they are sitting in the coffee-room they call for the fiddler to enliven them. Grave discourse or gay; young people or old: they are always ready to call for the fiddler and to pay him for his trouble. So that by dint of playing every evening, I did very well, and could afford to dine at the two shilling ordinary and to drink every day a glass or two of ale, and to pay my brother-in-law for the maintenance of Alice and the boy.

Among the prisoners were two who always walked together: talked together: and drank together. The others looked askance upon them. One, who was called the Captain, wore a scarlet coat which might have been newer, and a gold-laced hat which had once been finer. He was a tall, burly fellow, with the kind of comeliness one may see in a horse-rider at a fair, or a fellow who performs on a tight-rope; a man who carries by storm the hearts of village girls and leaves them all forlorn. He swaggered as he walked, and looked about him with an insolence which made me, among others, desirous of tweaking him by the nose, if only to see whether his courage was equal to his swagger. I have always, since, regretted that I lost the opportunity. Duels are not allowed in the College, and perhaps in an encounter with the simpler weapons provided by Nature I might have been equal to the Captain. His manners at the Ordinary were noisy and, if he had ever really carried His Majesty's Commission, as to which there were whispers, it must have been in some branch of the service where the urbanities of life were not required. Further: it was known that he was always ready to play with anyone: and at any time of the day: it was reported that he always won: this reputation, coupled with his insolent carriage, caused him to be shunned and suspected.

His companion, commonly known as the Bishop, was dressed in the habit of a clergyman. He wore a frayed silk cassock and a gown with dirty bands. His wig, which wanted dressing, was canonical. His age might have been forty or more: his cheeks were red with strong drink: his neck was puffed: his figure was square and corpulent: his voice was thick: he looked in a word what he was, not a servant of the Lord at all, but of the Devil.

At this period I had little experience or knowledge of the people who live by rogueries and cheats: nor had I any suspicion when a stranger appeared that he was not always what he pretended to be. At the same time one could not believe that the hulking fellow in a scarlet coat had ever received a commission from the King: nor could anyone believe that the hoglike creature who wore a cassock and a gown and a clergyman's wig was really in Holy Orders.

Among the collegians there was one who pleased me, though his raiment was shabby to the last degree, by his manners, which were singularly gentle; and his language, which was that of a scholar. He scorned the vulgar idiom and turned with disgust from the universal verb (or participle) with which annoyance or dislike or disappointment was commonly expressed. And he spoke in measured terms as one who pronounces a judgment. I heard afterward that he wrote critical papers on new books in the *Gentlemen's Magazine*. But I never read new books unless they are books of music. When he could afford to dine at the Ordinary, which was about twice a week, he sat beside me and instructed me by his discourse. He was a scholar of some college at Cambridge and a poet. I sometimes think that it may be a loss to the world not to know its poets. There are without doubt some who regard poetry as musicians regard music. Now if the work of a Purcell or a Handel were to fall dead and

unnoticed it would be a most dreadful loss to music and a discouragement for composers. So that there may be poets, of whom the world hears nothing, whose verse is neglected and lost, though it might be of great service to other poets or to mankind, if verse can in any way help the world.

However, one day, when these two prisoners, the Captain and the Bishop, had left the Ordinary and were brawling in the tavern hard by for a bottle of Port, my friend the scholar turned to me.

'Sir,' he said, 'the Prison ought to be purged of such residents. They should be sent to the Borough Compter or the Clink. Here we have gentlemen: here we have tradesmen: here we have craftsmen: we are a little World. Here are the temptations of the world': he looked across the table where some of the ladies of the Prison were dining. 'The tavern invites us: the gaming table offers us a seat: we have our virtues and our vices. But we have not our crimes. And as a rule we cannot boast among our company the presence of the Robber, the Forger, or the Common Rogue. We have, in a word, no representative, as a rule of the Gallows, the Pillory, the Stocks, the Cart-tail, and the Whipping Post.'

I waited, for he did not like to be interrupted.

'Sir,' he went on, 'I am a Poet. As a child of the Muses' – I thought they were unmarried but did not venture on that objection – 'it is my business to observe the crooked ways of men and the artful ways of women, even though one may at times be misunderstood – as has once or twice happened. One may be the temporary companion of a Rogue without having to pick a pocket. I remember the faces of those two men – I saw them in a Thieves' Kitchen whither I was taken in disguise by one who knows them. The Captain, Sir, is a Highwayman, common and notorious. He is now five-and-twenty, and his rope is certainly long out, so that he is kept from Tyburn Tree by some special favour by Mr. Merridew the Thief-Taker. The other, whom they call the Bishop, is a Rogue of some education. He may last longer because he is useful and it would be hard to replace him. He was once usher in a suburban school at Marybone, and now writes lying, threatening or begging letters for the crew. He also concocts villainies. He threatens to set the house on fire, or to bring the householder into bankruptcy: or in some way to injure him fatally unless he sends a certain sum of money. He tells gentlemen who have been robbed that they can have their papers back, but not their money, by sending a reward. His villainy is without any pity or mercy or consideration. The Captain is a mere robber – a Barabbas. The Bishop is worse: he has the soul of a Fiend in the body of a man.'

'But why,' I said 'are they here?'

'They are in hiding. A sham debt has been sworn against them. From their dejected faces and from what I have overheard them saying, I learn that a true debt has been added for another detainer. But indeed I know not their affairs, except that they came here in order to be out of the way, and that something has happened to disconcert their plans. As honest men we must agree in hoping that their plans, which are certainly dishonest, may succeed, in order that their presence among us may cease and so we may breathe again. The air of the Prison is sometimes close and even musty, but we do not desire it to be mistaken for the reek of St. Giles's or the stench of Turnmill Street.'

However, I troubled myself but little as to these two men. And I know not how long they were in the prison. Had I known what they would do for me in the future I think I should have brained them there and then.

This afternoon the pair were talking together with none of the listlessness that belongs to the King's Bench. 'Might as well get out at once' – I heard fragments – 'quite certain that he won't appear – no more danger – if she will consent,' and so on – phrases to which I paid no attention.

Suddenly, however, they stopped short, and both cried out together:

'She's come herself!'

I looked out of my window and beheld a Vision.

The lady was alone. She stood at the end of the Parade and looked about her for a moment with hesitation, because the scene was new to her. She saw the ragged rout playing racquets: drinking at their tables: leaning against the pumps at each of which there is always a little gathering: or strolling

by in couples on the Parade. Then she advanced slowly, looking to the right and to the left. She smiled upon the people as they made way for her: no Queen could have smiled more graciously: yet not a Queen, for there was no majesty in her face, which was inspired by, and filled with, Venus herself, the Goddess of charm and grace and loveliness. Never was a face more lovely and more full of love. As for her dress, all that I can tell you is that I have never known at any time how this lady was dressed: she carried, I remember, an ivory-handled fan in her hand: she seemed to beholders to be dressed in nothing but lace, ribbons and embroidery. Her figure was neither tall nor short. Reasonably tall, for a woman ought not to be six feet high: so tall as not to be insignificant: not so tall as to dwarf the men: slender in shape and quick and active in her movements. Her eyes, which I observed later, changed every moment with her change of mood: one would say that they even changed their colour, which was a dark blue: they could be limpid, or melting, or fiery, or pitiful; in a word, they could express every fleeting emotion. Her features changed as much as her eyes: one never knew how she would look, until one had watched and known her in all her moods and passions: her lips were always ready to smile: her face was continually lit up by the sunshine of joy and happiness. But this woman wanted joy as some women want love. Her voice was gentle and musical.

I speak of her as I knew her afterwards, not as she appeared on this, the first day of meeting. I make no excuse for thus speaking of her, because, in truth, the very thought of Jenny – I have too soon revealed her name – makes me long to speak of what she was. Out of the fulness of my heart I write about her. And as you will understand presently, I could love without wronging my wife, and as much as a woman can be loved, and yet in innocence and with the full approval of the other woman whom also I loved.

At the sight of this apparition the whole Prison stared with open mouth. Who was this angel, and for what fortunate prisoner did she come? At the very outset, when I could not dream that she would ever condescend to speak to me, she seemed the most lovely woman I had ever beheld. Some women might possess more regular features: no one, sure, was ever so lovely, so bewitching, so attractive. It is as if I could go on forever repeating my words. The women of the Prison – poor tattered drabs, for the most part – looked after her with sighs – oh! to dress like that! Some of them murmured impudently to each other, 'Who gave her all that finery?' Most of them only looked and longed and sighed. Oh! to be dressed like her! To look like her! To smile like her! To put on that embroidered petticoat – that frock – those gloves – to carry that fan – to possess that figure – that manner! Well: to gaze upon the inaccessible may sometimes do us good. The sight of this Wonder made those poor women appear a little less slatternly. They straightened themselves: they tidied their hair: the more ragged crept away.

As for the men, they followed her with looks of wonder and of worship. For my own part I understood for the first time that power of beauty which compels admiration, worship and service: when I am greatly moved by music that memory comes back to me. In looking upon such a woman, one asks not what has been her history: what she is: what she has done: one accepts the heavenly cheerfulness of her smile: the heavenly wisdom seated on her brow: the heavenly innocence in her eyes: the purity which cannot be smirched or soiled by contact with things of the world.

I continued to gaze upon her while she walked up the Parade. To my surprise this angelic creature stopped before the pair of worthies – the bully in scarlet and the drunken divine. What could she want with them? They received her with profound salutations, the Bishop sweeping the ground with his greasy hat.

'Madam,' he said, 'we did not expect that you would yourself condescend to such a place.'

'I wished to see you,' she replied, curtly. I seemed to remember her voice.

'May we conduct you, Madam,' said the Captain, 'to the Coffee-room for more private conversation. Perhaps a glass –'

'Or,' said the Bishop, for she refused the proffered glass with an impatient gesture – could such a woman drink with such men? she refused, I say, with a shake of her head, 'for greater privacy to our own room. It is on the third floor. No one will venture to intrude upon us – and there is a chair.

I fear that, in the neglect, which is too common in this place, the beds are not yet made,' He looked as if the morning wash had not been performed either.

'What do I care, sir,' she asked, interrupting again, 'whether your beds are made or not? I shall stay here,' She withdrew a little nearer to the wall beside my window, so as to be outside the throng of people. 'We can talk, I suppose, undisturbed, and unheard, though, so far as I care, all the world may hear. Bless me! The people look as if a woman was a rare object here.' She looked round at the crowd. 'Yet there are women among your prisoners. Well, then, what have you got to say? Speak up, and quickly, because I like not the place or the company. You wrote to me. Now go on.'

'I wrote to you,' said the Bishop, 'asking a great favour. I know that we have no reason to expect that or any other favour from you.'

'You have no reason. But go on.'

'We came here, you know' – his voice dropped to a whisper, but I heard what he said – 'in order to escape a great danger.'

'I heard. You told me. The danger was in connection with a gentleman and a post-chaise.'

'A villainous charge,' said the Captain.

'Villainous indeed,' repeated the Bishop. 'I could prove to you in five minutes and quite to your satisfaction that the Captain was engaged at Newmarket on the day in question, while I myself was conducting a funeral in place of the Vicar in a country village thirty miles on the other side of London.'

'An excellent defence, truly. But I will leave that to the lawyers. Well, the debt was sworn against you by Mr. Merridew.' I pricked up my ears at this because this was the name of the man, as you shall hear, who swore a debt which never existed against me. Could there be two Merridews?

'That was mere form. Unfortunately other detainers are out against both of us. I know not how they found out that we were here. Mr. Merridew refuses to take us out. He says that he thinks our time is up, and so he knows that we are safe.' He shuddered. Afterwards I understood why. 'There is the danger that we may have to remain here till he takes us out. As for our present necessities – ' He drew out his purse and dangled it – a long purse with a very few guineas in it. 'You see, Madam, to stay here, where there is no opportunity of honest work, is ruin and starvation.'

'Honest work! Why, if you go out, you will only continue in your old courses.'

'They are at least honest and even pious courses,' said the Bishop with a snuffle.

'As you please. But there is still the former danger.'

'No. The gentleman understands now that he only mislaid his pocket-book. Mr. Merridew found it for him. The drafts and notes were still in it, fortunately. The gentleman has redeemed the papers from Mr. Merridew. He will not take any further steps.'

'If I take you out,' she spoke to the Captain, 'you know what will happen. Better stay here in safety.'

'What else can a man do?' asked the Captain.

'You might go abroad; go to America – anything is better than the Road and the certain end.' She made a gesture with her hand, easy to be understood.

'If a man has a long rope, what else can he expect?'

'And you?' she turned to the Bishop, 'what will become of you? Will you stay in London where you are known in every street?'

'I have had thoughts of trying Ireland. A good many things can be done in Ireland. The Irish are a confiding people.'

'Do what you please. It is nothing to me what becomes of both of you. I interfere because – oh! you know why. And as for your future – that, I suppose, will be arranged for you by your friend Mr. Merridew.'

Putting together what my friend the starveling poet told me and what they themselves confessed, they were clearly a pair of rogues, and she knew it, and she was going to help them. Charity covereth a

multitude of sins. Yet, surely, it was remarkable that a gentlewoman should come to the King's Bench Prison in order to send two abominable criminals back to their old haunts.

'Any place is better than this,' said the Captain.

'Much better than this,' echoed the Bishop. 'Give me freedom while I live. A short life – ' but he was certainly past forty – 'and a free life, for me.'

'How much is it, then, altogether, for the pair of you?'

'The detainers, not counting Mr. Merridew's, amount to close upon seventy pounds. Then there are the costs and the fees.'

'Oh!' she cried impatiently, 'what is the good of setting you loose again? Why should I let loose upon the world such a pair of rogues? Why not keep you here so that you may at least die in your beds?'

The Bishop looked astonished at this outburst. 'Why,' he said, slowly, 'we are what we are. That is true. What else can we be? Nobody knows better than you what we are. Come, now, nobody, I say, knows better than you what we are.'

'Yes,' she replied with a sigh. 'I do know very well – I wish I did not.'

And nobody knows better than you,' he went on, roughly, 'that what we are we must continue to be. What else can we do?'

'Say no more,' she replied, sighing again. 'There is no help, I suppose. When I made up my mind to come here at all, I made up my mind that I would take you out – both of you. Yet – it is like walking over a grave, I shiver' – she did actually shiver as she spoke. 'I feel as if I were contriving a mischief for myself. These signs always come true – a mischief,' she repeated, 'to myself' – indeed she was, as you shall afterwards learn. 'As for the world you will certainly do as much mischief to that as you can.'

'As we can, Madam,' said the Bishop with a smile – he was easy now that he knew her mind. Before, he was inclined to be rough. 'The world, on the other hand, is always trying to do a mischief to me.'

'But mischief to you, Madam?' cried the captain, that mirror of gallantry. 'A soldier is all gratitude and honour. Mischief to you? Impossible!'

'And a Divine,' added the other with a grin, 'is all truth, fidelity, and honesty. His profession compels these qualities.'

'Quite so. Well, gentlemen of honour and truth, you shall once more return to the scenes and the pursuits and the companions that you love. Moll and Doll and Poll impatiently await you at the Black Jack. And I see, only a short mile from that hospitable place, another refuge – call it the Black Jug – where before long you will pass a few pleasant days of rest and repose before going forth in a glorious procession.'

'If we go forth in that procession', murmured the Bishop with lowering face, 'there are other people quite as deserving, who will sit there beside us.'

'Go,' she said. 'I have talked enough and more than enough with such as you. Go.'

They bowed again and walked away.

Now I heard this interview, half of which I did not understand, with amazement unspeakable. The lady was going to release this pair of villains – Why? Out of the boundless charity of her benevolent heart?

She looked after the precious pair, standing for a moment with her hand shading her eyes. The light went out of her face: a cloud fell upon it: she sighed again: her lips parted: she caught her breath. Ah! Poor lady! Thy face was made for joy and not for sorrow. What thought, what memory, was it that compelled the cloud and chased away the sunshine?

She turned her head – she moved away. I was still standing at my window looking on: as she passed she started and stopped short, her face expressing the greatest possible bewilderment and amazement.

'It is not ...' she cried – 'Surely – No – Yet the resemblance is so great. Sir, I thought – at first – you were a gentleman of my acquaintance. You are so much like him that I venture to ask you who you are?'

'A prison bird, Madam. Nothing more.'

'Yes, but you are so like that gentleman. May I ask your name?'

'My name, at your service, Madam, is Halliday. My friends call me Will Halliday.'

'Will Halliday. Are you a brother – but that cannot be – of Mr. Matthew Halliday?'

'I am his first cousin.'

'Matthew Halliday's first cousin? But he is rich. Does he allow you to remain in this place?'

'It is not only by the sufferance of my cousin Matthew but by his desire that I am here.'

'By his desire! Yes – I know something of your cousin, sir. It is by his desire. I discover new virtues in your cousin the more I learn of him. I suppose, then, that you are not on friendly terms with your cousin?'

'I am not indeed. Quite the contrary.'

'Can you tell me the reason why?'

'Because he desires my death. Therefore he has caused my arrest – he and an attorney of the devil – named Probus.'

'Oh! Probus! I have heard of that Probus. Sir, I would willingly hear more concerning this matter and your cousin and Mr. Probus, if you will kindly tell me. I must now go, but with your permission I will come again. It is not I assure you, out of idle curiosity that I ask these questions.'

The next day, or the day after, the Captain and the Bishop walked out of the Prison. When they were gone open talk went round the Prison, perhaps started by the Poet, that one was a highwayman and the other a sharper – perhaps a forger – a contriver of plots and plans to deceive the unwary. I marvelled that they should have received the bounty of so fine a lady, for indeed, whether highwayman or sharper or honest men, they were as foul-mouthed a pair of reprobates – drunken withal – as we had in the prison.

And then I remembered, suddenly, the reason why I recognised the lady's voice and why there was something in the face also that I seemed to know. I had been but once in my life to the Theatre. On that occasion there was an actress whose beauty and vivacity gave me the greatest possible delight. One may perhaps forget the face of an actress playing a part, because she alters her face with every part: but her voice, when it is a sweet voice, one remembers. The lady was that actress. I remembered her – and her name. She was Miss Jenny Wilmot of Drury Lane.

PART I

HOW I GOT INTO THE KING'S BENCH

CHAPTER I

I AM TURNED OUT INTO THE WORLD

In the year 1760 or thereabouts, everybody knew the name of Sir Peter Halliday, Merchant. The House in which Sir Peter was the Senior Partner possessed a fleet of West Indiamen which traded between the Port of London and Jamaica, Barbadoes, and the other English Islands, taking out all kinds of stuffs, weapons, implements, clothing, wine, silks, gloves, and everything else that the planters could want, and returning laden with sugar in bags, mahogany, arrack, and whatever else the islands produce. Our wharf was that which stands next to the Tower stairs: the counting-house was on the wharf: there the clerks worked daily from seven in the morning till eight at night. As a boy it was my delight to go on board the ships when they arrived. There I ran up and down the companion: into the dark lower deck where the midshipmen messed and slept among the flying cockroaches, which buzzed into their faces and the rats which ran over them and the creatures which infest a ship in hot latitudes and come on board with the gunny-bags, such as centipedes, scorpions, and great spiders. And I would stand and watch the barges when they came alongside to receive the cargo. Then with a yeo-heave-oh! and a chantey of the sailors, mostly meaningless, yet pleasant to hear, they tossed the bags of sugar into the barge as if they were loaves of bread, and the casks of rum as if they had been pint pots. Or I would talk to the sailors and hear stories of maroon niggers and how the planters engaged the sailors to go ashore in search of these fierce runaways and shoot them down in the mountains: and stories of shark and barra coota: of hurricanos and islands where men had been put ashore to starve and die miserably: of pirates, of whom there have always been plenty in the Caribbean Sea since that ocean was first discovered. Strange things these sailors brought home with them: coral, pink and white: preserved flying-fish: creatures put in spirits: carved cocoanuts: everybody knows the treasures of the sailor arrived in port.

This, I say, was my delight as a boy: thus I learned to think of things outside the narrow bounds of the counting-house and the City walls. Marvellous it is to mark how while the Pool is crammed with ships from all parts of the world, the Londoner will go on in ignorance of any world beyond the walls of the City or the boundaries of his parish. Therefore, I say, it was better for me than the study of Moll's Geography to converse with these sailors and to listen to their adventures.

Another thing they taught me. It is well known that on board every ship there is one, at least, who can play the fiddle. A ship without a fiddler is robbed of the sailors' chief joy. Now, ever since I remember anything I was always making music: out of the whistle pipe: the twanging Jews' harp: the comb and paper: but above all out of the fiddle. I had a fiddle: I found it in a garret of our house in Great College Street. I made a sailor tell me how to practise upon it: whenever one of our ships put into port I made friends with the fiddler on board and got more lessons; so that I was under instruction, in this rude manner for the greater part of the year, and before I was twelve I could play anything readily and after the fashion, rough and vigorous, of the sailors with whom strength of arm reckons before style.

I belong to a family which for nearly two hundred years have been Puritans. Some of them were preachers and divines under Cromwell. Their descendants retained the strict observance of opinions which forbid mirth and merriment, even among young people. Although they conformed to the Church of England, they held that music of all kinds: the theatre: dancing at the Assembly: reading poetry and tales: and wearing of fine dress must be sinful, because they call attention from the

salvation of the soul, the only thing about which the sinner ought to think. Why it was worse to let the mind dwell upon music than upon money-getting I know not, nor have I ever been able to discover. It will be understood, however, that ours was a strict household. It consisted of my father, myself, a housekeeper and five servants, all godly. We had long prayers, morning and evening; we attended the Church of St. Stephen Walbrook, instead of our own parish church of St. Michael Paternoster, because there was no organ in it: we went to church on Sundays twice: and twice in the week to the Gift Lectures, of which there were two. My father was a stern man, of great dignity. When he was Lord Mayor he was greatly feared by malefactors. He was of a full habit of body, with a large red face, his neck swollen into rolls. Like all merchants in his position he drank a great deal of port, of which he possessed a noble cellar.

I have often wondered why it was never discovered that I practised the fiddle in the garret. To be sure, it was only at those hours when my father was on the wharf. When I had the door shut and the windows open the maids below thought, I suppose, that the sounds came from the next house. However that may be, I was never found out.

Now this fondness for music produced an unfortunate result. The sight of a book of arithmetic always filled me with a disgust unspeakable. The sight of a book of accounts inspired me with loathing. The daily aspect of my father's clerks all sitting in a row on high stools, and all driving the quill with heads bending over the paper, made me, even as a child, believe theirs to be the most miserable lot that Fortune has to offer her most unhappy victims. I still think so. Give me any other kind of life: make me a bargee: a coal-heaver: a sailor before the mast: an apothecary: a schoolmaster's usher: in all these occupations there will be something to redeem the position: but for the accountant there is nothing. All day long he sits within four walls: his pay is miserable: his food is insufficient: when in the evening he crawls away, there is only time left for him to take a little supper and go to his miserable bed.

Imagine, therefore, my loathing when I understood that at the age of sixteen I was to take my place among these unfortunates, and to work my way towards the succession which awaited me – the partnership held by my father – by becoming a clerk like unto these others whom I had always pitied and generally despised. From that lot, however, there was no escape. All the partners, from father to son, had so worked their way. The reason of this rule was that the young men in this way acquired a knowledge of the business in all its branches before they were called upon to direct its enterprise, and to enter upon new ventures. I daresay that it was a good practical rule. But in my own case I found it almost intolerable.

I was unlike the clerks in one or two respects: I had good food and plenty of it. And I received no salary.

I had a cousin, named Matthew, son of my father's younger brother and partner, Alderman Paul Halliday, Citizen and Lorimer, who had not yet passed the chair. Matthew, though his father was the younger son, was three or four years older than myself. He, therefore, mounted the clerks' stool so many years before me. He was a young man with a face and carriage serious and thoughtful (to all appearance) beyond his years. He had a trick of dropping his eyes while he talked: his face was always pale and his hands were always clammy. Other young men who had been at school with him spoke of him with disrespect and even hatred, but I know not why. In a word, Matthew had no friends among those of his own age. On the other hand, the older people thought highly of him. My father spoke with praise of his capacity for business and of his industry, and of the grasp of detail which he had already begun to show. As for me, I could never like my cousin, and what happened when I was about eighteen years of age gave me no reason to like him any better.

I had been in the counting-house for two years, each day feeling like a week for duration. But the question of rebellion had so far never occurred to me. I could no longer practise in the garret while my father was in the counting-house. But I could get away, on pretence of business to the ships, and snatch an hour below with the fiddler. And in the evening sometimes, when my father was feasting

with a City Company or engaged in other business out of the house, I could take boat across the river and run over to St. George's Fields, there to have half an hour of play with a musician, of whom you shall learn more, called Tom Shirley. After the manner of youths I never asked myself how long this would go on without discovery: or what would be the result when it was discovered. Yet I knew very well that no Quaker could be more decided as to the sinfulness of music than my father and my uncle. Had not the great and Reverend Samuel Halliday, D. D., preached before the Protector on the subject of the snares spread by the devil to catch souls by means of music?

Now, one afternoon in the month of June, when the counting-house is more than commonly terrible, a message came to me that my father wished to speak with me.

I found him in his own room, his brother Paul sitting with him. His face showed astonishment and anger; that of his brother presented some appearance of sorrow – real or not, I cannot say. My uncle Paul was, as often happens in a family, a reduced copy of his elder brother. He was not so tall: not so portly: not so red in the face: not so swollen in the neck: yet he was tall and portly and red and swollen. He was shaking his head as I entered saying, 'Dear! dear! dear! And in our family too – in our family!'

'Son William,' said my father, 'I have heard a serious thing.'

'What is that, Sir, if I may ask?'

'I learn from my brother, who had it from Matthew – '

'From Matthew,' my uncle interposed solemnly.

'That you lose no opportunity of getting away from your desk to go on board our ships in the Pool, there to play the fiddle with the common sailors – to play the fiddle – the common fiddle – like a fellow with a bear – with the common sailors. I hear that our Captains and officers are all acquainted with this unworthy pastime of yours! I hear, further, that you have formed an acquaintance with a certain fellow named Shirley, now a prisoner in the Rules of the King's Bench, one who makes a sinful living by playing wanton music for lewd and wicked persons at what are called Pleasure Gardens, whither resort such company as no godly youth should meet. And I hear that you spend such time as you can spare under the tuition of this person.'

He stopped. My uncle took up the word.

'All these things I am assured by my son Matthew to be the case. I have informed Matthew that in my opinion it was right and even necessary that they should be brought before the notice of my brother.'

'I wait thy reply, Will,' said my father.

'It is all quite true, Sir.'

'Quite true.' I felt a little sinking of the heart because of the disappointment and sadness in his voice. 'But,' he went on, 'what is the meaning of it? For my own part I see no good purpose to be gained by music. On the other hand my grandfather, the Rev. Dr. Samuel Halliday, hath clearly shown in his book of godly discourses, that music, especially music with dancing, is the surest bait by which the devil draws souls to destruction. People, I am aware, will have music. At our Company's feasts music attends: at the Lord Mayor's banquets there is music: at the Lord Mayor's Show there is music: at many churches there is an organ: but what hast thou to do with music, Will? It is thy part to become a merchant, bent on serious work: and outside the counting-house to become a magistrate. What hast thou to do with music?'

He spoke, being much moved, kindly – because – alas! he loved his son.

'Sir,' I said, 'it is all most true. There is nothing that I love so much as music.'

'Consider,' he went on. 'There is no place for music in the life before thee. All day long learning thy work in the counting-house: some time to succeed me in this room. How is it possible for a young man who stoops to make music on catgut with a bow to become a serious merchant, respected in the City?'

'Indeed, Sir, I do not know,'

'How will it be possible for you to advance the interests of the House – nay, to maintain the interests of the House, when it is known that you are a common scraper in a crowd like a one-legged man with a Jack in the Green?'

Now I might even then have submitted and promised and given up my fiddle and so pleased my father and remained in his favour. But this was one of those moments which are turning-points in a man's life. Besides I was young; I was inexperienced. And an overwhelming disgust fell upon my soul as I thought of the counting-house and the ledgers and the long hours in the dingy place driving the quill all day long. So without understanding what the words meant, I broke out impatiently:

'Sir,' I said, 'with submission, I would ask your leave to give up my place in this office.'

'Give up? Give up?' he cried, growing purple in the face. 'Does the boy know what he means?'

'Give up?' cried my uncle. 'Is the boy mad? Give up his prospects in this House – this – the soundest House in the whole City? Nephew Will, wouldst starve?'

'I will make a living by music.'

'Make a living – a living – make a living – by music? What? To play the fiddle in a tavern? To play in the gallery while your father is feasting below?'

'Nay, sir; but there are other ways.'

'Hark ye, Will; let this stop. Back to thy desk lest something happen.' My father spoke with sudden sternness.

'Nay, sir; but I am serious.'

'Ay – ay? Serious? Then I am serious, too. Understand, then, that I own no son who disgraces the City family to which he belongs by becoming a common musician. Choose. Take thy fiddle and give up me – this office – thine inheritance – thine inheritance, mind, or lay down the fiddle and go back to thy desk. There, sir, I am, I hope, serious enough.'

He was. My father was a masterful man at all times; he was perfectly serious. Now the sons of masterful men are themselves often masterful. I walked out of the counting-house without a word.

I am conscious that there is no excuse for a disobedient son. I ought to have accepted any orders that my father might choose to lay upon me. But to part with my fiddle, to give up music: to abandon that sweet refreshment of the soul: oh! it was too much.

Moreover, no one knew better than myself the inveterate hatred with which my father and the whole of my family regarded what they called the tinkling cymbal which they thought leads souls to destruction. Had I seen any gleam of hope that there would be a relenting, I would have waited. But there was none. Therefore I cast obedience to the winds, and left the room without a word.

Had I known what awaited me: the misfortunes which were to drag me down almost unto a shameful death, in consequence of this act of disobedience, I might have given way.

But perhaps not: for in all my troubles there were two things which cheered and sustained me, I enjoyed at all times, so you shall learn, the support of love and the refreshment of music.

Had my father known of these misfortunes would he have given way? I doubt it. Misfortune does not destroy the soul, but music does. So he would say and so think, and conduct his relations with his own accordingly.

I walked out of the counting-house. At the door I met, face to face, the informer, my cousin Matthew, who had caused all this trouble.

He was attired as becomes a responsible merchant, though as yet only a clerk or factor with the other clerks. He wore a brown coat with silver buttons: white silk stockings: silver buckles in his shoes: silver braid upon his hat: a silver chain with seals hanging from his fob: with white lace ruffles and neckerchief as fine as those of his father, or of any merchant on Change.

He met me, I say, face to face, and for the first time within my knowledge, he grinned when he met me. For he knew what had been said to me. He grinned with a look of such devilish glee that I understood for the first time how much he hated me. Why? I had never crossed him. Because I was the son of the senior partner whose place I was to take and of the richer man of the two Partners.

His would be the subordinate position with a third only of the profits. Therefore my cousin hated me. He, I say, noted my discomfiture. Now, at that moment, I was in no mood for mockery.

Something in my face stopped his grinning. He became suddenly grave: he dropped his eyes: he made as if he would pass by me and so into the house.

'Villain and maker of mischief!' I cried. Then I fell upon him. I had but fists: he had a stick: I was eighteen: he was five-and-twenty: he was heavier and taller: well; there is little credit, because he was a poor fighter: in two minutes I had his stick from him, and in three more I had broken it over his head and his shoulders. However, had his wind and his strength equalled his hatred and desire that the stick should be broken over my shoulders instead of his, the result would have been different.

'You shall pay – you shall pay – you shall pay for this,' he gasped, lying prostrate.

I kicked him out of my way as if he had been a dog and strode off, my cheek aflame, my hand trembling and my limbs stiffened with the joy of the fight and the victory. Come what might, I had whipped my cousin, like the cur he was. A thing to remember.

I have never repented that act of justice. The memory of it brought many woes upon me, but I have never repented or regretted it. And certain I am that to the day of his miserable death Matthew never forgot it. Nor did I.

CHAPTER II

A CITY OF REFUGE

My last recollection of the counting-house is that of Matthew lying in a heap and shaking his fist, at me, while, behind, my uncle's face looks out amazed upon the spectacle from one door, and the clerks in a crowd contemplate the discomfiture of Mr. Matthew from another door. Then I strode off, I say, like a gamecock after a victory, head erect, cheek flushed, legs straight. Ha! I am always glad that I drubbed my cousin, just once. A righteous drubbing it was, too, if ever there was one. It hanselled the new life. After it, there was no return possible.

And so home – though the house in College Street could no longer be called a home – I now had no home – I was turned into the street. However, I went upstairs to my own room – mine no longer. I looked about. In the cupboard I found a black box in which I placed everything I could call my own: my music; my linen and my clothes. On the wall hung the miniature of my mother. Happily she had not lived to see the banishment of her son: this I put in my pocket. The fiddle I laid in its case. Then with my cudgel under my arm and carrying the fiddle in one hand and the box on my shoulder I descended the stairs – now, I must confess, with a sinking heart – and found myself in the street.

I had in my purse five guineas – the son of a most solid and substantial merchant, and I had no more than five guineas in the world. What could I do to earn a living? Since I had been for two years in my father's counting house I might be supposed to know something of affairs. Alas! I knew nothing. One art or accomplishment I possessed: and one alone. I could play the fiddle. Now that I had to depend upon my playing for a livelihood, I began to ask whether I could play well enough. At all events, I could play vigorously. But the die was cast. I had made my choice, and must make the best of it. Besides, had I not drubbed my cousin Matthew and that, as they say, with authority?

You have heard how my father accused me of intimacy with a person named Shirley, a resident in the Rules of the King's Bench. That charge I could not deny. Indeed, the person named Shirley, by all his friends called Tom, had been of late my master. Every spare hour that I had was spent with him, practising with him and learning from him. He taught a finer style than I could learn from the sailors. When I went into the counting-house I had no longer any spare hours, except in the evening, and then my master was engaged earning his bread in an orchestra. Still I could manage to visit him sometimes on Sunday evenings when my father was generally occupied with friends who loved likewise to limit and make as narrow as they could the mercies of the Almighty.

At this moment I could think of no one except Tom Shirley who could help me or advise me.

I therefore lugged my box and my violin to the Three Cranes, and took boat across to Moldstrand Stairs, from which it is an easy half mile by pleasant lanes, Love Lane and Gravel Lane, past Looman's Pond to St. George's Fields where Tom Shirley lived.

It was a little after noon when I arrived at the house. It was one of three or four cottages standing in a row, every cottage consisting of four or five rooms. They are pleasing retreats, each having a small front garden where lilacs, laburnums, hollyhock, sunflowers, tulips, and other flowers and bushes grow. In front of the garden flows languidly one of the many little streams which cross the fields and meadows of Southwark: a rustic bridge with a single hand-rail crosses the stream.

The region of St. George's Fields, as is very well known, has a reputation which, in fact, is well deserved. The fact that it is covered with shallow ponds, some of which are little better than mere laystalls, causes it to be frequented on Sundays and on summer evenings by the rude and barbarous people who come here to hunt ducks with dogs – a horrid sport: some of them even throw cats into the water and set their dogs at them. The same people come here for prize fights, but they say that the combatants have an understanding beforehand how long the fight is to last: some come for quarter-staff practice: some come for hockey or for football. Outside the Fields there are many taverns and places of entertainment: on the Fields there is at least one, the notorious Dog and Duck. Every evening

except in winter these places are full of people who come to dance and drink and sing. Every kind of wickedness is openly practised here: if a man would gamble, here are the companions for him and here are rooms where he can play: if he would meet women as deboshed as himself here they may be found.

It is unfortunate for Southwark and its environs that everything seems to have conspired to give it a bad name. First of all, it was formerly outside the jurisdiction of the City, so that all the villains and criminals of the City got across the water and found refuge here. Next, the government of the place was not single, but divided by the manors, so that a rogue might pass from one manor into another and so escape: thirdly, the Sanctuary of Southwark tolerated after the Reformation at St. Mary Overies, grew to accommodate as great a number as that in Westminster where they only lately pulled down the gray old Tower which looked like a donjon keep rather than the walls enclosing two chapels. I know not whether there was such a tower at Montagu Close, but within my recollection no officer of the law dared to arrest any sanctuary man in Mint Street – their latest refuge: nor did any person with property to lose venture into that street. For first his hat would be snatched off: then his wig: then his silk handkerchief: then he would be hustled, thrown, and kicked: when he was permitted to get up it was without watch, chain, buckles, shoes, lace cravat, ruffles. Fortunate if he was allowed to escape with no more injury. The presence of these villains was alone enough to give the place a bad name. But there was more. Prisons there must be, but in Southwark there were too many. The King's Bench Prison: the Marshal-sea: the Borough Compter: the Clink: the White Lyon. So many prisons in a place so thinly populated produced a saddening effect. And, besides, there are those who live in the Rules, which are themselves a kind of prison but without walls. In another part, along the Embankment, the Show Folk used to live: those who act: those who write plays and songs: those who dance and tumble: mimes, musicians, buffoons: and those who live by the bear-baiting, badger-baiting, bull-baiting, and cock-throwing, which are the favourite sports of Southwark.

These considerations are quite sufficient to account for the evil reputation which clings to the Borough. They do not, however, prevent it from being a place of great resort for those who come up from Kent and Surrey on business, and they do not for obvious reasons prevent the place from being inhabited by the prisoners of the Rules.

When I arrived, Tom Shirley was playing on the harpsichord, his head in a white nightcap, his wig hanging on a nail. As he played, not looking at notes or keys, his face was turned upwards and his eyes were rapt. As one watched him his face changed in expression with the various emotions of the music: no man, certainly, was more moved by music than Tom Shirley. No man, also, could more certainly bring out the very soul of the music, the inner thought of the composer. He played as if he loved playing, which indeed he did whether it was a country dance, or a minuet or an oratorio or a Roman Catholic Mass. It was a fine face, delicate in outline; full of expression: the face of a musician: it lacked the firmness which belongs to one who fights: he was no gladiator in the arena: a face full of sweetness. Everyone loved Tom Shirley. As for age, he was then about five-and-twenty.

I stood at the open door and looked in, listening, for at such moments he heard nothing. There was another door opposite leading to the kitchen, where his wife was engaged in some domestic work. Presently, she lifted her head and saw me. 'Father,' she cried. 'Here is Will!'

He heard that: brought his fingers down with a splendid chord and sprang to his feet. 'Will? In the morning? What is the meaning – why this box?'

'I have come away, Tom. I have left the counting-house for good.'

'What? You have deserted the money bags? You have run away for the sake of music?'

'My father has turned me out.'

'And you have chosen music. Good – good – what could you have done better? Wife, hear this. Will has run away. He will play the fiddle in the orchestra rather than become an Alderman and Lord Mayor.'

'I want to live as you live, Tom.'

'If you can, boy, you shall.' Now it was the humour of Tom to speak of his own cottage and his manner of life as if both were stately and sumptuous. 'Very few,' he added proudly, 'can live as we live.' He looked proudly round. The room was about ten feet square: low, painted drab, without ornament, without curtains: there were a few shelves: a cupboard: a small table: two brass candlesticks, a brass pair of snuffers: four rush-bottomed chairs, and nothing more.

Tom was dressed in an old brown coat with patches on the elbows, the wrists frayed and the buttons gone. To be sure he had a finer coat for the orchestra. His stockings were of worsted, darned in many places: a woollen wrapper was round his neck. Everything proclaimed poverty: of course people who are not poor do not live in the Rules. 'Few,' he repeated, 'are privileged to live as I live.' I have never known whether this was a craze or his humour to pretend that he fared sumptuously: was lodged like a prince: and received the wages of an ambassador. Perhaps it was mere habit; a way of presenting his own life to himself by exaggeration and pretence which he had somehow grown to believe.

'You ask, Will, a thing difficult of achievement.'

'But gradually – little by little. One would never expect it all at once.'

'Ay, there we talk sense. But first, why hath Sir Peter behaved with this (apparent) harshness? I would not judge him hastily. Therefore I say, apparent.'

'Because he found out at last – my cousin Matthew told him – that I came here to play the fiddle. So he gave me the choice – either to give up the counting-house or to give up the music. And I gave up the counting-house, Tom. I don't care what happens so that I get out of the counting-house.'

'Good – lad – good.'

'And I drubbed my cousin – I paid him with his own stick. And here I am.'

He took my hand, his honest face beaming with satisfaction. At that moment, his sister Alice came back from making some purchases in the Borough High Street. 'Alice my dear,' he said, 'Will has been turned out of house and home by his father – sent out into the streets without a penny.'

Alice burst into tears.

When I think of Alice at that moment, my heart swells, my eyes grow humid. She was then fifteen, an age when the child and the woman meet, and one knows not whether to expect the one or the other. When Alice burst into tears it was the child who wept: she had always loved me with a childish unconsciousness: she was only beginning to understand that I was not her brother.

You know how sweet a flower will sometimes spring up in the most unlovely spot. Well: in this place, close to the Dog and Duck, with prodigals and rakes and painted Jezebels always before her eyes, this child grew up sweet and tender and white as the snow. I have never known any girl upon whom the continual sight – not to be concealed – of gross vice produced so little effect: it was as if the eyes of her soul involuntarily closed to the meaning of such things. Such sweetness, such purity, was stamped upon her face then as afterwards. Never, surely, was there a face that showed so plain and clear to read that the thoughts behind it were not earthly or common.

'It is the soul of music that possesses her,' said her brother once. 'She has imbibed that soul day by day. Will, 'tis a saintly child. Sometimes I fear that she may be carried away like Elijah.'

Well, when I saw those tears, I was seized with a kind of joyful compassion and, so to speak, happy shame, to think that those tears were for me. I drew her gently and kissed her.

'Why, nothing better could have happened to him. Thou little simpleton,' said her brother. Warming up with his subject, he became eloquent. 'He shall do much better – far better – than if he had stayed in the counting-house. He shall not be weighed down with a load of riches: he shall have to work in order to live – believe me, Will, Art must be forced by necessity: where there is no necessity there is no Art: when riches creep in, Art becomes a toy. Because he must work, therefore he will be stimulated to do great things. He shall never set his mind upon growing rich: he shall remain poor.'

'Not too poor,' said his wife gently. Indeed her poor shabby dress showed what she meant.

'Peace, woman. He shall be poor, I say. Happy lad! He shall be poor. He shall never have money in a stocking, and he shall never want any. He shall live like the sparrows, from day to day, fed by the bounty of the Lord.'

'Who loveth the Dog and Duck,' said his wife.

The husband frowned. 'To sum up, Will, thy lot shall be the happiest that the world can give. What?' He lifted his hand and his eyes grew brighter. 'For the musician the curse of labour is remitted: for him there is no longing after riches: for him there is no flattery of great men: for him there is no meanness; for him there are no base arts: for him there is no wriggling: for him there are no back stairs: for him there is no patron. – In a word, Will, the musician is the only free man in the world.'

'In the Rules, you mean, my dear.' This was his wife's correction.

'Will,' said Alice, 'shall you really become like Tom?'

'Truly, Alice, if I can.'

'Wife,' said Tom. 'Will shall stay with us. He can sleep in the garret. We must find a mattress somewhere.'

'Nay, but I must pay my footing. See, Tom. I have five guineas.' I showed this mine of wealth. He took one and gave it to his wife.

'Aha!' he laughed. 'Buy him a mattress and a blanket, wife. And this evening we will have a bowl of punch. Will, we shall fare like Kings and like the Great ones of the Earth.'

CHAPTER III

A WAY TO LIVE

I think that Tom Shirley was the most good-natured man in the whole world: the most ready to do anything he could for anybody: always cheerful: always happy: partly, I suppose, because he looked at everything through spectacles of imagination. He joined, however, to his passion for music another which belonged to a lower world: namely, for punch. Yet he was not an intemperate man: he showed neither purple cheeks, nor a double chin, nor a swollen neck, nor a rubicund nose – all of which were common sights on Change and in the streets of London. The reason why he displayed no signs of drink was that he could seldom gratify his passion for punch by reason of his poverty, and that in eating, which, I believe, also contributes its share to the puffing out of the neck and the painting of the nose, such as may be seen on Change, he was always as moderate, although he thought every meal a feast, as became his slender means.

I do not know how he got into the King's Bench, but the thing is so easy that one marvels that so many are able to keep out. They put him in and kept him there for a time, when he was enabled to obtain the privilege of the Rules. He was, as he boasted, always rich, because he thought he was rich. His wife took from him, every week, the whole of his wages, otherwise he would have given them away.

At one o'clock Alice laid the cloth and we had dinner. Tom lifted the knife and fork and held it over the cold boiled beef as if fearing to mar that delicate dish by a false or clumsy cut. 'Is there anything,' he said, 'more delicious to the palate than cold boiled beef? It must be cut delicately and with judgment – with judgment, Will.' He proceeded to exercise judgment. There was a cabbage on the table. 'This delicacy,' he said, 'is actually grown for us – for us – in the gardens of Lambeth Marsh. Remark the crispness of it: there is a solid heart for you: there is colour: there is flavour.' All this was, I remember, the grossest flattery. 'Oat cake,' he said, breaking a piece. 'Some, I believe, prefer wheaten bread. They do wrong. Viands must not be judged by their cost but by their fitness to others on the table, and by the season. Remember, Will, that with cold boiled beef, oat cake is your only eating.' He poured out some beer into a glass and held it up to the light. 'Watch the sparkles: hear the humming: strong October this' – it was the most common small beer – 'have a care, Will, have a care.' And so on, turning the simple meal into a banquet.

His wife and sister received these extravagances without a smile. They were used to them. The latter, at least, believed that they were the simple truth. The poor girl was innocently proud of her humble home, this cottage on St. George's Fields, within the Rules.

After dinner, we talked. As the subject was Music Tom was somewhat carried away; yet there was method in his madness.

'I said, lad, that there would be no Art if there were no necessity. 'Tis Poverty alone makes men become musicians and painters and poets. Where can you find a rich man who was ever a great artist? I am no scholar, but I have asked scholars this question, and they agree with me that riches destroy Art. Hardly may Dives become even a Connoisseur. He may become a general or a statesman: we do not take all from him: we leave him something – but not the best – that we keep for ourselves – we keep Art for ourselves. As for a rich merchant becoming a musician or a painter – it is impossible: one laughs at the very thought.'

'Well, that danger is gone, Tom, so far as I am concerned.'

'Ay. The reason I take it, is that Art demands the whole man – not a bit of him – the whole man – all his soul, all his mind, all his thoughts, all his strength. You must give all that to music, Will.'

'I ask nothing better.'

'Another reason is that Art raises a man's thoughts to a higher level than is wanted for Trade. It is impossible for a man's mind to soar or to sink according as he thinks of art or trade. You will remember, Will, for your comfort, that your mind is raised above the City.'

'I will remember.'

'Well, then, let us think about what is best to be done.'

He pondered a little. Then he smiled.

'Put pride in pocket, Will. Now what would you like?'

'To write great music.'

'A worthy ambition. It has been my own. It is not for me to say whether my songs, which are nightly sung at the Dog and Duck, are great music or not. Posterity may judge. Lad, it is one thing to love music – and another thing to compose it. The latter is given to few: the former to many. It may be that it is thy gift. But I know not. Meantime, we must live.'

'I will do anything.'

'Again – put pride in pocket. Now there is a riverside tavern at Bermondsey. It is a place for sailors and their Dolls. A rough and coarse place it is, at best. They want a fiddler from six o'clock till ten every night, and later on Saturdays.'

I heard with a shiver. To play in a sailors' tavern! It was my father's prophecy.

'Everybody must begin, Will. What? A sailors' tavern is no place for the son of a City merchant, is it? But that is gone. Thou art now nobody's son – a child of the gutter – the world is thine oyster – free of all ties – with neither brother nor cousin to say thee nay. Lucky dog! What? We must make a beginning – I say – in the gutter.'

His eyes twinkled and smiled, and I perceived without being told that he meant to try my courage. So, with a rueful countenance and a foolish sense of shame, I consented to sit in the corner of a sanded room in a common riverside tavern and to make music for common sailors and their sweethearts.

'Why,' said Tom, 'that is well. And now, my lad, remember. There are no better judges of a fiddle than sailors. They love their music as they love their lobsouse, hot and strong and plenty. Give it elbow, Will. They are not for fine fingering or for cunning strokes and effects – they like the tune to come out full and sweet. They will be thy masters. As for dancing, they like the time to be marked as well as the tune. Find out how they like to take it. There is one time for a hornpipe and another for a jig. As for pay –'

I will not complete the sentence. For such as myself there must be a Day of Small Things. But one need not confess how very small these things have been.

Thus it was that I found an Asylum – a City of Refuge – in the Rules of the King's Bench, when I was turned out by my own people. And in this way I became that despised and contemptible object, a Common Fiddler. I played, not without glory, every night, to a company as low as could be found. At least, I thought so at the time. Later on, it is true, I found a lower company still. And I dare say there are assemblies of men and women even lower. My fellows, at least, were honest, and their companions were, at least, what the men had made them.

We settled the business that very afternoon, walking over to Bermondsey. The landlord said I was very young, but if I could fiddle he did not mind that, only it must be remembered in the pay. So I was engaged to begin the next day. In the evening I went with Tom to the Dog and Duck where he played first fiddle in the Orchestra, and sat in the musicians' gallery. About this place more anon. At twelve o'clock the music ceased and I walked home with Tom. I remember, it was then a fine clear night in September: the wind blew chill across the marshes: it had come up with the flow of the river: the moon was riding high: a strange elation possessed my soul: for my independence was beginning: four guineas in my pocket: and a place with so many shillings a week to live upon: nothing to do but to work at music: and to live with the best-hearted man in the whole world.

We got home. Alice had gone to bed. Tom's wife was sitting up for us, the bowl of punch was ready for us, not too big a bowl, because Tom's weakness where punch was concerned was well known. He drank my success in one glass: my future operas and oratorios in the second: my joyful independence in the third: and my happy release in the fourth. That finished the bowl and we went to bed.

CHAPTER IV

LOVE AND MUSIC

You need not be told how I lived for the next three or four years. I took what came. Pride remained in pocket. I fiddled a wedding-party to church and home again. I fiddled the Company of Fellowship Porters through the streets when they held their yearly feast. I fiddled for sailors; I fiddled at beanfeasts; I fiddled for Free Masons; I fiddled in taverns; I fiddled here and there and everywhere, quite unconcerned, even though I was playing in the gallery of a City company's hall, and actually saw my cousin sitting in state among the guests at the feast below, and knew that he saw me and rejoiced at the sight, in his ignorance of the consolations of music.

Nothing in those days came amiss to me. One who makes music for his livelihood has no cause to be ashamed of playing for anyone. It does not seem an occupation such as one would choose, to spend the evening in a chair, stuck in a corner out of the way, in a stinking room, for rough fellows to dance hornpipes: the work does not lift up the soul to the level which Tom Shirley claimed for the musician. But this was only the pot-boiling work. I had the mornings to myself, when I could practise and attempt composition. Besides, at eighteen, the present, if one belongs to a calling which has a career, is of very little importance: the real life lies before: the boy lives for the future. I was going, in those days, to be a great composer like Handel. I was going to write oratorios such as his: majestic, where majesty was wanted: tender, where love and pity must be depicted: devout, where piety was called for. I would write, besides, in my ambition, such things as were written by Purcell and Arne: anthems for the church: songs and madrigals and rounds and catches such as those with which my patron Tom Shirley delighted his world.

The profession of music is one which can only be followed by those who have the gift of music. That is the definition of any Art: it can only be followed by those who have the gift of that Art. In any other calling a man may serve after a fashion, who hath not been called thereto. Many men, for example, are divines who have neither learning nor eloquence nor – the Lord help them! – religion. Many lawyers have no love for the law. Many merchants hate the counting-house. But in music no one can serve at all unless he is a musician born. He who, without the gift, would try to enter the profession breaks down at the outset, seeing that he cannot even learn to play an instrument with feeling, ease, or judgment. Nay, there are distinct ranks of music, to each of which one is raised by Nature, as much as by study. Thus, you have at the bottom, the rank and file, namely, those who can play a single instrument: next, those who can compose and make simple music for songs, in which all that is wanted is a tuneful and spirited air with an ordinary accompaniment: next those who understand harmony and can make music of a higher character, such as anthems, part-songs, and so forth. Lastly, you have the composer in whose brains lies the knowledge of every instrument in the orchestra. He is the King of musicians: from him come the noble oratorios which delight our age and lift our souls to Heaven: from him come the masses which are sung – I have the scores of several – in Cathedrals of Roman Catholic countries. It is not for an Englishman to admire aught that belongs to Rome: but we must at least concede to the Roman Catholic the possession of noble music.

This, then, was my ambition. For four years I continued to live with my friend Tom Shirley. I held no communication with my father or any of my own people. None of them made any attempt at reconciliation. I believe they were honestly ashamed of me. The new friends I made were good and faithful: musical people have ever kindly hearts, and are loyal to each other: they do not backbite: there is no room for envy where one man plays the fiddle and another the cornet: we are all a company of brothers.

The time came when it was no longer necessary for me to play at taverns for the sailors: when I was no longer compelled to attend weddings. I obtained, one after the other, two posts, neither of which was a very great thing, but both together made it possible for me to live in some comfort.

The first was that of organist at St. George's in the Borough. I had to attend the service and to play the organ twice on Sunday: the week day services and the Gift Lectures were conducted without any singing. The Church contains, I believe, the most fashionable congregation of South London, and therefore the most critical. I do not think, however, that, while I sat in the organ-loft, they had any reason to complain either of music or of choir. There sat with me in the organ-loft, Alice, who possessed a sweet, clear, and strong voice: her brother Tom, who brought into the choir an excellent tenor: Mr. Ramage, one of my father's clerks, who lodged behind the Marshal-sea, gave us a bass of indifferent quality, though he was now past fifty. Half a dozen boys and girls from the Charity School, of no great account for voices, made up our choir. I believe it was better than the average, and I think that people came on Sunday morning on purpose to hear the organ and the singing.

Mr. Ramage, or Ramage, as he was called in the Counting-house, where no title is allowed to any below the rank of partner or partner's son, kept me acquainted with events in College Street and on the wharf. My father, it was understood, never mentioned my name: the business of the Firm was never more flourishing: Mr. Matthew was constantly called in for consultations. 'And oh! Master Will,' my old friend always concluded, 'be reconciled. What is it – to give up playing the organ at Church? Why – it is nothing. Someone else will play while you sit in state in your red velvet pew below. Give way to your father. He is a hard man, but he is just.'

It also appeared from Mr. Ramage's information that it was perfectly well known by the clerks and by Mr. Matthew, who doubtless told my father, the ways by which I had been making a living: I had been seen by one marching ahead of a sailor's wedding-party: by another fiddling in the Bermondsey Tavern: by a third in the Gallery of a City Company Hall. The Counting-house down to the messengers was humiliated: there was but one feeling among the clerks: I had brought disgrace upon the House.

'They are sorry, Master Will, for your father's sake. It is hard for him: so proud a man – with so much to be proud of – a quarter of a million, some say. Think how hard it is for him.'

'It is harder for me Ramage,' I replied, 'to be driven to fiddle for sailors, when all I ask is to be allowed to follow music in peace. However, tell the clerks that I am sorry to have disgraced them.'

Disgraced the clerks! What did I say? Why, theirs is the lowest kind of work that the world can find for men. They were disgraced because their Master's son played the fiddle for a living. But I could not afford to consider their opinions.

Ramage knew nothing about my other place, or his entreaties would have been more fervent. I had but one answer, however. I could not give up the only work that I cared for, even to be reconciled to my father. Why, I was born for music. Shall a man fly in the face of Providence, and scorn the gifts with which he is endowed?

My other place was none other than second fiddle, Tom Shirley being the first fiddle, of the *Dog and Duck*.

I have mentioned the Pleasure Gardens south of the River. There are, as Londoners know very well, a great many such gardens, all alike in most respects. That is to say, there is in every one of them an avenue or walk, lined by trees which at night are festooned by thousands of lights in coloured glass lamps hanging from tree to tree. There is also in most a piece of water with swans or ducks upon it, and all round it arbours where the company take tea or punch or wine. There is a tavern where drink may be had: suppers are served in the evening: there is a floor for dancing in the open air with a place for the band; and there is a Long Room with an organ at one end where the company promenade and listen, and where on hot nights the band and the singers perform. In many gardens there is also a bowling-green: there is sometimes a swimming bath, and in most there is a chalybeate spring the water of which is warranted to cure anything, but especially rheumatism, gout, and the King's evil.

Every one of these gardens employs an orchestra, and engages the services of singers. The number of musicians employed is therefore considerable. There are certainly in the south of London alone more than a dozen Gardens large enough to have a band. Beside the *Dog and Duck*, there are

the *Temple of Flora*: the Lambeth Wells: the Cumberland Gardens: Vauxhall Gardens: Bermondsey Spa: St. Helena Gardens: Finch's Grotto: Cupid's Gardens: Restoration Spring Gardens – is not that twelve? And there are more. So that it is not difficult for a young man who can play any instrument tolerably to get a place in the orchestra of some Garden.

One would not choose such a position if Fortune gave one a choice. At the Dog and Duck there are visitors to whose pleasure we should be ashamed of ministering: people whose proper place is the House of Correction or Bridewell: they are allowed to attend these gardens with friends who should also be denied entrance: they make the company noisy and disorderly. We gave them music that was a great deal better than they deserved: it was thrown away upon the majority: we gave them songs that were innocent and tender – Tom Shirley wrote and composed them himself: we also had to give them other songs more suited to their gross and grovelling tastes.

It was part of Tom's humour to speak of the audience at the Dog and Duck as the most polite, fashionable, and aristocratic assembly in the world. He declared that their taste in music was excellent: their attention that of a connoisseur: and their appreciation of his own songs all that he could desire. I asked him once how he reconciled these things with their delight in the comic songs which were also provided for them. 'The aristocracy,' he said, 'must from time to time, unbend: they must from time to time, laugh: they laugh and they unbend when we give them a song to which in their more polite moments they would refuse to listen.' I knew very well that the company was chiefly composed of deboshed profligates: prentices who daily robbed their masters in order to come to the gardens: young gentlemen from the country; prodigal sons from the Temple and Lincoln's Inn; and tradesmen who were dissipating their capital. If good music was played they talked and laughed: at the singing of good songs they walked about or left the open platform for the dark lanes of the garden. 'You are lucky, Will,' said Tom. 'To play for such an audience brings good luck, with name and fame and riches.'

It brought me fifteen shillings a week. And as for name and fame I never heard of either.

I did not propose to write my own history, but that of a woman to whom you have already seen me conversing. Yet my own history must be understood before hers can be related. You have been told how for my obstinate adherence to music I was turned out of my father's house: how I found a refuge: how I earned my livelihood by playing the fiddle. Now, before I come to the events which connected my fortunes with those of the lady whom I call my mistress – and that with my wife's consent – I must tell one or two events which befell me. The first of them was my courtship and my marriage. In the courtship there was no obstacle: the course of true love ran smoothly: in my marriage there were no regrets: no discords: always a full deep current of affection on both sides. A simple, plain story, in which nothing happened, so far: would to Heaven that nothing had happened, afterwards.

When a young man and girl live under the same roof: when they share the same interests: when they have the same affections – Alice herself could not love her brother more than I did: when the home is happy in spite of poverty and its restrictions: when the hearts of the two go out to each other spontaneously, then the time must come when they will resolve upon becoming brother and sister or declared and open lovers.

When I think of this time, this truly happy time, I sometimes feel as if we were too hurried over it. I sat beside Alice every morning at breakfast and at dinner: I played to her: I composed songs for her: I even wrote verses for the music – I have some of them still, and really, though I do not pretend to be a poet, there are things in them which I admire. Poets always speak of the warblers in the grove: so did I. Love, which rhymes to grove, always burns and flames – did so in my verses. As to the rhymes, I abolished the first and third, which was a great relief. Without the necessity of rhyming one could easily become a poet.

I say that the situation being so pleasant and so happy, I might have prolonged it: but there comes a time when a man must take the last step. The uncertainty is sweet. Can she love me? Will she perhaps say nay? Yet the pleasing pain, the charming smart, the raptured flames – I quote from my

own verses which were really like many that I have seen used in songs – become in time too much: one must perforce go on to secure the happiness beyond.

In the morning, when the weather was fine, we would walk abroad among the fields and gardens that lie stretched out behind the river bank: some of them are pretty gardens, each with its hedge and bushes filled with flowers in the summer: garden houses stand about here and there: windmills vary the landscape: the lanes are shaded by trees: at the end of one is a great stone barn, formerly part of King Richard's Palace, of which not another stone is left. Beside the river are Lambeth Palace and Lambeth Church with a few fishermen's cottages. Over this rural place we strayed at our will, now among the lanes; picking wild flowers; recalling scraps of songs; listening to the skylark, while the fresh breeze coming up the river with the tide fanned Alice's cheek and heightened the soft colour which was one of her charms. Sometimes we left the fields and walked along the high Embankment watching the laden barges slowly going up or down and the sailing tilt-boats bound for Richmond: or the fishermen in mid-stream with their nets: or the wherries plying with their fares and the swans: admiring, in a word, the life and animation of the river at Westminster and above it. Chiefly, however, Alice loved the fields, where in the morning we were always alone save for a gardener here and there at work. Since the life that she saw around her was such as she saw – made up of debtors' prisons, noisy duck-hunters, prize-fighters and drunken profligates, what wonder if she loved to linger where she was apart from the vileness of men and women? To meditate: to muse: to sing all alone, for my companionship counted nothing: was her greatest joy. So it has continued: even now she loves to wander alone beneath the trees – they are other trees under another sky – and lift up her voice to Heaven, which answers by giving her thoughts, always new and always holy.

It was in the middle of May, the poet's month, when we were thus roaming in the fields. Alice carried a handful of hawthorn. She sang as she went. Dear Heart! how she sang! Yet I know not what. It was Prayer: it was Praise: it was Adoration: it was Worship: I know not what she sang. The larks were dumb because they could not sing with her.

It was the time of which I have spoken – the time of uncertainty. Never had Alice looked so heavenly sweet: she carried her hat by the strings: her hair fell about her shoulders – fair, soft hair, like silk, with a touch of gold in it: her eyes gazed upwards when the light clouds flew across the blue, as if they were things of this world trying to turn her eyes and thoughts away from the things of Heaven. I could endure the doubt no longer. I laid my arm about her waist: the song was troubled: her eyes dropped. 'Oh!' she said. 'What wilt thou?' I drew her closer. The song broke off. I kissed her head, her brow, her lips. We said nothing. She sang no more. But the larks began their hymns of joy: the clouds passed: the sun came out in splendour: the hedges seemed all to burst together into blossom.

Thus it was – so easily – so sweetly – did we pass into the condition of lovers. Yet we had been lovers all the time.

CHAPTER V

WEDDING BELLS AND THE BOOK OF THE PLAY

We were married without delay. Why should we wait? I should be no richer for waiting and time would be passing. We were married, therefore. It was impossible from time to time we should not be reminded of the lowly station in which we lived. When one of my cousins was married, what preparations! what feasts arranged and provided! What troops of guests! What a noble company in the Church! What crowds afterwards – the street filled with beggars come for the broken victuals: the butchers with their din unmusical of marrow-bones and cleavers: the band of music playing outside: the acclamation of the crowd when the bride was brought back from church: the rooms full of guests all with wedding favours: the loving-cup passing from hand to hand: the kissing of the bridesmaids: the merriment and coquetry over the bride-cake and the wedding-ring! All this I remembered and it made me sad for a moment. Not for long, for beside me stood a bride sweeter far than was any cousin of mine: and I was a musician; and I was independent.

We walked over the Fields to St. George's Church and were there married at ten o'clock in the morning. Tom gave away his sister: Alice had no bridesmaids: I had no groomsmen: there was no crowd of witnesses: there was no loving-cup. We were married in an empty church, and after marriage we walked home again to Tom's cottage.

He sat down and played a wedding march, of his own composition, made for the occasion. 'There!' he said, 'that is better than a wedding feast – yet there shall be a wedding feast and of the best.'

It was served at noon: there was a duck pie: a pair of soles: a cowslip tart – a very dainty dish: and fried sweetbreads. After dinner there was a bottle of port.

'Will,' said my brother-in-law, taking the last glass in the bottle, 'who would be one of those unhappy creatures who cannot be married without crowds and noise and a great company? Here are we, contented with ourselves: we have been married: we have had a royal banquet – your sweetbreads, wife, were a morsel for a king. You are contented, Will?'

'Quite.' For I was holding Alice by the hand.

'You never regret the flesh-pots?'

'Never – I have forgotten them.' This was not quite true, but it passed.

'I have sometimes thought' – he looked from me to Alice and from Alice to me again – 'that there might have been regrets.'

'There can be none, now.'

'Good. Hands upon it, brother. We shall miss Alice, shall we not, wife? But she will not be far off. So.' A tear stood in his eye while he kissed his sister. 'Now,' he said, 'enough of sentiment. The day is before us. I have got a man to take my place to-night and another to take yours. On such an occasion, Will, we must not spare and grudge. We will see the sights of London and then – then – none of your Pleasure Gardens – we will – but I have a surprise for you.'

We sallied forth. Never was a wedding-day kept in so strange a fashion. We took oars at the Falcon Stairs to the Tower. Now Alice had spent all her life in or about the Rules of the King's Bench, but she had never seen London City or the Sights of London. To her everything was new. We showed her the Tower and the wild beasts and the arms and armour and the Royal Crown and Sceptre. After the Tower, we walked along Thames Street where are the Custom House and Billingsgate Market and the Steelyard and the Monument. We climbed up the Monument for the sake of the view: it was a clear day, and we could discern in the distance Lambeth Palace and the Church and perhaps even, one was not sure, the cottage which we had taken on the Bank. After this we went to see the Guildhall and the famous Giants: then the Bank of England and the Royal Exchange: we looked at the shops in Cheapside: they are the richest shops in the world, but the mercers and haberdashers do not put out in the window their costly stuffs to tempt the shoplifter. 'You must imagine, Alice,' I told

her, 'the treasures that lie within: some time if we ever become rich you shall come here and buy to your heart's content.' Then we entered St. Paul's, that solemn and magnificent pile: here we heard part of the afternoon service, the boys in their white surplices singing like angels, so that the tears rolled down my girl's face – they were tears of praise and prayer, not of repentance. From St. Paul's we walked up the narrow street called the Old Bailey and saw the outside of Newgate. Now had we known what things we were to do and to suffer in that awful place, I think we should have prayed for death. But Heaven mercifully withholds the future.

It was then about five o'clock. We went to a coffee-house and took some coffee and ratafia. The animation of the place; the brisk conversation; the running about of the boys: the fragrant odour of the coffee: pleased us. There were coffee-houses in the High Street, but they lacked the vivacity of this on Ludgate Hill, where Templars, Doctors of Divinity, and the mercers and goldsmiths of Ludgate Hill and Fleet Street were assembled together to talk and drink the fragrant beverage which has done so much to soften the manners of the better sort.

'And now,' said Tom, 'for my surprise.'

He called a coach and we drove not knowing whither; he was taking us to Drury Lane.

We were to celebrate our wedding-day by going to the Play.

For my own part I had never – for reasons which you will understand – been allowed to go to the Play. To sober-minded merchants the Play was a thing abhorrent: a hot-bed of temptation: the amusements of Prodigals and Profligates. Therefore I had never seen the Play. Nor had Alice or her sister-in-law, while Tom, who had once played in the orchestra, had never seen the Play since his debts carried him off to the King's Bench.

We found good places in the Boxes: the House was not yet half full and the candles were not all lighted: many of the seats were occupied by footmen waiting for their mistresses to take them: in the Pit the gentlemen, who seemed to know each other, were standing about in little knots conversing with the utmost gravity. One would have thought that affairs of state were being discussed: on the contrary, we were assured, they were arguing as to the merits or the blemishes of the piece, now in its third night.

Presently the musicians came in and the cheerful sound of tuning up began: then the House began to fill up rapidly; and the orange girls made their way about the Pit with their baskets, and walked about the back of the boxes calling out their 'fine Chaney orange – fine Chaney orange.' Why do I note these familiar things? Because they were not familiar to me: because they are always connected in my mind with what followed.

The play was 'The Country Girl.' The story is about an innocent Country Girl, an heiress, who knows nothing of London, or of the world. Her guardian wants to marry her himself for the sake of her money, though he is fifty and she is twenty: as he cannot do so without certain papers being drawn up, he makes her believe that they are married by breaking a sixpence, and brings her to London with him. How she deceives him, pretends this and that, makes appointments and writes love-letters under his very nose, wrings his consent to a subterfuge and marries the man she loves – these things compose the whole play.

The first Act, I confess, touched me little. The young fellow, the lover, talks about the girl he loves: her guardian is introduced: there is no action: and there were no women. I felt no interest in the talk of the men: there was an old rake and a young rake; the soured and gloomy guardian, and the lover. They did not belong to my world, either of the City or of St. George's Fields.

But in the second Act the Country Girl herself appeared and with her as a foil and for companion the town woman. Now the Country Girl, Peggy by name, instantly, on her very first appearance, ravished all hearts. For she was so lovely, with her light hair hardly dressed at all, hanging in curls over her neck and shoulders, her bright eyes, her quick movements, that no one could resist her. She brought with her on the stage the air of the country; one seemed to breathe the perfumes of roses and jessamine. And she was so curious and so ignorant and so innocent. She had been taken, the evening

before, to the Play: she found the actors 'the goodliest, properest men': she liked them 'hugeously': she wants to go out and see the streets and the people. Her curmudgeon of a guardian comes in and treats her with the barbarity of a natural bad temper irritated by jealousy. There was a charming scene in which the Country Girl is dressed as a boy so that she may walk in the Park without being recognised by her lover – but she is recognised and is kissed by the very man whom her guardian dreads. There is another in which she is made to write a letter forbidding her lover ever to see her again: this is dictated by the guardian: when he goes to fetch sealing-wax she writes another exactly the opposite and substitutes it. Now all this was done with so much apparent artlessness and so much real feminine cunning that the play was charming whenever the Country Girl was on the stage.

It was over too soon.

'Oh!' cried Alice. 'She is an angel, sure. How fortunate was the exchange of letters! And how lucky that he was made, without knowing it, to grant his consent. I hope that her lover will treat her well. She will be a fond wife, Will, do you not think?'

And so she went on as if the play was real and the Country Girl came really from the country and the thing really happened. The name of the actress, I saw on the Play Bill, was Miss Jenny Wilmot. I am not surprised looking back on that evening. The wit and sparkle of her words seemed, by the way she spoke them, invented by herself on the spot. She held the House in a spell: when she left the stage the place became instantly dull and stupid: when she returned the stage became once more bright.

We went back by water: it was a fine evening: a thousand stars were gleaming in the sky and in the water: we were all silent, as happens when people have passed a day of emotions. At my brother-in-law's cottage we made a supper out of the remains of the dinner, and after supper Alice and I went away to the house we had taken at Lambeth, beside the church. And so our wedded life began.

There was another incident connected with my wedding which turned out to be the innocent cause of a great deal that happened afterwards.

Among my former friends in the City was a certain Mr. David Camlet who had a shop in Bucklersbury for the sale of musical instruments. He allowed me the run of the place and to try different instruments; it was he who first taught me to play the harpsicord and suffered me to practise in his back parlour overlooking the little churchyard of St. Pancras. The good old man would also converse with me – say, rather, instruct me in the history of composers and their works. Of the latter he had a fine collection. In brief he was a musician born and, as we say, to the finger tips; a bachelor who wanted no wife or mistress; one who lived a simple happy life among his instruments and with his music. Whether he was rich or not, I do not know.

He knew the difficulties which surrounded me: I used to tell him all: my father's prejudice against music: my own dislike of figures and accounts: my refuge in the highest garret when I wished to practice – only at such times when my father was out of the house: my beloved teacher in the King's Bench Rules: he encouraged me and warned me: he took the most kindly interest in my position, counselling always obedience and submission even if by so doing I was forbidden to practise at all for a time: offering his own parlour as a place of retreat where I could without fear of discovery practise as much as I pleased.

When I was turned out of the house, I made haste to inform him what had happened. He lifted up his hands in consternation. 'What?' he cried. 'You, the only son of Sir Peter Halliday, Knight, Alderman, ex-Lord Mayor, the greatest merchant in the City: the heir to a plum – what do I say? Three or four plums at the least: the future partner of so great a business: the future owner of a fleet, and the finest and best appointed fleet on the seas – and you throw all this away –'

'But,' I said, 'I will be nothing but a musician.'

'Thou shalt be a musician, lad. Wait – thou shalt have music for a hobby. It is good and useful to be a patron of music: to encourage musicians.'

'But I would be a musician by profession.'

'It is a poor profession, Will. Believe me, it is a beggarly profession. If you think of making money by it – give up that hope.'

That day I had ringing in my ears certain glowing words of Tom Shirley upon the profession and I laughed.

'What do I care about poverty, if I can only be a musician? Mr. Camlet, you have been so kind to me always, do not dissuade me. I have chosen my path,' I added with the grandeur that belongs to ignorance, 'and I abide by my lot.'

He sighed. 'Nay, lad, I will not dissuade thee. Poverty is easy to face, when one is young: it is hard to bear when one is old.'

'Then we shall be friends still, and I may come to see you sometimes when I am a great composer.'

He took my hand. 'Will,' he said, with humid eyes, 'Music is a capricious goddess. It is not her most pious votary whom she most often rewards. Be a musician if she permits. If not, be a player only. Many are called but few are chosen. Of great composers, there are but one or two in a generation. 'Tis an eager heart, and an eager face. The Lord be good to thee, Will Halliday!'

From time to time I visited this kind old man, telling him all that I did and hiding nothing. At the thought of my playing at the riverside tavern for the sailors to dance he laughed till the tears ran down his cheeks. 'Why,' he said, 'it was but yesterday that I looked in at Change, because it does one good sometimes to gaze upon those who, like the pillars of St. Paul's bear up and sustain this great edifice of London. Among the merchants, Will, I saw thy respected father. Truly there was so much dignity upon his brow: so much authority in his walk: so much mastery in his voice: so much consideration in his reception: that I marvelled how a stripling like thyself should dare to rebel. And to think that his son plays the fiddle in a sanded tavern for ragged Jack tars to dance with their Polls and Molls. I cannot choose but laugh. Pray Heaven, he never learn!'

But he did learn. My good cousin kept himself informed of my doings somehow, and was careful to let my father know.

'Sir Peter looks well,' Mr. Camlet went on. 'He is perhaps stouter than is good for him: his cheeks are red, but that is common: and his neck is swollen more than I should like my own to be. Yet he walks sturdily and will wear yet, no doubt many a long year. London is a healthy place.'

Presently I was able to tell him that I was about to be married, being in a position which seemed to promise a sufficiency. He wished me hearty congratulations, and begged to know the happy day and the place of our abode.

On the morning after our wedding, before we had had time to look around us in our three-roomed cottage – it was designed for one of the Thames fisherman: hardly had I found time to talk over the disposition of the furniture, I perceived, from the casement window, marching valiantly down the lane from St. George's Fields, my old friend Mr. David Camlet. The day was warm and he carried his wig and hat in one hand, mopping his head with a handkerchief.

'He comes to visit us, my dear,' I said. 'It is Mr. Camlet. What is he bringing with him?'

For beside him a man dragged a hand-cart in which lay something large and square, covered with matting.

'He is the maker of musical instruments,' I explained. 'Alice, what if – in the cart –'

'Oh, Will – if it were –'

Know that my great desire was to possess a harpsichord, which for purposes of composition is almost a necessity. But such an instrument was altogether beyond my hopes. I might as well have yearned for an organ.

He stopped where the houses began and looked about him. He made straight for our door which was open and knocked gently with his knuckles.

Alice went out to meet him. By this time he had put on his wig and stood with his hat under his arm.

'The newly married lady of my young friend, Master Will Halliday?' he asked. 'I knew it. In such a matter I am never wrong. Virtue, Madam, sits on thy brow, Love upon thy lips. Permit an old man – yet a friend of thy worthy husband' – so saying he kissed her with great ceremony. Then at length, the room being rather dark after the bright sunshine, he perceived me, and shaking hands wished me every kind of happiness.

'I am old,' he said, 'and it is too late for me to become acquainted with Love. Yet I am assured that if two people truly love one another, to the bearing of each other's burdens: to working for each other: then may life be stripped of half its terrors. I say nothing of the blessing of children, the support and prop of old age. My children, love each other always,' Alice took my hand. 'For better for worse; in poverty and in riches: love each other always.'

I drew my girl closer and kissed her. The old man coughed huskily. 'Twas a tender heart, even at seventy.

Alice gave him a chair: she also brought out the wedding cake (which she made herself – a better cake was never made) and she opened the bottle of cherry brandy we had laid in for occasions. He took a glass of the cordial to the health of the bride, and ate a piece of bride cake to our good luck.

'This fellow ought to be fortunate,' he said, nodding at me. 'He has given up all for the sake of music. He ought to be rewarded. He might have been the richest merchant on Change. But he preferred to be a musician, and to begin at the lowest part of the ladder. It is wonderful devotion.'

'Sir, I have never regretted my decision.'

'That is still more wonderful. No – no – I am wrong' – he laughed – 'quite wrong. If you were to regret it, now, you would be the most thankless dog in the world. Aha! The recompense begins – in full measure – overflowing – with such a bride.'

'Oh! Sir,' murmured Alice blushing.

He took a second glass of cherry brandy and began a speech of some length of which I only remember the conclusion.

'Wherefore, my friends, since life is short, resolve to enjoy all that it has to give – together: and to suffer all that it has to inflict – together. There is much to enjoy that is lawful and innocent. The Lord is mindful of His own – Love is lawful, and innocent: there is abiding comfort in love: trust in each other raises the soul of him who trusts and of him who is trusted: sweet music is lawful and innocent: if there is ever any doubt: if there is any trouble: if any fail in love: if the world becomes like a threatening sea: you shall find in music new strength and comfort. But why do I speak of the solace of music to Will Halliday and the sister of Tom Shirley? Therefore, I say no more.'

He stopped and rose. Alice poured out another glass of cherry brandy for him.

'I nearly forgot what I came for. Such is the effect of contemplating happiness. Will, I have thought for a long time that you wanted a harpsichord.'

'Sir, it has been ever beyond my dreams.'

'Then I am glad – because I can now supply that want. I have brought with me, dear lad – and dear blooming bride, as good an instrument as I have in my shop: no better in all the world.' He went out and called his man. We lifted the instrument – it was most beautiful not only in touch but also with its rosewood case. We set it up and I tried it.

'Oh!' Alice caught his hand and kissed it. 'Now Will is happy indeed. How can we thank you sufficiently?'

'Play upon it,' he said. 'Play daily upon it: play the finest music only upon it. So shall your souls be raised – even to the gates of Heaven.'

Once more he drew my wife towards him and kissed her on the forehead. Then he seized my hand and shook it and before I had time or could find words to speak or to thank him, he was gone, marching down the hot lane with the firm step of thirty, instead of seventy.

A noble gift, dictated by the most friendly feeling. Yet it led to the first misfortune of my life – one that might well have proved a misfortune impossible to be overcome.

Then began our wedded life. For two years we continued to live in that little cottage. There our first child was born, a lovely boy. Every evening I repaired to the Dog and Duck, and took my place in the orchestra. Familiarity makes one callous: I had long since ceased to regard the character of the company. They might be, as Tom pretended, the most aristocratic assembly in the world: they might be the reverse. The coloured lamps in the garden pleased me no more: nor did the sight of those who danced or the pulling of corks and the singing of songs after supper in the bowers: the ladies were no longer beautiful in my eyes: I enquired not about the entertainment except for my own part: I never looked at the fireworks. All these things to one who has to attend night after night becomes part of the work and not of the entertainment and amusement of life.

The musician is a being apart. He takes no part in the conduct of State or City: he is not a philosopher: or a theologian: he is not a preacher or teacher: he writes nothing either for instruction or for amusement: in the pleasures of mankind he assists but having no share or part in them. His place is in the gallery: they cannot do without him: he cannot live without them: but he is a creature apart.

My mornings were my own. Sometimes I walked with Alice on the terrace of Lambeth Palace: or went down into the Marsh and walked about the meadows: we made no friends except among the humble fishermen to whose wives Alice taught cleanliness. Sometimes, after the child came, I would leave Alice for the morning and walk into the City. Perhaps I had a hope that I might meet my father. I never did, however. I looked for him on Change: I walked in Great College Street: but I never met him. I knew beforehand that my reception would be of the coldest – but I wanted to see him and to speak with him. I went down to Billingsgate Stairs and took boat and was rowed about the ships in the Pool. There I recognised our own ships: they might have been my own, but would never be mine, now. All these things I had thrown away – ships, wharf, trade, fortune. It made me proud to think so. Yet I would have spoken to my father had I met him.

Once I met Matthew in the street and passed him touching shoulders. He looked me full in the face with the pretence of not knowing me. I commanded my temper and let him go without expostulation which would have led to a second fight, for which I had no desire.

On two other occasions I saw him though he did not see me. The first was on a certain afternoon in October when it grows dark about five. I was strolling down Garlickhithe near Queenhithe. As I passed the Church of St. James's which stands a little back with steps I saw two figures conversing: one was a man whom I knew at once for my cousin by his shoulders and by the shape of his head. The other was a woman with a veil over her face. I knew the man next by his voice. Our Matthew had such a voice – oily and yet harsh. 'If you loved me,' he said, 'you would do this simple thing.'

'I will never do it,' she declared, passionately. 'You have deceived me.'

I would not be an eavesdropper, and I passed on. Matthew, therefore, had 'deceived' – the word may mean many things – a woman. Matthew, of all men! However, it was no concern of mine.

A third time I saw him – or heard him, because I did not see him. It was in one of those taverns where small square pews are provided with high walls so that one cannot be heard. I sat in one with Tom Shirley, taking a pint of wine. All round were the voices of people carrying on business in whispers and in murmurs. Suddenly I distinguished the voice of Matthew.

'The security is good,' he said. 'There is no finer security in the City. I want the money.'

'You can have some to-morrow night.' I was destined to hear a great deal more of that grating voice. 'And the rest next week, if I can get the papers signed. It is a confidential business, I suppose.'

'Nothing is to be said. Our House does not like to borrow money, but the occasion is pressing.'

'Let us go,' I said to Tom. 'We shall learn presently all Matthew's secrets.'

'Matthew? Your cousin Matthew?'

'He is in one of the boxes. I have heard his voice. Come, Tom.'

CHAPTER VI

A CITY FUNERAL

Thus we lived – humble folk if you please – far from the world of wealth or of fashion.

This happiness was too great to last. We were to be stricken down, yet not unto death.

The troubles began with the death of my father.

One morning, when he ought to have been at his desk, my old friend Ramage came to see me.

'Master Will,' he said, the tears running down his cheeks, 'Master Will – 'tis now too late. You will never be reconciled now.'

'What has happened?' I asked. But his troubled face told me.

'My master fell down in a fit last night, coming home from the Company's feast. They carried him home and put him to bed. But in the night he died.'

In such a case as mine one always hopes vaguely for reconciliation, so long as there is life: without taking any steps, one thinks that a reconciliation will come of its own accord. I now believe that if I had gone to my father and put the case plainly: my manifest vocation: my incapacity for business; if I had asked his permission to continue in the musical profession: if I had, further, humbled myself so far as to admit that I deserved at his hands nothing less than to be cut off without a shilling: he might have given way. It is a terrible thing to know that your father has died with bitterness in his heart against his only son. Or, I might have sent Alice, with the child. Surely the sight of that sweet girl, the sight of the helpless child, would have moved him. I reproached myself, in a word, when it was too late.

'Sir,' said the clerk, 'I do not believe that Mr. Matthew, or his father, will send you word of this event, or of the funeral.'

'They do not know where I live.'

'Excuse me, Sir, Mr. Matthew knows where you live and everything that you have done since you left your home. Believe me, Mr. Will, you have no greater enemy than your cousin. He has constantly inflamed your father's mind against you. It was he who told my master that you were playing for sailors at a common tavern with a red blind and a sanded floor. He told him that you were playing in the orchestra at the Dog and Duck for all the 'prentices and the demireps of town: he told him that you had married – a – '

'Stop, Ramage, lest I do my cousin a mischief. How do you know all this?'

'I listen,' he replied. 'From my desk, I can hear plainly what is said in the counting-house. I listen. I can do no good. But sometimes it is well to know what goes on.'

'It may be useful – but to listen – well – Ramage, is there more to tell?'

'This. They do not intend to invite you to the funeral. Mr. Matthew will assume the place of the heir, and his father will be chief mourner.'

'Oh! Do you tell me, old friend, when it is to take place, and I will be there.'

So he promised, though it was worth his situation if he were found out to have held any intercourse with me. In the end it proved useful to have a friend in the enemy's camp. At the time, I laughed at danger. What had I to fear from Matthew's enmity?

The manner of my father's death is common among Merchants of the City of London. Their very success makes them liable to it: the City customs favour feasting and the drinking of wine: the richer sort ride in a coach when they should be walking for health: it is seldom, indeed, that one may meet a citizen of Quality walking in the fields of which there are so many and of such a wholesome air round London, whether we go East to the fields of Mile End and Bow: or North where, not to speak of Moorfields, there are the fields this side of Islington: or on the West where are the fields of Westminster and Chelsea: or South where the whole country is a verdant meadow with orchards. I say that among the crowds who flock out on a summer evening to take the air (and other refreshments) in

these fields, one may look in vain for the substantial merchant. He takes the air lolling in his coach: he feasts every day, drinking quantities of rich and strong wine such as Port or Lisbon: he stays too much indoors: the counting-house is too often but a step from the parlour.

The consequence is natural: at thirty-five the successful merchant begins to swell and to expand: his figure becomes arched or rounded: perhaps his nose grows red: at forty-five his circumference is great: his neck is swollen; his cheek is red: perhaps his nose has become what is called a Bottle. Soon after fifty, he is seized with an apoplexy. It is whispered on Change that such an one fell down stepping out of his Company's Hall, after a Feast, into the road: that he never recovered consciousness: and that he is dead. The age of fifty, I take it, is the grand Climacteric of the London Merchant.

On the day of the funeral, then, I presented myself, with Alice, properly habited, to take my place as chief Mourner. The house, within, was all hung with black cloth. The hall and the stairs were thus covered: it was evening at eight o'clock: candles placed in sconces feebly lit up the place: at the door and on the stairs stood the undertaker's men, mutes, bearing black staves with black plumes: within, the undertaker himself was busy serving out black cloaks, tying the weepers on the hats, distributing the gloves and the rosemary, and getting ready the torches.

Upstairs, the room in which my father's body lay had been prepared for the ceremony. All the furniture – bed, chairs, everything – had been taken out: there was nothing at all in the room but the coffin on trestles: the wainscotted walls had been hung with black velvet, which looked indeed funereal as it absorbed the light of fifty or sixty wax tapers and reflected none. The tapers stood in silver sconces on the walls: they showed up the coffin, the lid of which, not yet screwed down, was laid so as to expose the white face of the deceased, grave, set, serious and full of dignity. I remembered how it looked, fiery and passionate, when my father drove me from his presence. The candles also lit up the faces of the mourners: in the midst of so much blackness their faces were white and deathlike. On the breast of the dead man lay branches of rosemary: on the lid of the coffin were branches of rosemary, of which every person present carried a sprig. On the lid of the coffin was also a large and capacious silver cup with two handles.

Only one thing relieved the blackness of the walls. It was a hatchment with the family shield. Everyone would believe, so splendid is this coat of arms, that our family must rank among the noblest in the land. But the time has passed when the City Fathers were closely connected by blood with the gentry and the aristocracy of the country: of our family one could only point to the shield: where we came from, I know not: nor how we obtained so fine a shield: nor to what station of life my ancestors originally belonged. Family pride, however, is a harmless superstition: not one of us, I am sure, would surrender that coat of arms, or acknowledge that we were anything but a very ancient and honourable House.

When I entered the house, accompanied by Alice, I found the hall and the steps, and even the street itself, which is but narrow, crowded with the humbler class of mourners. There was a whisper of surprise, and more than one honest hand furtively grasped mine. Well: there would be few such hands to welcome Matthew.

I did not need to be told where the coffin lay. I led my wife up the stairs and so into my father's room, which was the best bedroom, on the first floor. I found the various members of the family already assembled, my Uncle Paul as I expected, with Matthew, usurping my place at the head of the coffin. My cousins, of whom there were five-and-twenty at least, including my Uncle Paul's wife and two daughters, showed signs of profound astonishment at the sight of the banished son. The Alderman, for his part, held up his hands in amazement, and looked up to Heaven as if to protest against this assertion of filial rights. The girls, who were as amiable as their brother Matthew, stared with more rudeness than one would expect even from a Wappineer, at Alice. They knew not, perhaps, that I had taken a wife: to a natural curiosity on such a subject they affected a contempt which they took no pains to disguise.

There was a man standing behind my cousin whom I knew not: nor did I understand by what right he stood among us at all: a tall thin figure somewhat bowed with years: a lean and wrinkled face: his appearance filled me with distrust at the outset – let no one deny that first thoughts are best thoughts. He stooped and whispered something to my cousin – whose face seemed to show trouble of some kind, but not grief. Matthew started, and looked at me with astonishment.

I stepped forward, drawing Alice with me. 'Uncle Paul,' I said, 'I take my place as my father's chief mourner.'

My cousin glared at me, as if threatening to dispute the point, but he gave way and retired to my left hand. Thus, Alice beside me, my Uncle Paul at my right, and Matthew at my left, I waited the arrival of the funeral guests.

Meantime, the ladies moaned and wailed. Outside, the women-servants on the stairs lifted up their lamentation. The crying of the women at a funeral hath in it little reality of grief: yet it penetrates to the soul of those who hear it. As each new guest arrived, the wail was raised anew: the louder in proportion to the rank of the arrival, in so much that when the Lord Mayor himself walked up the stairs the lament became a shriek.

The undertaker whispered in my ear that all were present.

I looked about me. 'Twas not in human nature to avoid a sense of honour and glory in looking upon so honourable a company. They proclaimed by their presence the respect with which they regarded my father. Here, beside our cousins, were the Lord Mayor and Aldermen, the Sheriffs, the Town Clerk, the Recorder, the Common Sergeant, the Remembrancer, the Dean of St. Paul's, the Master and Wardens of his Company and many of the greatest merchants on Change. They were there to do honour to my father's memory, and I was there to receive them, as my father's son, despite the respect in which I had failed.

It was not a time, however, for regrets.

I lifted the great cup, I say, and looked around. The wailing ceased. All eyes were turned to me as I drank from the cup – it was hypocras, a drink much loved at City feasts. Then I handed it to Alice, who drank and gave it back to me. Then to my uncle the Alderman, after whom it went round. Down below, in the hall, there was the solemn drinking of wine. We drank thus to the memory of the dead: in old times, I am assured, the mourners drank to the repose of the soul just gone out of the body. For memory or for repose, it is an old custom which one would not willingly neglect.

After the ceremony the ladies began once more their wailing and groaning. They make too much of this custom. It is not in reason that girls like my cousins Amelia and Sophia should be so torn and lacerated by grief as their wails betokened. Indeed, I saw them after the funeral talking and laughing as they went away.

We then descended the stairs and waited below while the men went up to finish their work and to shut out the face of the dead man for ever from the world.

They brought out the coffin. The housekeeper with one last wail of grief – one hopes there was some sincerity in it – locked the door of the death chamber: she locked it noisily, so that all might hear: she turned the handle loudly so that all might be sure that the door was shut: she had before put out the wax candles: out of respect for the late occupant the room would not be opened or used again for years: it would remain as it was with the black velvet hangings and the silver sconces. This is one of the privileges accorded to wealth – an empty honour, but one that is envied by those who cannot afford to spare a room. What can the dead man know or feel or care while the black velvet grows brown and shabby, and the silver sconces become yellow, and the sunbeams through the shutters slowly steal round the room, and except for the dancing of the motes in the sunlight there is no motion or sound or touch of life or light in the solitude and silence of the chamber? It is giving Death to Death – not the Life for which we pray, for which we hope and trust.

The pall was of velvet with a gold fringe and gold embroidery. I knew it for the parish pall bequeathed by some pious person for the use of parishioners. When all was ready the undertaker

marshalled the procession. First marched two conductors with staves and plumes: then followed six men in long black coats, two and two; then one bearing the Standard, with black plumes: then, eighteen men in long black cloaks as before, all being servants to the Deceased: then the Minister of the Parish: after him an officer of Arms carrying a knight's sword and target, helm and crest: with him another officer of Arms carrying the shield, both in their tabards or embroidered coats: then the Body, the pall being borne by six Merchants between men carrying the Shields of the City: of the Company: and of Bridewell, Christ's Hospital, St. Bartholomew's and St. Thomas's, of which the Deceased was a Governor. Then I followed as chief mourner with my wife: after me the Alderman my uncle and his lady. Then came Matthew. With him should have walked one of his sisters: but there stepped out of the crowd a woman in black holding a handkerchief to her face. Who she was I knew not. After them came the rest of the cousins. Then followed the Lord Mayor and the City Fathers; and, lastly, the clerks, porters, stevedores, bargemen, and others in the service of the House. In our hands we carried, as we went, lighted torches: a considerable number of people came out to see the funeral: they lined the street which by the flames of the torches was lit up as if by daylight. The faces at the windows: the crowds in the street: the length of the procession filled my soul with pride, though well I knew that I was but a castaway from the affections of the dead man whom these people honoured.

The procession had not far to go: the parish church, that of St. Michael Paternoster Royal, is but a short distance down the street: it is the church in which Whittington was buried, his tomb and his ashes being destroyed in the Great Fire a hundred years ago. The Church, like the house, was hung with black and lit by wax candles and our torches. The Rector read the service with a solemnity which, I believe, affected all hearts. After the reading of that part which belongs to the Church we carried the body to the churchyard at the back – a very small churchyard: there we lowered the coffin into the grave – I observed that the mould seemed to consist entirely of skulls and bones – and when dust was given to dust and ashes to ashes, we dashed our torches upon the ground and extinguished the flames. Then in darkness we separated and went each his own way. I observed that the lady who walked with Matthew left him when the ceremony was over. The weeping of the women ceased and the whispers of the men: everybody talked aloud and cheerfully. No more mourning for my father: pity and regret were buried in the grave with him: they became the dust and ashes which were strewed upon the coffin. He had gone hence to be no more seen: to be no more wept over. But, as you shall shortly hear, the dead man still retained in his hands the power of doing good or evil.

Matthew spoke to me as we left the Churchyard.

'Cousin,' he said, with more civility than I expected, 'if you can come to the counting-house to-morrow morning you will learn your father's testamentary dispositions. The will is to be opened and read at ten o'clock.'

CHAPTER VII

THE READING OF THE WILL

'We will make him sell his Reversionary interest' – the voice was curiously harsh and grating – 'and you will then be able to take the whole.'

You know how, sometimes, one hears things in a mysterious way which one could not hear under ordinary circumstances. I was standing in the outer counting-house in the room assigned to the accountants. In the inner counting-house, I knew, my cousin was sitting. Without being told any thing more, I guessed that the voice belonged to the tall lean man who was present at the funeral, and that he was addressing Matthew, and that he was talking about me. And, without any reason, I assumed a mental attitude of caution. They were going to make me sell something, were they?

When I was called into the room I found that I was so far right, inasmuch as the only two persons in the room were my cousin and the lean man who by his black dress I perceived to be an attorney.

Now, I daresay that there are attorneys in the City of London whose lives are as holy as that of any Bishop or Divine. At the same time it is a matter of common notoriety that the City contains a swarm of vermin – if I may speak plainly – who are versed in every kind of chicanery: who know how to catch hold of every possible objection: and who spend the whole of their creeping lives in wresting, twisting, and turning the letter of the law to their own advantage, under the pretense of advantage to their clients. These are the attorneys who suggest and encourage disputes and lawsuits between persons who would otherwise remain friends: there are those who keep cases running on for years, eating up the estates: when they fasten upon a man, it is the spider fastening on a big fat fly: they never leave him until they land him in a debtor's prison, naked and destitute. I have observed that a course of life, such as that indicated above, presently stamps the face with a look which cannot be mistaken: the eyes draw together: the mouth grows straight and hard: the lips become thin: the nose insensibly, even if it be originally a snub, becomes like the beak of a crow – the creature which devours the offal in the street: the cheeks are no longer flesh and skin, but wrinkled parchment: the aspect of the man becomes, in a word, such as that of the man who sat at the table, a bundle of papers before him.

I knew, I say, that Mr. Probus – which was his name – was an attorney at the outset. His black coat: his wig: his general aspect: left no doubt upon my mind. And from the outset I disliked and distrusted the man.

The last time I had entered this room was to make my choice between my father and my music. The memory of the dignified figure in the great chair behind the table: his voice of austerity: his expectation of immediate obedience made my eyes dim for a moment. Not for long, because one would not show any tenderness before Matthew.

With some merchants the counting-house is furnished with no more than what is wanted: in this wharf it was a substantial house of brick in which certain persons slept every night for the better security of the strong-room in the cellars below. The principal room, that which had been my father's, had two windows looking out upon the river: the room was carpeted: family portraits hung upon the walls: the furniture was solid mahogany: no one who worked in such a room could be anything but a substantial merchant.

My cousin looked up and sulkily pointed to a chair.

At this time Matthew Halliday presented the appearance of a responsible City Merchant. His dress was sober yet of the best: nobody had whiter ruffles at his wrist or at his shirt-front: nobody wore a neck-cloth of more costly lace: his gold buttons, gold buckles, and gold laced hat proclaimed him an independent person: he carried a large gold watch and a gold snuff-box: he wore a large signet-ring on his right thumb, his face was grave beyond his years: this morning it presented an appearance which in lesser men is called sulky. I knew the look well, from old experience. It meant that something had gone wrong. All my life long I had experienced at the hands of this cousin an animosity which I

can only explain by supposing a resentment against one who stood between himself and a rich man's estate. As a boy – I was four or five years younger than himself – he would take from me, and destroy, things I cherished: he invented lies and brought false accusations against me; he teased, pinched, bullied me when no one was looking. When I grew big enough I fought him. At first I got beaten: but I went on growing and presently I beat him. Then, if he attempted any more false accusations he knew that he would have to fight me again; a consideration which made him virtuous.

'Cousin,' he said coldly, 'this gentleman is Mr. Probus, the new attorney of the House. Mr. Littleton, his late attorney, is dead. Mr. Probus will henceforth conduct our affairs.'

'Unworthily,' said Mr. Probus.

'That is my concern,' Matthew replied with great dignity. 'I hope I know how to choose and to appoint my agents.'

'Sir' – Mr. Probus turned to me – 'it has ever been the business of my life to study the good of my fellow man. My motto is one taken from an ancient source – you will allow one of the learned profession to have some tincture of Latin. The words are – ahem! —*Integer vitæ scelerisque Probus*. That is to say: Probus – Probus, Attorney-at-Law; *vitæ*, lived; *integer*, respected; *scelerisque*, and trusted. Such, Sir, should your affairs ever require the nice conduct of one who is both guide and friend to his clients, you will ever find me. Now, Mr. Matthew, Sir, my honoured patron, I await your commands.'

'We are waiting, cousin,' said Matthew, 'for my father. As soon as he arrives Mr. Probus will read the Will. The contents are known to me – in general terms – such was the confidence reposed in me by my honoured uncle – in general terms. I believe you will find that any expectations you may have formed –'

'Pardon me, Sir,' interrupted the attorney. 'Not before the reading of the Will –'

'Will be frustrated. That is all I intended to say. Of course there may be a trifle. Indeed I hope there may prove to be some trifling legacy.'

'Perhaps a shilling. Ha, ha!' The attorney looked more forbidding when he became mirthful than when he was serious.

Then some of my cousins arrived and sat down. We waited a few minutes in silence, until the arrival of my uncle the Alderman with his wife and daughters.

The ladies stared at me without any kind of salutation. The Alderman shook his head.

'Nephew,' he said, 'I am sorry to see you here. I fear you will go away with a sorrowful heart –'

'I am sorrowful already, because my father was not reconciled to me. I shall not be any the more sorrowful to find that I have nothing. It is what I expect. Now, sir, you may read my father's will as soon as you please.'

In spite of my brave words I confess that, for Alice's sake, I did hope that something would be left me.

Then all took chairs and sat down with a cough of expectation. There was no more wailing from the ladies.

Mr. Probus took up from the table a parchment tied with red tape and sealed. He solemnly opened it.

'This,' he said, 'is the last will and testament of Peter Halliday, Knight, and Alderman, late Lord Mayor, Citizen and Lorimer.'

My uncle interposed. 'One moment, sir.' Then he turned to me. 'Repentance, nephew, though too late to change a parent's testamentary dispositions, may be quickened by the consequences of a parent's resentment. It may therefore be the means of leading to the forgiveness – ahem – and the remission – ahem – of more painful consequences – ahem – at the hands of Providence.'

I inclined my head. 'Now, sir, once more.'

'This will was made four years ago when the late Mr. Littleton was the deceased gentleman's attorney. It was opened three months ago in order to add a trifling codicil, which was entrusted to my care. I will now read the will.'

There is no such cumbrous and verbose document in the world as the will of a wealthy man. It was read by Mr. Probus in a harsh voice without stops in a sing-song, monotonous delivery, which composed the senses and made one feel as if all the words in the Dictionary were being read aloud.

At last he finished.

'Perhaps,' I said, 'someone will tell me in plain English what it means?'

'Plain English, Sir? Let me tell you,' Mr. Probus replied, 'that there is no plainer English in the world than that employed by lawyers.'

I turned to my uncle. 'Will you, Sir, have the goodness to explain to me?'

'I cannot recite the whole. As for the main points – Mr. Probus will correct me if I am wrong – my lamented brother leaves bequests to found an almshouse for eight poor men and eight poor widows, to bear his name; he also founds at his Parish Church an annual Lecture, to bear his name: he establishes a New Year's dole, to bear his name, of coals and bread, for twenty widows of the Parish. He has founded a school, for twelve poor boys, to bear his name. He has ordered his executors to effect the release of thirty poor prisoners for debt, in his name. Is there more, Mr. Probus?'

'He also founds a scholarship for a poor and deserving lad, to assist him at Cambridge. The same scholarship to bear his name and to be in the gift of his Company.'

'What does he say about me?'

'I am coming to that,' Mr. Probus replied. 'He devises many bequests to his nephews and nieces, his cousins and his personal friends, with mourning rings to all: there are, I believe, two hundred thus honoured: two hundred – I think, Mr. Paul, that it is a long time since the City lost one so rich and so richly provided with friends.'

'But what does he say about me?' I insisted.

'Patience. He then devises the whole of his remaining estate: all his houses, investments, shares, stocks: all his furniture and plate: to his nephew Matthew.'

'I expected it. And nothing said about me at all.'

'It is estimated that the remainder, after deducting the monies already disposed of, will not amount to more than £100,000, because there is a reservation –'

'Oh!'

'It is provided that the sum of £100,000 be set aside: that it be placed in the hands of trustees whom he names – the Master of his Company and the Clerk of the Company. This money is to accumulate at compound interest until one of two events shall happen – either the death of his son, in which case Mr. Matthew will have it all: or the death of Mr. Matthew, in which case the son is to have it all. In other words, this vast sum of money with accumulations will go to the survivor of the two.'

I received this intelligence in silence. At first I could not understand what it meant.

'I think, Sir,' Mr. Probus addressed the Alderman, 'we have now set forth the terms of this most important document in plain language. We ought perhaps to warn Mr. William against building any hopes upon the very slender chance of succeeding to this money. We have here' – he indicated Matthew – 'health, strength, an abstemious life: on the other hand we have' – he indicated me – 'what we see.'

I laughed. At all events I was a more healthy subject, to look at, than my cousin, who this morning looked yellow instead of pale.

'The span of life,' the attorney went on, 'accorded to my justly esteemed client, will probably be that usually assigned to those who honour their parents – say eighty, or even ninety. You, sir, will probably be cut off at forty. I believe that it is the common lot in your class. Above all things, do not build upon the chances of this reversion.'

Suddenly the words I had heard came back to me. What were they? 'We will make him sell his reversion.' 'Sell his reversion.' Then the reversion must not be sold.

Mr. Probus went on too long. You may destroy the effect of your words by too much repetition. 'A shadowy chance,' he said, 'a shadowy chance.'

'I don't know. Why should not my cousin die before me? Besides, it means that my father in cutting me off would leave a door for restitution.'

'Only an imaginary door, sir – not a real door.'

'A very real door. I shall live as long as I can. My cousin will do as he pleases. Mr. Probus, the "shadowy chance," as you call it, is a chance that is worth a large sum of money if I would sell my reversion.' Mr. Probus started and looked suspicious. 'But I shall not sell it. I shall wait. Matthew might die to-morrow – to-day, even –'

'Fie, Sir – oh, fie! – to desire the death of your cousin! This indeed betokens a bad heart – a bad heart. How dreadful is the passion of envy! How soul-destroying is the thirst for gold!'

I rose. I knew the worst.

'Do not,' Mr. Probus went on, 'give, I entreat you, one thought to the thing. Before your cousin's life lies stretched what I may call a charming landskip with daisies in the grass, and – and – the pretty warblers of the grove. It is a life, I see very plainly, full of goodness, which is Heavenly Wealth, stored up for future use; and of success on Change, which is worldly wealth. Happy is the City which owns the possessor of both!'

The moralist ceased and began to tie up his papers. When his strident voice dropped, the air became musical again, so to speak. However, the harsh voice suited the sham piety.

'Cousin Matthew,' I rose, since there was nothing to keep me longer. 'Could I remember, in your seven-and-twenty years of life, one single generous act or one single worthy sentiment, then I could believe this fustian about the length of days and the Heavenly Wealth. Live as long as you can. I desire never to see you again, and never to hear from you again. Go your own way, and leave me to go mine.'

The whole company rose: they parted right and left to let me pass: as the saying is, they gave me the cold shoulder with a wonderful unanimity. There was a common consent among them that the man who had become a fiddler had disgraced the family. As for Matthew, he made no reply even with looks. He did not, however, present the appearance of joy at this great accession to wealth. Something was on his mind that troubled him.

My uncle the Alderman spoke for the family.

'Nephew,' he said, 'believe me, it is with great sorrow that we see thee thus cast out: yet we cannot but believe the acts of my brother to be righteous. I rejoice not that my son has taken thine inheritance. I lament that thou hast justly been deprived. The will cuts thee off from the family.' He looked round. A murmur of approval greeted him. A disinherited son who is also a fiddler by profession cannot be said to belong to a respectable City family. 'We wish thee well – in thy lower sphere – among thy humble companions. Farewell.' I passed through them all with as much dignity as I could assume. 'Alas!' I heard him saying as I stepped out. 'Alas! that cousins should so differ from each other in grain – in grain!'

His daughters, my dear cousins, turned up their noses, coughed and flattened themselves against the wall so that I should not touch so much as a hoop – and I saw these affectionate creatures no more, until – many things had happened.

CHAPTER VIII

THE TEMPTATION

One morning, about six weeks after the funeral, I was sitting at the harpsichord, picking out an anthem of my own composition. The theme was one of thanksgiving and praise, and my heart was lifted to the level of the words. All around was peace and tranquillity: on the river bank outside Alice walked up and down carrying our child, now nearly a year and a half old: the boy crowed and laughed: the mother would have been singing, but she would not disturb me at work. Can mortal man desire greater happiness than to have the work of his own choice; the wife who is to him the only woman in the world: a strong and lovely child: and a sufficiency earned by his own work? As for my chance of ever getting that huge fortune by my cousin's death, I can safely aver that I never so much as thought of it. We never spoke of it: we put it out of our minds altogether.

I heard steps outside: steps which disturbed me: I turned my head. It was Mr. Probus the attorney. He stood hat in hand before Alice.

'Mr. William's wife I believe,' he was saying. 'And his child? A lovely boy indeed, Madam. I bring you news – nothing less in short than a fortune – a fortune – for this lovely boy.'

'Indeed, Sir? Are you a friend of my husband?'

'A better friend, I warrant, Madam, than many who call him friend.'

'He is within, Sir. Will you honour our poor cottage?' He stood in the open door.

'Mr. Will,' he said, 'I have your permission to enter?'

At sight of him the whole of the anthem vanished: harmony, melody, solo, chorus. It was as if someone was singing false: as if all were singing false. I put down my pen. 'Sir,' I said, 'I know not if there is any business of mine which can concern you.'

'Dear Sir,' he tried to make his grating voice mellifluous: he tried to smile pleasantly. 'Do not, pray, treat me as if I was an adviser of the will by which your father deprived you of your inheritance.'

'I do not say that you were. Nevertheless, I cannot understand what business you have with me.'

'I come from your cousin. You have never, I fear, regarded your cousin with kindly feelings' – this was indeed reversing the position – 'but of that we will not speak. I come at the present moment as a messenger of peace – a messenger of peace. There is Scripture in praise of the messenger of peace. I forget it at the moment: but you will know it. Your good lady will certainly know it.' Alice, who had followed him, placed a chair for him and stood beside him. 'I bear the olive-branch like the turtle-dove,' he continued, smiling. 'I bring you good tidings of peace and wealth. They should go together, wealth and peace.'

'Pray, Sir, proceed with your good tidings.'

Alice laid her hand on my shoulder. 'Husband,' she said, 'it would be no good tidings which would deprive us of the happiness which we now enjoy. Think well before you agree to anything that this gentleman, or your cousin, may offer.' So she left us, and carried the boy out again into the fresh air.

'Now, Sir, we are alone.'

He looked about him curiously. 'A pretty room,' he said, 'but small. One would take it for the cottage of a fisherman. I believe there are some of these people in the neighbourhood. The prospect either over the river or over the marsh is agreeable: the trees are pleasant in the summer. The Dog and Duck, which is, I believe, easily accessible, is a cheerful place, and the company is polite and refined, especially that of the ladies. No one, however, would think that a son of the great Sir Peter Halliday, ex-Lord Mayor and Alderman, West India Merchant, was living in this humble place.'

'Your good tidings, Sir?'

'At the same time the position has its drawbacks. You are almost within the Rules. And though not yourself a prisoner, you are in the company of prisoners.'

'Again, Sir, your good tidings?'

'I come to them. Scelerisque Probus is my motto. Probus, attorney at law, trusted by all. Now, Sir, you shall hear what your cousin proposes. Listen to me for a moment. You can hardly get on, I imagine, even in so small a way as this appears to be, under fifty pounds a year.'

'It would be difficult.'

'And in your profession, improperly hard and unjustly despised, it is difficult, I believe, to make much more.'

'It is difficult to make much more.'

'Ha! As your cousin said: "They must be pinched – this unfortunate couple – pinched at times."'

'Did my cousin say that?'

'Assuredly. He was thinking especially of your good lady, whom he remarked at the funeral. Well, your cousin will change all that. A heart of gold, Mr. William, all pure gold' – I coughed, doubtfully – 'concealed, I admit, by a reserved nature which often goes with our best and most truly pious men, especially in the City of London. I do assure you, a heart of gold.'

He played his part badly. His cunning eyes, his harsh voice, the words of praise so out of keeping with his appearance and manner – as if such a man with such a face could be in sympathy with hearts of gold – struck a note of warning. Besides, Matthew with a heart of gold?

'Well, Sir,' I interrupted him, 'what have you come to say?'

'In plain words, then, this. Mr. Matthew has discovered a way of serving you. Now, my dear Sir, I pray your attention.' He leaned back and crossed his legs. 'Your father showed a certain relenting – a disposition to consider you as still a member of the family by that provision as to survival which you doubtless remember.'

'So I interpret that clause in the will.'

'And with this view has put you in as the possible heir to the money which is now accumulating in the hands of trustees. Mr. Matthew, now a partner in the business, will, it is assumed, provide for his heirs out of the business. On his death your father's fortune will come to you if you are living. If you die first it will go to your cousin. In the latter event there will be no question of your son getting aught.'

'So I understand.'

'Your cousin, therefore, argues in this way. First, he is only a year or two older than yourself: next, he is in full possession of his health and strength. There is nothing to prevent his living to eighty: I believe a great-grandmother of his, not yours, lived to ninety-six. It is very likely that he may reach as great an age. You will allow that.'

'Perhaps.'

'Why then, we are agreed. As for you, musicians, I am told, seldom get past forty: they gradually waste away and – and wither like the blasted sprig in July. Oh! you will certainly leave this world at forty – enviable person! – would that I could have done so! – you will exchange your fiddle for a harp – the superior instrument – and your three-cornered hat for a crown – the external sign of promotion – long before your cousin has been passed the Chair.'

'All this is very likely, Mr. Probus. Yet –'

'I am coming to my proposal. What Mr. Matthew says is this. "My cousin is cut out of the will. It is not for me to dispute my uncle's decision. Still, what he wants just now is ready money – a supplement – a supplement – to what he earns."'

'Well?' For he stopped here and looked about the room with an air of contempt.

'A pleasant room,' he said, going back, 'but is it the room which your father's son should have for a lodging? Rush-bottomed chairs: no carpet ... dear me, Mr. William, it is well to be a philosopher. However, we shall change all that.'

I waited for him to go on without further interruption.

'In a word, Sir, I am the happy ambassador – privileged if ever there was one – charged to bring about reconciliation and cousinly friendship.' Again he overdid it. 'Your cousin sent me, in a word, to propose that you should sell him your chances of inheritance. That is why I am here. I say, Mr. William, that you may if you please sell him your chance of the inheritance. He proposes to offer you £3,000 down – £3,000, I say – the enormous sum of three – thousand – pounds – for your bare chance of succeeding. Well, Sir? What do you say to this amazing, this astounding piece of generosity?'

I said nothing. Only suddenly there returned to my mind the words I had overheard in the outer counting-house.

'We will make him sell his reversion.'

What connection had these words with me? There was no proof of any connection: no proof except that jumping of the wits which wants no proof.

'With £3,000,' Mr. Probus continued, 'you can take a more convenient residence of your own – here, or elsewhere: near the Dog and Duck, or further removed: you can live where you please: with the interest, which would amount to £150 a year at least, and what you make by your honest labour, you will be, for one of your profession, rich. It will be a noble inheritance for your children. Why, Sir, you are a made man!'

He threw himself back in his chair and puffed his cheeks with the satisfaction that naturally follows on the making of a man.

I was tempted: I saw before me a life of comparative ease: with £150 a year there would be little or no anxiety for the future.

Mr. Probus perceived that I was wavering. He pulled a paper out of his pocket – he slapped it on the table and unrolled it: he looked about for ink and pen.

'You agree?' he asked with an unholy joy lighting up his eyes. 'Why – there – I knew you would! I told Mr. Matthew that you would. Happy man! Three thousand pounds! And all your own! And all for nothing! Where is the ink? Because, Sir – I can be your witness – that cousin of yours, I may now tell you, is stronger than any bull – sign here, then, Sir – here – he will live for ever.'

His eagerness, which he could not conceal, to obtain my signature startled me. Again I remembered the words:

'We will make him sell his reversion.'

'Stop, Mr. Probus,' I said. 'Not so quick, if you please.'

'Not so quick! Why, dear Sir, you have acceded. You have acceded. Where is the ink?'

'Not at all.'

'If you would like better terms I might raise it another fifty pounds.'

'Not even another fifty will persuade me.' At that moment I heard Alice singing,

'The Lord my pasture shall prepare,
And lead me with a shepherd's care.'

The Lord – not Mr. Probus. I took the words for a warning.

'We shall not want any ink,' I said, 'nor any witness. Because I shall not sign.'

'Not sign? Not sign? But Mr. William – Sir – surely – have a care – such an offer is not made every day. You will never again receive such an offer.'

'Hark ye, Mr. Probus. By that clause in his will my father signified his desire, although he would punish me for giving up the City – to show that he was not implacable and that if it be Heaven's will that I should survive my cousin I should then receive his forgiveness and once more be considered as one of the family. Sir, I will not, for any offer that you may make, act against my father's wish. I am to wait, God knows I desire not the death of my cousin – I wait: it is my father's sentence upon me. I shall obey my father. He forgives me after a term of years – long or short – I know not. He forgives me by that clause. I am not cursed with my father's resentment.'

'Oh! He talks like a madman. With £3,000 waiting for him to pick up!'

'I repeat, Sir. In this matter I shall leave the event to Providence, in obedience to my father's wishes. Inform my cousin, if you please, of my resolution.'

More he said, because he was one of those tenacious and obstinate persons who will not take 'No,' for an answer. Besides, as I learned afterwards, he was most deeply concerned in the success of his mission. He passed from the stage of entreaty to that of remonstrance and finally to that of wrath.

'Sir,' he said, 'I perceive that you are one of those crack-brained and conceited persons who will not allow anyone to do them good: you throw away every chance that offers, you stand in your own light, you bring ruin upon your family.'

'Very well,' I said, 'very well indeed.'

'I waste my words upon you.'

'Why then waste more?'

'You are unworthy of the name you bear. You are only fit for the beggarly trade you follow. Well, Sir, when misery and starvation fall upon you and yours, remember what you have thrown away.'

I laughed. His cunning face became twisted with passion.

'Sir,' he said, 'all this talk is beside the mark. There are ways. Do not think that we are without ways and means.' Then he swore a great round oath. 'We shall find a way, somehow, to bring you to reason.'

'Well Mr. *Integer Vitæ scelerisque Probus*,' I said. 'If you contemplate rascality you will have to change your motto.'

He smoothed out his face instantly, and repressed the outward signs of wrath. 'Mr. Will,' he said, 'forgive this burst of honest indignation. You will do, of course, what you think fit. Sir, I wish you a return to better sense. I think I may promise you' – he paused and clapped his forefinger to his nose, 'I am sure that I can so far trespass on the forbearance of your cousin as to promise that this offer shall be kept open for three weeks. Any day within the next three weeks you shall find at my office the paper ready for your signature. After that time the chance will be gone – gone – gone for ever,' he threw the chance across the river with a theatrical gesture and walked away.

What did it mean? Why did Matthew want to buy my share? We might both live for forty years or even more. Neither could touch that money till the other's death. He might desire my early death in which case all would be his. But to buy my share – it meant that if I died first he would have paid a needless sum of money for it: and that if he died first it would not be in his power to enjoy that wealth. I asked Ramage on the Sunday why Matthew wanted it. He said that merchants sometimes desire credit and that perhaps it would strengthen Matthew if it were known that this great sum of money would be added to his estate whenever either his cousin or he himself should die. And with this explanation I must be content. There was another possibility but that I learned afterwards.

'We will make him sell his reversion.' What was the meaning of those words? Perhaps they did not apply to me. But I was sure that they did. Like a woman I was certain that they did: and for a woman's reason – which is none.

CHAPTER IX

THE CLAIM AND THE ARREST

You have heard how my old friend David Camlet, musical instrument maker, of Dowgate Street, presented me – or my wife – on our marriage, with a handsome harpsichord. Shortly after my father's death, this good old gentleman also went the way of all flesh: a melancholy event which I only learned by receiving a letter from Mr. Probus. Imagine, if you can, my amazement when I read the following:

'Sir,

'I have to call your immediate attention to your debt of fifty-five pounds for a harpsichord supplied to you by David Camlet of Dowgate Street, deceased. I shall be obliged if you will without delay discharge this liability to me as attorney for the executors —

'And Remain Sir,

'Your obedient humble Servant,

'Ezekiel Probus'

'Why,' said Alice. 'Mr. Camlet gave us the instrument. It was a free gift.'

'It was. If Mr. Probus will acknowledge the fact.'

'Mr. Probus? Is it that man with the harsh voice who talked lies to you?'

'The same. And much I fear, wife, that he means no good by this letter.'

'But Mr. Camlet gave us the harpsichord.'

Had the letter been received from any other person I should have considered it as of no importance; but the thought that it came from Mr. Probus filled me with uneasiness. What had that worthy attorney said? 'There are ways – we shall find a way to bring you to reason.'

'My dear,' said Alice, 'since we have had the instrument for two years without any demand for payment, we ought to be safe. Better go and see the man.'

It was with very little hope that I sallied forth. Not only was this man a personal enemy but he was an attorney. What must be the true nature of that profession which so fills the world with shuddering and loathing? Is it, one asks, impossible to be an honest attorney? This one, at all events, was as great a villain as ever walked. They are a race without pity, without scruple, without turning either to the right or to the left when they are in pursuit of their prey. They are like the weasel who singles out his rabbit and runs it down, being turned neither to one side nor the other. Their prey is always money: they run down the man who has money: when they have stripped him naked they leave him, whether it is in a debtor's prison or in the street: when he is once stripped they regard him no longer. Other men take revenge for human motives, for wrongs done and endured: these men know neither revenge nor wrath: they do not complain of wrongs: you may kick them: you may cuff them: it is nothing: they want your money: and that they will have by one way or another.

I took boat from St. Mary Overies stairs. As I crossed the river a dreadful foreboding of evil seized me. For I perceived suddenly that, somehow or other, Mr. Probus was personally interested in getting me to sell my reversion. How could he be interested? I could not understand. But he was. I remembered the persuasion of his manner: his anxiety to get my signature: his sudden manifestation of disappointment when I refused. Why? Matthew was now a partner with a large income and the fortune which my father left him. Matthew had no expensive tastes. Why should Mr. Probus be interested in his affairs?

Next, asked the silent reasoner in my brain, what will happen when you declare that you cannot pay this debt? This man will show no mercy. You will be arrested – you will be taken to Prison. At this thought I shivered, and a cold trembling seized all my limbs. 'And you will stay in the Prison till

you consent to sell your reversion.' At which I resumed my firmness. Never – never – would I yield whatever an accursed attorney might say or do to me.

Mr. Probus wrote from a house in White Hart Street. It is a small street, mostly inhabited by poulterers, which leads from Warwick Lane to Newgate market: a confined place at best: with the rows of birds dangling on the hooks, not always of the sweetest, and the smell of the meat market close by and the proximity of the shambles, it is a dark and noisome place. The house, which had a silver Pen for its sign, was narrow, and of three stories: none of the windows had been cleaned for a long time, and the door and doorposts wanted paint.

As I stood on the doorstep the words again came back to me, 'We will make him sell his reversionary interest.'

The door was opened by an old man much bent and bowed with years: his thin legs, his thin arms, his body – all were bent: on his head he wore a small scratch wig: he covered his eyes with his hand on account of the blinding light, yet the court was darkened by the height of the houses above and the dangling birds below.

He received my name and opened the door of the front room. I observed that he opened it a very little way and entered sliding, as if afraid that I should see something. He returned immediately and beckoned me to follow him. He led the way into a small room at the back, not much bigger than a cupboard, which had for furniture a high desk and a high stool placed at a window so begrimed with dirt that nothing could be seen through it.

There was no other furniture. The old man climbed upon his stool with some difficulty and took up his pen. He looked very old and shrivelled: his brown coat was frayed: his worsted stockings were in holes: his shoes were tied with leather instead of buckles: there was no show of shirt either at the wrist or the throat. He looked, in fact, what he was, a decayed clerk of the kind with which, as a boy, I had been quite familiar. It is a miserable calling, only redeemed from despair – because the wages are never much above starvation-point – by the chance and the hope of winning a prize in the lottery. No clerk is ever so poor that he cannot afford at least a sixteenth share in this annual bid for fortune. I never heard that any clerk within my knowledge had ever won a prize: but the chance was theirs: once a year the chance returns – a chance of fortune without work or desert.

Presently the old man turned round and whispered, 'I know your face. I have seen you before – but I forget where. Are you in trade? Have you got a shop?'

'No. I have no shop.'

'You come from the country? No? A bankrupt, perhaps? No? Going to make him your attorney?' He shook his head with some vehemence and pointed to the door with his pen. 'Fly,' he said. 'There is still time.'

'I am not going to make him or anyone else my attorney.'

'You come to borrow money? If so' – again he pointed to the door with the feathery end of the quill. 'Fly! There is still time.'

'Then you owe him money. Young man – there is still time. Buy a stone at the pavior's – spend your last penny upon it; then tie it round your neck and drop into the river. Ah! It is too late – too late – ' For just then Mr. Probus rang a bell. 'Follow me, Sir. Follow me. Ah! That paving stone!'

Mr. Probus sat at a table covered with papers. He did not rise when I appeared, but pointed to a chair.

'You wish to see me, Mr. William,' he began. 'May I ask with what object?'

'I come in reply to your letter, Mr. Probus.'

'My letter? My letter?' He pretended to have forgotten the letter. 'I write so many, and sometimes – ay – ay – surely. The letter about the trifling debt due to the estate of David Camlet Deceased. Yes – yes, I am administering the worthy man's estate. One of many – very many – who have honoured me with their confidence.'

'That letter, Mr. Probus, is the reason why I have called.'

'You are come to discharge your obligation. It is what I expected. You are not looking well, Mr. William. I am sorry to observe marks – are they of privation? – on your face. Our worthy cousin, on the other hand, has a frame of iron. He will live, I verily believe, to ninety.'

'Never mind my cousin, Mr. Probus. He will live as long as the Lord permits.'

'When last I saw you Sir, you foolishly rejected a most liberal offer. Well: youth is ignorant. We live and learn. Some day, too late, you will be sorry. Now, Sir, for this debt. Fifty-five pounds. Ay. Fifty-five pounds. And my costs, which are trifling.'

'I have come to tell you, Mr. Probus, that your letter was written under a misapprehension.'

'Truly? Under a misapprehension? Of what kind, pray?'

The harpsichord was a gift made by Mr. David Camlet. I did not buy it.'

Mr. Probus lifted his eyebrows. 'A gift? Really? You have proof, no doubt, of this assertion?'

'Certainly.'

'Well, produce your proofs. If you have proofs, as you say, I shall be the first to withdraw my client's claim. But makers of musical instruments do not usually give away their wares. What are your proofs, Sir?'

'My word, first.'

'Ta – ta – ta. Your word. By such proof every debtor would clear himself. What next?'

'The word of my wife who with me received the instrument from Mr. Camlet.'

'Receiving the instrument does not clear you of liability – what else?'

'The fact that Mr. Camlet never asked me for the money.'

'An oversight. Had he, in a word, intended the instrument for a gift, he would have said so. Now, Sir, what other proofs have you?'

I was silent. I had no other proof.

He turned again to the book he had before consulted. It was the ledger, and there, in Mr. Camlet's own handwriting, firm and square, was an entry:

'To Will Halliday – a Harpsichord, £55.'

In another book was an entry to the office that the instrument had been delivered.

Of course, I understand now what the old man meant by the entry. He wanted to note the gift and the value: and unfortunately he entered it as if it was a business transaction.

'Well, Sir?' asked Mr. Probus.

I said nothing. My heart felt as heavy as lead. I was indeed in the power of this man.

'There are such things as conspiracy,' he went on, severely. 'You have told me, for instance, that you and your wife are prepared to swear that the instrument was a gift. I might have indicted you both for a conspiracy, in which case Tyburn would have been your lot. For the sake of your excellent cousin and the worthy Mr. Peter, your uncle, Sir, I refrain from the indictment, though I fear I might be charged with compounding a felony. But mercy before all things: charity, mercy, and long suffering. These are the things that chiefly nourish the human soul, not guineas.'

I remained still silent, not knowing what to do or to say, and seeing this abyss yawning before me.

'Come Sir,' he said with changed voice, 'you owe fifty pounds and costs. If it were to myself I would give you time: I would treat you tenderly: but an Attorney must protect his clients. Therefore I must have that money at once.'

'Give me time to consult my friends.' Alas! All my friends could not raise fifty pounds between them.

'You have none. You have lost your friends. Pay me fifty pounds and costs.'

'Let me see the executors. Perhaps they will hear reason.'

'For what purpose? They must have their own. The long and the short of it, Mr. William Halliday, is that you must pay me this money.'

'Man! I have not got so much money in the world.'

He smiled – he could not disguise his satisfaction.

'Then, Mr. William Halliday' – he shut the ledger with a slam – 'I fear that my clients must adopt – most unwillingly, I am sure – the measures sanctioned by the law.' His eyes gleamed with a malicious satisfaction. 'I only trust that the steps we shall have to take will not disturb the mind of my much-respected client, your cousin. You will have to choose your prison, and you will remain in the – the Paradise of your choice until this money, with costs, is paid. As for your choice, the situation of the Fleet is more central: that of the Bench is more rural: beyond the new Prison there are green fields. The smell of the hay perhaps comes over the wall. Should you find a lengthened residence necessary, I believe that the rooms, though small, are comfortable. Ah! how useful would have been that three thousand pounds which you refused – at such a juncture as this.'

'If there is nothing more to be said – 'I got up, not knowing what I said, and bewildered with the prospect before me.

'Heaven forbid, Sir,' he continued sweetly, 'that I should press you unduly. I will even, considering the tender heart of your cousin, extend to you the term. I will grant you twenty-four hours in which to find the money.'

'You may as well give me five minutes. I have no means of raising the sum.'

'I am sorry to hear that for the sake of my clients. However, I can only hope' – he pushed back the papers and rose with a horrible grin of malice on his face – 'that you will find the air of the Prison salubrious. There have been cases of infectious fever – gaol fever, lately: perhaps the King's Bench and the Fleet are equal in this respect. Small-pox, also, is prevalent in one: but I forget which. Many persons live for years in a Prison. I hope, I am sure, that you will pass – many – many – happy years in that seclusion.'

I listened to none of this ill-omened croaking, but hastened to leave him. At the door I passed the old clerk.

'Go to the King's Bench,' he whispered. 'Not to the Fleet where he'll call every day to learn whether you are dead. There is still time,' he pointed to his throat while he noisily opened the door. 'Round the neck. At the bottom of the River: the lying is more comfortable than in the King's Bench.'

I had entered the house with very little hope. I left it with despair. I walked home as one in a dream, running against people, seeing nothing, hearing nothing. When I reached home I sat down in a kind of stupor.

'My dear,' I said, presently recovering, 'we are lost – we are ruined. I shall starve in a Prison. Thou wilt beg thy bread. The boy will be a gutter brat.'

'Tell me,' Alice took my hand. 'Oh! tell me all – my dear. Can we be lost if we are together?'

'We shall not be together. To-morrow I shall be in the Prison. For how long God only knows.'

'Since *He* knows, my dear, keep up your heart. When was the righteous man forsaken? Come, let us talk. There may be some means found. If we were to pay – though we owe nothing – so much a week.'

'Alice, it is not the debt. There is no debt. It is revenge, and the hope – '

I did not finish – what I would have added was, 'The hope that I may die of gaol fever or something.' 'My dear, be brave and let us arrange. First, I lose my situation in the Church and at the Gardens. Next, we must provide for the child and for thyself outside the prison. No, my dear, if the Lord permits us to live any other way the child shall not be brought up a prison bird.'

CHAPTER X

THE ARREST

In this distress I again consulted Tom, who knew already the whole case.

'In my opinion, Will,' he said, 'the best thing for you is to run away. Let Alice and the boy come here. Run away.'

'Whither could I run?'

'Go for a few days into hiding. They will come here in search of you. Cross the river – seek a lodging somewhere about Aldgate, which is on the other side of the river. They will not look for you there. Meantime I shall inquire – Oh! I shall hear of something to carry on with for a time. You might travel with a show. Probus does not go to country fairs. Or you might go to Dublin or to York, or to Bath, and play in the orchestra of the theatre. We will settle for you afterwards – what to do. Meantime pack thy things and take boat down the river.'

This seemed good advice. I promised I would think of it and perhaps act upon it. Some might think it cowardly to run away: but if an enemy plays dishonest tricks and underhand practices, there is no better way, perhaps, than to run away.

Now had I been acquainted with these tricks I should have remained where I was, in Tom's house, where no sheriff's officer could serve me with a writ. I should have remained there, I say, until midnight, when I could safely attempt the flight. Unfortunately I thought there was plenty of time: I would go home and discuss the matter with Alice. I left the house, therefore, and proceeded across the fields without any fear or suspicion. As I approached the Bank, I saw two fellows waiting about. Still I had no suspicion, and without the least attempt to escape or to avoid them I fell into the clutches of my enemy.

'Mr. William Halliday?' said one stepping forward and tapping my shoulder. 'You are my prisoner, Sir, at the suit of Mr. Ezekiel Probus, for the debt of fifty-five pounds and costs.'

As I made no resistance, the fellows were fairly civil. I was to be taken, it appeared, first to the Borough Compter. They advised me to leave all my necessities behind and to have them sent on to the King's Bench as soon as I should be removed there.

And so I took leave of my poor Alice and was marched off to the prison where they take debtors first before they are removed to the larger prison.

The Borough Compter is surely the most loathsome, fetid, narrow place that was ever used for a prison. Criminals and Debtors are confined together: rogues and innocent girls: the most depraved and the most virtuous: there is a yard for exercise which is only about twenty feet square for fifty prisoners: at night the men are turned into a room where they have to lie edgeways for want of space: there is no ventilation, and the air in the morning is more horrible than I can describe. My heart aches when I think of the cruelty of that place: it is a cruel place, because no one ever visits it, no righteous Justice of the Peace, no godly clergyman: there is no one to restrain the warder: and he goes on in the same way, not because he is cruel by nature, but because he is hardened by daily use and custom.

I stayed in that terrible place for two nights, paying dues and garnish most exorbitant. At the end of that time I was informed that I could be removed to King's Bench at once. So I was taken to the Court and my business was quickly despatched. As a fine for being poor, I had to pay dues which ought not to be demanded of any prisoner for debt – at least we ought to assume that a debtor wants all the money he has for his maintenance. Thus, the Marshal demanded four shillings and sixpence on admission: the turnkey eighteen-pence: the Deputy Marshal a shilling: the Clerk of the Papers, a shilling: four tipstiffs ten shillings between them: and the tipstaff for bringing the prisoner from the Court, six shillings.

These dues paid, I was assigned a room, on the ground-floor of the Great Building (it was shared with another), and my imprisonment began. It was Matthew's revenge and Mr. Probus's first plan of reduction to submission. But I did not submit.

Thus I was trapped by the cunning of a man whom I believe to have been veritably possessed of a Devil. That there are such men we know very well from Holy Writ: their signs are a wickedness which shrinks from nothing: a pitiless nature: a constant desire for things of this world: and lastly, as happens always to such men, the transformation of what they desire, when they do get it, into dust and ashes; or its vanishing quite away never to be seen, touched, or enjoyed any more. These signs were all visible in the history of Mr. Probus, as you shall hear. Possessed, beyond a doubt, by a foul fiend, was this man whom then I had every reason to hate and fear. Now, I cannot but feel a mingled terror and pity when exemplary punishment overtakes and overwhelms one who commits crimes which make even the convicts in the condemned cell to shake and shudder. His end was horrible and terrible, but it was a fitting end to such a life.

Tom Shirley came, with Alice, to visit me in my new lodging.

He looked about him cheerfully. 'The new place,' he said, 'is more airy and spacious than the old prison on the other side of the road, where I spent a year or two. This is quite a handsome court: the Building is a Palace: the Recreation ground is a Park, but without trees or grass: the three passages painted green remind me somehow of Spring Gardens: the numbers of people make me think of Cheapside or Ludgate Hill: the shops, no doubt contain every luxury: the society, if mixed, is harmonious...'

'In a word, Tom, I am very lucky to get here.'

'There might be worse places. And hark ye, lad, if there is not another fiddler in the Bench, you will make in a week twice as much in the Prison as you can make out of it. Nothing cheers a prisoner more than the strains of a fiddle.'

This gave me hope. I began to see that I might live, even in this place.

'There are one or two objections to the place,' this optimist philosopher went on. 'I have observed, for instance, a certain languor which steals over mind and body in a Prison. Some have compared it with the growth they call mildew. Have a care, Will. Practise daily. I have known a musician leave this place fit for nothing but to play for Jack in the Green. Look at the people as they pass. Yonder pretty fellow is too lazy to get his stockings darned: that fellow slouching after him cannot stoop to pull up his stockings: that other thrusts his feet into his slippers without pulling up the heels: there goes one who has worn, I warrant you, his morning gown all day for years: he cannot even get the elbows darned: keep up thy heart, lad. Before long we will get thee into the Rules.'

He visited my room. 'Ha!' he said, 'neat, clean, commodious. With a fine view of the Parade; with life and activity before one's eyes.' He forgot that he had just remarked on the languor and the mildew of the Prison. 'Observe the racquet players: there are finer players here than anywhere else, I believe. And those who do not play at racquets may find recreation at fives: and those who are not active enough for fives may choose to play at Bumble puppy. Well, Will, Alice will come back to me, with the boy. She can come here every morning if you wish. Patience, lad, patience. We will get thee, before long, within the Rules.'

It is possible, by the Warder's permission, to go into the Rules. But the prisoner must pay down £10 for the first £100 of his debts, and £5 for every subsequent £100. Now I had not ten shillings in the world. When I look back upon the memory of that time: when I think of the treatment of prisoners: and of the conduct of the prison: and when I reflect that nothing is altered at the present day I am amazed at the wonderful apathy of people as regards the sufferings of others – it may become at any time their own case: at their carelessness as concerns injustice and oppression – yet subject every one to the same oppression and cruelty.

What, for instance, is more monstrous than the fact that a man who has been arrested by writ, has to pay fees to the prison for every separate writ? If he has no money he is still held liable, so

that even if his friends are willing to pay his debts with the exorbitant costs of the attorney, there are still the fees to be paid. And even if the prisoner's friends are willing to release him there is still the warden who must be satisfied before he suffers his prisoner to go.

Again what can be more iniquitous than the license allowed to attorneys in the matter of their costs? Many a prisoner, originally arrested for a debt of four or five pounds or even less, finds after a while that the attorney's costs amount to twenty or thirty pounds more. He might be able to discharge the debt alone: the costs make it impossible: the creditor might let him go: the attorney will never let him go: the friends might club together to pay the debt: they cannot pay the costs: the attorney abates nothing, hoping that compassion will induce the man's friends to release him. In some cases they do: in others, the attorney finds that he has overreached himself and that the prisoner dies of that incurable disease which we call captivity.

At first sight the Parade and the open court of the Prison present an appearance of animation. The men playing racquets have a little crowd gathered round them, there are others playing skittles: children run about shouting: there are the shrill voices of women quarrelling or arguing: the crowd is always moving about: there are men at tables smoking and drinking: the tapsters run about with bottles of wine and jugs of beer. There are women admitted to see their friends, husbands and brothers, and to bring them gifts. Alas! when I remember – the sight comes back to me in dreams – the sadness and the earnestness in their faces and the compassion and the love – the woman's love which endures all and survives all and conquers all – I wish that I had the purse of Cræsus to set these captives free, even though it would enrich the attorney, whose wiles have brought them to this place.

One has not to look long before the misery of it is too plainly apparent above the show of cheerful carelessness. One sees the wives of the prisoners: their husbands play racquets and drink about and of an evening sit in the tavern bawling songs; the poor women, ragged and draggled, come forth carrying their babes to get a little air: their faces are stamped with the traces of days and weeks and years of privation. The Prison has destroyed the husband's sense of duty to his wife: he will not, if he can, work for his family; he lives upon such doles as he can extract from his family or hers. Worse still, men lose their sense of shame: they say what they please and care not who hears: they introduce companions and care not what is said or thought about them: things are said openly that no Christian should hear: things are done openly that no Christian should witness or should know. There are many hundreds of children within these accursed walls. God help them, if they understand what they hear and what they see!

In the prison there are many kinds of debtors: there is the debtor who is always angry at the undeserved misery of his lot: sometimes his wrongs drive him mad in earnest: then the poor wretch is removed to Bedlam where he remains until his death. There is, next, the despairing debtor who sits as one in a dream and will never be comforted. There is the philosophical debtor who accepts his fate and makes the best of it: there is the meek and miserable debtor – generally some small tradesman who has been taught that the greatest disgrace possible is that which has actually fallen upon him; there is the debtor who affects the Beau and carries his snuff-box with an air. There is the debtor who was a gentleman and can tell of balls at St. James's; there is the ruffler who swaggers on the Parade, looking out for newcomers and inviting those who have money to play with him. As for the women they are like the men: there are the wives of the prisoners who fall, for the most part, into a draggled condition like their husbands; there are ladies who put on sumptuous array and flaunt it daily on the Parade: stories are whispered about them; there are others about whom it is unnecessary to tell stories; in a word it is a place where the same wickedness goes on as one may find outside.

There is a chapel in the middle of the great Building. Service is held once a week but the attendance is thin; there is a taproom which is crowded all day long: here men sit over their cups from morning till evening; there is a coffee-room where tea and coffee can be procured and where the newspapers are read; this is a great place for the politicians of whom there are many in the Prison. Indeed, I know not where politics are so eagerly debated as in the King's Bench.

The King's Bench Prison is a wonderful place for the observation of Fortune and her caprices. There was a society – call it not a club – consisting entirely of gentlemen who had been born to good estates and had suffered ruin through no fault of their own. These gentlemen admitted me to their company. We dined together at the Ordinary and conversed after dinner. One of them, born to an easy fortune, was ruined by the discovery of a parchment entitling him to another estate. There was a lawsuit lasting for twenty years. He then lost it and found that the whole of his own estate had gone too. Another, a gentleman of large estate, married an heiress. Her extravagancies ran through both her own fortune and her husband's. She lived with him in the Prison and daily, being now a shrew as well as a slattern, reproached him with the ruin she herself had caused. There was a young fellow who had fallen among lawyers and been ruined by them. He now studied law intending as soon as he got out to commence attorney and to practise the tricks and rogueries he had learned from his former friends. Another had bought a seat in the House of Commons and a place with it. But at the next election he lost his seat and his place, too. And another was a great scholar in Arabic. His captivity affected him not one whit because he had his books and could work in the Prison as well as out.

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