Dickens Charles

Oliver Twist. Volume 3 of 3

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http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=23167363
Oliver Twist, Vol. 3 (of 3):
ISBN http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/47531

Содержание

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

It was a dull, close, overcast summer evening, when the clouds, which had been threatening all day, spread out in a dense and sluggish mass of vapour, already yielded large drops of rain, and seemed to presage a violent thunderstorm, – as Mr. and Mrs. Bumble, turning out of the main street of the town, directed their course towards a scattered little colony of ruinous houses, distant from it some mile and a-half, or thereabouts, and erected on a low unwholesome swamp, bordering upon the river.

They were both wrapped in old and shabby outer garments, which might perhaps serve the double purpose of protecting their persons from the rain, and sheltering them from observation;

the husband carried a lantern, from which, however, no light yet shone, and trudged on a few paces in front, as though – the way being dirty – to give his wife the benefit of treading in his heavy foot-prints. They went on in profound silence; every now and then Mr. Bumble relaxed his pace, and turned his head round, as if to make sure that his helpmate was following, and, discovering that she was close at his heels, mended his rate of walking, and proceeded at a considerable increase of speed towards their place of destination.

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

In the heart of this cluster of huts, and skirting the river,

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

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

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

"Halloa there!" cried a voice from above.

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

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

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

Mr. Bumble nodded in the affirmative.

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

Mr. Bumble, who had eyed the building with very rueful looks, was apparently about to express some doubts relative to

the advisability of proceeding any farther with the enterprise just then, when he was prevented by the appearance of Monks, who opened a small door, near which they stood, and beckoned them inwards.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Hem! That is the woman," replied Mr. Bumble, mindful of

his wife's caution.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He remained silent for a few moments, and then removing

his hands suddenly from his face, showed, to the unspeakable discomposure of Mr. Bumble, that it was much distorted, and nearly blank.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

worth?"

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

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

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

"Perhaps there may," was the composed reply.

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

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

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

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

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

"Add five pounds to the sum you have named; give me five-

and-twenty pounds in gold," said the woman, "and I'll tell you all I know – not before."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

all."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The roar of thunder, which seemed in fact much nearer, and to shiver and break almost over their heads, having subsided, Monks, raising his face from the table, bent forward to listen

to what the woman should say. The faces of the three nearly touched as the two men leant over the small table in their eagerness to hear, and the woman also leant forward to render her whisper audible. The sickly rays of the suspended lantern falling directly upon them, aggravated the paleness and anxiety of their countenances, which, encircled by the deepest gloom and darkness, looked ghastly in the extreme.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"In life?" asked Monks.

"In death," replied the woman, with something like a shudder.

"She stole from the corpse, when it had hardly turned to one, that which the dead mother had prayed her with her last breath to keep for the infant's sake."

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

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

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

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

"Which contained – " interposed Monks, stretching forward.

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

"For what?" demanded Monks.

"In good time I'll tell you," said the woman. "I judge that she had kept the trinket for some time, in the hope of turning it to better account, and then pawned it, and saved or scraped together money to pay the pawnbroker's interest year by year, and prevent its running out, so that if any thing came of it, it could still be

redeemed. Nothing had come of it; and, as I tell you, she died with the scrap of paper, all worn and tattered, in her hand. The time was out in two days; I thought something might one day come of it too, and so redeemed the pledge."

"Where is it now?" asked Monks quickly.

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

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

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

"All," replied the woman.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

when freed from the obstacles which had unavailingly attempted to stem its headlong course.

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

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

Monks drew the little packet from his breast, into which he had hurriedly thrust it, and tying it firmly to a leaden weight which had formed a part of some pulley, and was lying on the floor, dropped it into the stream. It fell straight, and true as a die, clove the water with a scarcely audible splash, and was gone.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It was about two hours earlier on the evening following that upon which the three worthies mentioned in the last chapter disposed of their little matter of business as therein narrated, when Mr. William Sikes, awakening from a nap, drowsily growled forth an inquiry what time of night it was.

The room in which Mr. Sikes propounded this question was not one of those he had tenanted previous to the Chertsey expedition, although it was in the same quarter of the town, and was situated at no great distance from his former lodgings. It was not in appearance so desirable a habitation as his old quarters, being a mean and badly-furnished apartment of very limited size, lighted only by one small window in the shelving

roof, and abutting upon a close and dirty lane. Nor were there wanting other indications of the good gentleman's having gone down in the world of late; for a great scarcity of furniture, and total absence of comfort, together with the disappearance of all such small moveables as spare clothes and linen, bespoke a state of extreme poverty, while the meager and attenuated condition of Mr. Sikes himself would have fully confirmed these symptoms if they had stood in need of corroboration.

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

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

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

this thundering bed, anyhow."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Give her a whiff of fresh air with the bellows, Charley," said

Mr. Dawkins; "and you slap her hands, Fagin, while Bill undoes the petticuts."

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

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

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

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

"Sitch a rabbit pie, Bill!" exclaimed that young gentleman, disclosing to view a huge pasty; "sitch delicate creeturs, with sitch tender limbs, Bill, that the wery bones melt in your mouth, and there's no occasion to pick 'em; half a pound of seven and

sixpenny green, so precious strong that if you mix it with boiling water, it'll go nigh to blow the lid of the teapot off; a pound and a half of moist sugar that the niggers didn't work at all at afore they got it to sitch a pitch of goodness, – oh no! two half-quartern brans; pound of best fresh; piece of double Glo'ster; and, to wind up all, some of the richest sort you ever lushed." Uttering this last panegyric, Master Bates produced from one of his extensive pockets a full-sized wine-bottle, carefully corked, while Mr. Dawkins at the same instant poured out a wine glassful of raw spirits from the bottle he carried, which the invalid tossed down his throat without a moment's hesitation.

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

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

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

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

"I never see such a jolly dog as that," cried Master Bates, doing

as he was desired. “Smelling the grub like a old lady a-going to market! He’d make his fortun on the stage that dog would, and rewive the drayma besides.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“There now, Bill,” remonstrated the Jew, eagerly catching at

the word. “If it hadn’t been for the girl! Who was the means of your having such a handy girl about you but me?”

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

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

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

“I haven’t a piece of coin about me,” replied the Jew.

“Then you’ve got lots at home,” retorted Sikes, “and I must have some from there.”

“Lots!” cried the Jew, holding up his hands. “I haven’t so much as would – ”

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

“Well, well,” said the Jew, with a sigh, “I’ll send the Artful round presently.”

“You won’t do nothing of the kind,” rejoined Mr. Sikes. “The

Artful's a deal too artful, and would forget to come, or lose his way, or get dodged by traps and so be perwented, or any thing for an excuse, if you put him up to it. Nancy shall go to the ken and fetch it, to make all sure, and I'll lie down and have a snooze while she's gone."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

breast; “who’s that? Listen!”

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

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

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

It was Monks.

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

The girl drew closer to the table, and glancing at Monks with an air of careless levity, withdrew her eyes; but as he turned his

towards the Jew, she stole another look, so keen and searching, and full of purpose, that if there had been any bystander to observe the change he could hardly have believed the two looks to have proceeded from the same person.

"Any news?" inquired the Jew.

"Great."

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

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

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

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

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

The room remained deserted for a quarter of an hour or

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I tell you wot it is," said Sikes, "if you haven't caught the fever, and got it comin' on now, there's something more than usual in the wind, and something dangerous, too. You're not a-

going to – No, damme! you wouldn't do that!"

"Do what?" asked the girl.

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

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

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

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

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

She hastily dressed herself in her bonnet and shawl, looking

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

When she reached the more wealthy quarter of the town, the streets were comparatively deserted, and here her headlong progress seemed to excite a greater curiosity in the stragglers

whom she hurried past. Some quickened their pace behind, as though to see whither she was hastening at such an unusual rate; and a few made head upon her, and looked back, surprised at her undiminished speed, but they fell off one by one; and when she neared her place of destination she was alone.

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

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

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

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

"Miss Maylie," said Nancy.

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

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

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

"Nor business?" said the man.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"That a young woman earnestly asks to speak to Miss Maylie alone," said Nancy; "and, that if the lady will only hear the first word she has to say, she will know whether to hear her business,

or have her turned out of doors as an impostor."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The girl's life had been squandered in the streets, and the most noisome of the stews and dens of London, but there was something of the woman's original nature left in her still; and when she heard a light step approaching the door opposite to that by which she had entered, and thought of the wide contrast which the small room would in another moment contain, she felt

burdened with the sense of her own deep shame, and shrunk as though she could scarcely bear the presence of her with whom she had sought this interview.

But struggling with these better feelings was pride, – the vice of the lowest and most debased creatures no less than of the high and self-assured. The miserable companion of thieves and ruffians, the fallen outcast of low haunts, the associate of the scourings of the jails and hulks, living within the shadow of the gallows itself, – even this degraded being felt too proud to betray one feeble gleam of the womanly feeling which she thought a weakness, but which alone connected her with that humanity, of which her wasting life had obliterated all outward traces when a very child.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You!" said Rose Maylie.

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

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

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

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

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

"No," said Rose.

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

"I never heard the name," said Rose.

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

"Yes," said Rose, "I understand."

" – That Monks," pursued the girl, "had seen him accidentally with two of our boys on the day we first lost him, and had known

him directly to be the same child that he was watching for, though I couldn't make out why. A bargain was struck with Fagin, that if Oliver was got back he should have a certain sum; and he was to have more for making him a thief, which this Monks wanted for some purpose of his own."

"For what purpose?" asked Rose.

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

"And what occurred then?"

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

"What is all this!" said Rose.

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

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

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

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

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

having been on such an errand as this. I must get back quickly."

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

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

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

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

too late!"

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

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

"Why should you be?" asked Rose.

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

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

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

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

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

"Of what use, then, is the communication you have made?" said Rose. "This mystery must be investigated, or how will its

disclosure to me benefit Oliver, whom you are anxious to serve?"

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

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

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

"I promise you solemnly," answered Rose.

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

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

"When ladies as young, and good, and beautiful as you are," replied the girl steadily, "give away your hearts, love will carry

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

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

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

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

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

Thus speaking, and sobbing aloud, the unhappy creature turned away; while Rose Maylie, overpowered by this extraordinary interview, which bore more the semblance of a rapid dream than an actual occurrence, sank into a chair, and

endeavoured to collect her wandering thoughts.

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

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

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

Mr. Losberne was with them, and would be for the next two days; but Rose was too well acquainted with the excellent gentleman's impetuosity, and foresaw too clearly the wrath with which, in the first explosion of his indignation, he would regard the instrument of Oliver's recapture, to trust him with the secret, when her representations in the girl's behalf could be seconded by no experienced person. These were all reasons for the greatest caution and most circumspect behaviour in communicating it to Mrs. Maylie, whose first impulse would infallibly be to hold a conference with the worthy doctor on the subject. As to resorting to any legal adviser, even if she had known how to do so, it was scarcely to be thought of, for the same reasons. Once the thought occurred to her of seeking assistance from Harry; but this awakened the recollection of their last parting, and it seemed unworthy of her to call him back, when – the tears rose to her eyes as she pursued this train of reflection – he might have by this time learnt to forget her, and to be happier away.

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

"If it be painful to him," she thought, "to come back here, how painful will it be to me! But perhaps he will not come; he may write, or he may come himself, and studiously abstain from

meeting me – he did when he went away. I hardly thought he would; but it was better for us both – a great deal better." And here Rose dropped the pen and turned away, as though the very paper which was to be her messenger should not see her weep.

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

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

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

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

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

"Where?" asked Rose.

"Getting out of a coach," replied Oliver, shedding tears of delight, "and going into a house. I didn't speak to him – I couldn't speak to him, for he didn't see me, and I trembled so, that I was not able to go up to him. But Giles asked for me whether he lived

there, and they said he did. Look here," said Oliver, opening a scrap of paper, "here it is; here's where he lives – I'm going there directly. Oh, dear me, dear me! what shall I do when I come to see him and hear him speak again!"

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

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

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

"Dear me," said the gentleman, in the bottle-green coat,

hastily rising with great politeness, "I beg your pardon, young lady – I imagined it was some importunate person who – I beg you will excuse me. Be seated, pray."

"Mr. Brownlow, I believe, sir?" said Rose, glancing from the other gentleman to the one who had spoken.

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

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

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

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

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

"Oliver Twist you knew him as," replied Rose.

The words no sooner escaped her lips than Mr. Grimwig, who had been affecting to dip into a large book that lay on the table, upset it with a great crash, and falling back in his chair, discharged from his features every expression but one of the most unmitigated wonder, and indulged in a prolonged and vacant stare; then, as if ashamed of having betrayed so much emotion,

he jerked himself, as it were, by a convulsion into his former attitude, and looking out straight before him emitted a long, deep whistle, which seemed at last not to be discharged on empty air, but to die away in the inmost recesses of his stomach.

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

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.